

**NWWRAC Meeting Report from Working Group 4
November 2005**



REPORT

North Western Waters Regional Advisory Council

**Working Group 4
The Irish Sea (ICES VIIa)**

**Monday the 7th of November 2005
2.00pm-5.30pm**

Chair: Lorcan O’Cinneide (Ireland)

Vice Chair: Rapporteur Alan McCulla (UK)

Introduction

This first report from Irish Sea Working Group (ISWG) is limited by the timescale under which the RAC has been established (late September 2005), the timing of the ISWG meeting and the need to provide some useful advice pursuant to 2006 management decisions.

It is envisaged that the ISWG will be in a position to provide more detailed and substantial advice to feed into the decision-making process in 2006 once it implements its 2006 work programme

Input from all stakeholder groups at ISWG was greatly appreciated

1 ICES Advice for VIIa: Single Stocks

Dr. Mike Armstrong (CEFAS, UK) was invited to give the ISWG a summary of ICES’ advice for each of the Irish Sea stocks. Dr. Armstrong stated that while confidence was high regarding the **trend** of the stocks, **insufficient data** meant that accurate stock forecasts could not be given.

At the outset industry members concurred with the concerns regarding data. The fact that some of the Irish Sea stocks had not been properly assessed for two years was highlighted. Consequently, the advice had not taken account of the temporary tie-up schemes applied to the Northern Irish whitefish fleet in 2004 and 2005. Additionally, any effort reduction resulting from forthcoming fishing vessel decommissioning scheme in Ireland was not included.

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*** Cod**

ICES Advice Summary (Dr. Mike Armstrong) The stock is perceived to be in a long-term decline, with fishing mortality rates well above the precautionary limit reference points as defined by ICES. There have been three years of weak recruitment to the stock and an EU management/recovery plan is in play. ICES are unable to comment on the plan, but according to the criteria the single species advice is for a zero catch in 2006. According to the model a 30% increase in SSB could only be achieved with a 75% decrease in fishing effort.

Dr. Armstrong stated that ICES were not talking about biological extinction of Irish Sea cod and that there had been a decline in fishing effort in recent years. (STECF had noted a 17% reduction in fishing effort.) He emphasised that much of the uncertainty with the stock was due to misreporting or lack of data or discards.

In this situation ICES takes the precautionary view, but looks forward to improving this outlook through the provision of better data, egg surveys and more collaborative work with the industry, such as the Fishery Science Partnership work carried out in the UK.

ISWG Views Fishing sector members reiterated that Irish Sea cod has been the first European Cod stock to be subjected to a recovery programme in the year 2000. Since then there have been six temporary area closures to directed whitefish fisheries and additional technical conservation measures had been applied. Furthermore, the UK has implemented two fishing vessel decommissioning schemes and two temporary tie-up schemes in 2004 and 2005. Effort control has been extended to the area from 1 January 2004. In fact the Irish Sea was the only “Cod Recovery Area” where closed areas have been applied together with effort control. While in no way are the industry advocating the ‘writing-off’ of Irish Sea Cod, there was a serious question as to whether or not the Cod stock could be recovered, given that issues such as a changing environment and competition from other stocks (e.g. Haddock) were increasingly being perceived to be affecting the stock.

A major issue of industry concern is the fact that while there is increasing emphasis on the ‘mixed fishery model’, the entire Irish Sea fishery continued to be managed **contingent** on the basis of a single species, cod. The fishery is managed on the basis of the lowest common denominator. Consequently, fishing opportunities for other species, such as Nephrops (the most important commercial stock in the Irish Sea), are being held artificially low.

*** Haddock**

ICES Advice Summary (Dr. Mike Armstrong) The presence of this species in sizeable numbers in the Irish Sea is a very recent phenomenon. There is now a very sizable spawning stock, which continues to produce good year classes. However, while ICES are of the opinion that fishing mortality is very high; uncertainties with the data mean they are unable to give an analytical stock forecast. Advice is for a substantial reduction in fishing effort, in the hope that this would provide long term economic benefits.

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ISWG Views Fishing sector members pointed out that Haddock was one of the good news stories in the Irish Sea. They suggested that reductions in fishing effort had little impact upon a stock which was naturally fluctuating and that the methodology in the assessment was flawed. As with cod, they highlighted the vicious cycle of poor data, which led to poor management – a situation that could not be allowed to continue. The management link with cod was again highlighted as being a major issue, where the haddock fishery was being curtailed in the interests of cod recovery. Not only did this create problems regarding the viability of the industry, but it also presented a paradox, where a stock that competed with cod was being offered more protection, thus exacerbating the competition with cod.

*** Whiting**

ICES Advice Summary (Dr. Mike Armstrong) The state of the stock is unknown. Dr. Armstrong again highlighted data problems. Reasons for an apparent decline in adult whiting are unknown. Yet this was against a background of a relative abundance of juvenile whiting in the Irish Sea. Improvements in gear selectivity have been noted, but there is a feeling that more could be done. Consequently, initiatives involving the industry (and in some cases led by the industry), which were looking at improvements in selectivity in the prawn trawl sector are commended. For 2006, ACFM are again proposing the lowest possible TAC.

