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ADVICE

Mitigating the risk of whiting choking the demersal Fisheries in the Irish Sea

23 October 2017

Background

The latest analyses of potential choke species conducted by the NWWAC and the NWW Member States' Regional group, have identified that whiting in the Irish Sea has a significant risk of choking multiple fisheries in the Irish Sea, once the landing obligation is fully implemented in 2019.

Problem

Currently, the majority of catches of whiting are taken as a bycatch in small-mesh fisheries e.g. sole, *Nephrops* and queen scallops. According to ICES advice, close to 98% of whiting catches are under the minimum conservation reference size and are currently discarded¹. Despite the introduction of several technical measures to reduce both the finfish catch and discards in the *Nephrops* fishery, the estimate of the total discard remains high².

As an example, in 2016, the value of whiting landings from the Irish Sea was approximately EUR 50,000, whilst the *Nephrops* fishery was estimated to be worth close to EUR 40 million. In 2016, the UK landed approximately 6,000 tonnes of *Nephrops*³ but only 5 tonnes of whiting³, while Ireland landed 1,700 tonnes of *Nephrops*³ and 26 tonnes of whiting³.

The effect of whiting choking these and other fisheries would, therefore, carry the risk of extreme and adverse socio-economic consequences for those active in the fisheries concerned.

Overview of the choke mitigation options for whiting

Options for mitigating the high risk of whiting choking other fisheries in the Irish Sea appear to be limited. The choke species analysis conducted by the NWWAC and the NWW Member States' Regional group concludes that:

¹ ICES 2017 Celtic Sea Working Group (WGCSE, [link](#) in English only)

² ICES 2017 advice Whiting in area 7.a ([link](#) in English only)

³ STECF database 2017 – Fisheries Dependent Information ([link](#) in English only)

- In recent years, a series of technical measures, e.g. mandatory square mesh panels, have been applied and implemented in the demersal fisheries of the Irish Sea, which have significantly reduced the “unwanted” catches of whiting;
- Research trials and development work have taken place assessing various gear adaptations that reduce “unwanted” catches of whiting, however, further advances in selectivity or further reduction of the bycatch of the magnitude required to mitigate the choke risk seem unlikely in the near future, due to the small size of whiting in the Irish Sea and the loss of marketable catch of the target species;
- Avoidance measures, such as real time closures could reduce catches of juvenile whiting in coastal, inshore areas but would only be applicable to fleets and fisheries where concentrations of undersized whiting are encountered. As whiting is so widely distributed, the scope for such avoidance is limited to inshore waters in the Irish Sea;
- Inter-species flexibility is not applicable, as whiting is outside safe biological limits and is unlikely to be within such limits for a number of years;
- High survival and *de minimis* exemptions are unlikely to present a solution, in this case;
- No Member State has whiting quota to swap;
- Uplift of the TAC will not be sufficient to solve the problem because whiting, along with all other harvested species, is subject to the CFP requirement that it is managed to achieve MSY by 2020, at the latest. Any TAC set in accordance with this objective, will be insufficient to cover the catches of whiting taken by all fleets as targeted catch or bycatch.

Removing TAC Status

Against this background, the NWWAC considers that the existing tools within the CFP will not be sufficient to fully mitigate against the risk of whiting choking multiple fisheries. One potential solution to prevent whiting from becoming a serious and immediate choke in 2019, could be the removal of whiting from the TAC regime in the Irish Sea.

Recognising the continued responsibility to manage whiting sustainably, even if the TAC status were to be removed, the NWWAC makes the following recommendations:

- Before the removal of the TAC can be considered, ICES should be asked by the Commission to evaluate the implications of removing a TAC for the achievement of the CFP’s objective to restore stocks above levels that can produce MSY by achieving F_{msy} by 2020, at the latest. ICES should be requested to identify alternative management options and safeguards that will ensure fishing mortality does not exceed F_{msy} and these alternative management measures and safeguards must be in place immediately following the removal of the TAC, should this option be taken;
- Identifying such measures may require programmes of enhanced monitoring, ideally starting prior to TAC removal, for fleets catching significant quantities of whiting. The aim would be to provide robust information on whether whiting requires additional management measures in the absence of a TAC and what those measures might be. The enhanced monitoring programme could entail a scientifically supervised observer programme or other means to achieve full and verified documentation of catches for strategically selected sectors of the fleet. This could involve reference fleets and collaboration between fishermen, fisheries scientists and fisheries administrators through fisheries science partnerships;
- A full evaluation of current gear selectivity for whiting in the relevant fisheries should be carried out with the objective of determining whether selectivity can be improved further to

reduce unwanted catches of whiting. This evaluation would take account of all recent gear selectivity work carried out in the Irish Sea;

- After an agreed interim period, and in light of data collated through enhanced monitoring, a decision would need to be made on the type of management measures required to achieve management objectives and the timeline for the introduction of any such measures.

Commission research project on the management of bycatch stocks

The NWWAC proposal reflects discussion and increased interest as to whether a TAC is always the best way of managing species that are not the primary focus of fishing activity⁴. The NWWAC understands that the Commission has launched a call for tenders focussing on the identification of measures to protect bycatch species in mixed-fisheries management plans. As projects may include the analysis of measures other than TACs⁵, the NWWAC asks for an opportunity to provide input into this process.

Against this background, the NWWAC asks that the Commission considers further ways to mitigate the serious choke situation that whiting will likely present in the various fisheries of the Irish Sea, by requesting advice from ICES as outlined above and referring any outcome on this issue to STECF, should this be desired.

Furthermore the NWWAC suggests that this exercise for Irish Sea whiting could be considered as a basis for similar discussions on whiting stocks in other areas or even for other stocks facing a similar choke risk.

⁴ Extract from Commission Communication on TACs in 2018: “the Commission is ready to discuss scrapping other TACs in the future, if there is no risk to the conservation of the stock and ICES agrees to this”.

⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/easme/en/tender/10121/identification-measures-protect-catch-species-mixed-fisheries-management-plans>