ISWG Views Specific comments on whiting were made in the context of issues relating to the lack of data and flawed scientific methodology. The consensus was that unless the whole stock assessment issue (data flow and scientific methodology) was addressed, the credibility of the management strategy was severely undermined.

*** Nephrops**

ICES Advice Summary (Dr. Mike Armstrong) The state of the stock is unknown. Landings are apparently stable and catch independent surveys (camera surveys) have portrayed higher stock levels compared to traditional assessments. However, unlike the North Sea and West of Scotland there are only three years of data from the ROV camera surveys, which counted the number of burrows. However, despite a shorter time frame, the ROV camera survey is portraying a very similar picture, compared to what has been found in the North Sea and West of Scotland. Information regarding continuing high discard rates of whiting is seen as another reason for keeping the Nephrop TAC capped. ICES advice is that effort should not increase, although the high rates of effort directed at the stock were apparently sustainable.

ISWG Views The industry again stressed the fact that Nephrops were another good news story from the Irish Sea, with the science apparently confirming industry observations that the stock was increasing in size. This drew further comments about the unknown interactions between stocks in a changing environment and underlined industry calls for a fundamental review of all the Nephrops stock assessment methodology.

Processing sector representatives emphasised the importance of the Nephrops and stressed that it was of the utmost importance that positive indications relating to this stock be turned into realistic TACs that reflected the abundance of the stocks.

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*** Plaice & Sole**

ICES Advice Summary (Dr. Mike Armstrong) The Plaice stock is another good news story from the Irish Sea. The fishery is mainly prosecuted in the eastern Irish Sea. There has been a substantial reduction in fishing effort and fishing mortality has also declined. The spawning stock had almost doubled since 2000. While advising that the TAC be maintained below the precautionary level, ICES are still advocating the largest plaice TAC since assessments began. Irish Sea plaice is a very healthy stock.

Sole is considered to be reasonably stable, although data availability problems mean that ICES is unable to give a catch forecast, so the resulting advice is for a status quo TAC in 2006.

ISWG Views Once again issues relating to uncertainty with the data were highlighted. It was pointed out that the positive outlook for plaice had only materialised in 2003/2004 when the science was compounded by industry reports of an abundance of plaice. The assessment had been re-assessed by excluding catch data, with the result that the science more accurately reflected the industry reported increase in the stock. Yet despite the good news, the TAC was still kept low because of the alleged link with cod. An industry/science partnership project in the UK had provided evidence to counter this.

As for sole, the Belgian industry rejected the allegation that they had withheld data and made it available at the meeting.

2 The Mixed Fishery Approach

Detailed discussion took place in ISWG regarding the mixed fishery and management of the fishery in the Irish Sea.

It was agreed that there is a pressing need for evaluation of the effects of recovery plan initiatives in recent years. Grave doubt arises as to the efficacy of a mixed fishery model beset by poor data and uncertainty as expressed in relation to individual stocks, and driven by a Cod imperative.

The Irish Sea is now coming to the end of its 6th year of cod recovery, but the question remained, what had been achieved? Furthermore, the Irish Sea is different to the North Sea and measures applied to one area do not necessarily work in the other.

It was agreed that future strategies must recognise the *specificities of the Irish Sea* and that any proposed measures would have to be the subject of a much more sophisticated impact assessment, which prioritised the implications for the fishing industry and fishing dependent communities. On this later point the ISWG highlighted the apparent lack of consideration (or knowledge) of socio-economic issues relating to the fishing sector.

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Industry members are clear in their opposition to any punitive reduction in the number of days at sea for the fleets working in the Irish Sea. They pointed out that little if any consideration had been given to the contribution made by the UK's temporary-tie up schemes in 2004 and 2005 and that Ireland had launched a fishing vessel decommissioning scheme, which would further contribute to effort reduction in the area.

As had been mentioned earlier, gear selectivity trials were underway in a number of Irish Sea Nephrop fisheries. The "Necessity" project involved trawlers from Ireland and an industry led, FIFG funded project in N. Ireland is promoting collaboration between the fishing sector and ICES scientists, with the aim of identifying gear that would significantly reduce discards in the Nephrops fishery across a range of different vessel types/sizes.

ISWG members were reminded that much of the ethos behind the stock recovery plans was being driven by the Johannesburg Protocol. The principle of achieving the Johannesburg targets was further complicated by the EC's own objectives regarding the rehabilitation of stocks towards the Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY). The question was how achievable this actually was?

The ISWG membership agreed that what was needed was the development of a package of credible measures to replace what already existed. It was unacceptable to everyone that words and phrases emphasising the uncertainties in the science were used on 77 occasions within the 7 Irish Sea single stock assessments.

3 Related Policy Formulation Issues

**** Data Quality***

Discussions on the ICES stock assessments highlighted the major problems with fisheries data, as well as interaction between stocks in a changing environment. Data deficiencies are to a great extent a function of the present dichotomy between management regimes and the economic imperatives driving fishing enterprises. We are faced with an inter-dependent system, which required detailed examination of its individual components, before they could be tied together. It was however noted that there already existed a huge volume of data that could help improve our understanding of these interactions. These will have to be collated and examined.

**** Front Loading and Decision Making Timescales***

Questions were asked as to what had happened to the EC's proposals regarding "Front Loading". Proposals had been expected regarding the EC's ideas for future effort control measures, but disappointingly these had not materialised. It was considered that this 'Institutional Inertia' had devalued the deliberations of the NWWRAC Working groups. ISWG feel that the most important issues will again be crammed into discussions lasting a very few weeks, before negotiations were held in Brussels the week before Christmas. This is unacceptable.

**** Possible Proposals and Considerations: Effort Control***

In the absence of EC proposals, it was suggested that the EC's effort targets would centre upon reductions in the fisheries using 70 to 99mm gears.

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ISWG members felt that in the Irish Sea the EC's own effort rules have had a detrimental effect on fisheries by forcing effort out of the 100mm+ fisheries into the 70 to 99mm fisheries and then removing the option to move back into the 100mm+ gear category (Annexe 4a, Para. 12). The present effort regime is not well thought out and in many ways is contradictory. The question was what all of the various measures used in the Irish Sea had added up to, in terms of assisting the stocks, as well as imposing un-necessary burden upon the industry.

*** *Fuel***

In the midst of all these issues ISWG industry members highlighted the continuing crisis caused by high fuel costs, which some members felt would overtake management considerations as vessels would be forced out of business. The sector called upon the EC and Member States to take immediate action to help alleviate the problem. It was seen as a priority that the issue be taken into consideration when the Fisheries Council meet to in December to make decisions on TACs and effort restrictions, insofar as biological objectives and recovery trajectories would have to be tempered by the economic realities.

4 Time for Change

The consensus flowing from these discussions was that the management system applied to the Irish Sea does not work, and the time had come for radical change. Annual amendments and additions to the system had resulted in an overly complex regime, which was of benefit neither to stocks nor the fishing sector.

The ISWG identified the challenge as creating a situation where credible and effective fisheries management can be established, which required a new collaborative approach between ICES fisheries scientists and the ISWG stakeholders.

The aim was clear, to maximise fish stocks and sustain a viable industry.

5 2006 Work Programme

While the data flow, science and methodology had to be improved, members accept that there cannot be an increase in fishing effort within the Irish Sea. However, pending the agreement of more effective management strategies, effort limits and gears used must to be maintained at their recent levels.

While the industry was expressing loud and clear its willingness to work in partnership with the EC, what was not needed was the EC 'tinkering' with the existing measures just as the NWWRAC and ISWG were commencing its work.

The ISWG recognises that it will be required to give an opinion on EC working papers dealing with MSY principles and technical conservation measures early in 2006. The hope was that observations on these matters could be made in the context of the proposal for a fundamental review of fisheries management within the Irish Sea.

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It was also noted with interest that the North Sea RAC has a focus group on MSY, with experts involved. It was reported to the ISWG that this focus group had been very productive and very useful. It was agreed that the issue of technical conservation measures overlapped between RACs, in particular where there were trans-zonal fisheries.

The contribution of Dr. Armstrong as the sole representative of ICES at the ISWG meeting is greatly appreciated. It is hoped that ICES participation be improved in future.

Summary of ISWG Advice

- **Status quo in 2006 (pending review).**
 - Recognise the impact of the fuel crisis upon the sector in framing 2006 regimes;
 - Recognise the inadequacy of present stock recovery model;
 - Maintain the effort regime at its present levels pending a significant programme of work in 2006 involving NWWRAC towards a more appropriate model for application from 2007;.
 - Where appropriate, maximise TACs (Nephrops, plaice, haddock and herring).
 - Rollover of the cod, whiting and sole TACs.
 - Recognise the contribution of measures applied during the last two years and that are in the pipeline.
 - Recognise industry initiatives regarding technical conservation measures.
 - sector.
- **ISWG proposes a suite of initiatives that it will promote and collaborate in through itself and its constituent elements to be applied from 1 January 2007. The work programme will be driven by the following urgent requirements:**
 - Propose measures to fill in existing knowledge gaps and improve data;
 - Actively promote collaboration between ICES and the industry with a view to more reliable data and accurate analysis of stock indicators and realistic objectives;
 - Examine and research alternative fisheries management hypotheses including the application of technical measures and other policy tools;
 - Promote the integration to the greatest extent possible the social and economic needs of a viable sector with sustainable harvesting of stocks and EU / UN conservation policies and objectives;
 - The formulation of a new fisheries management policy for the Irish Sea.