# National Federation of Fishermen´s Organization (NFFO)

## DRAFT FOR DISCUSSION

## Irish Sea Fisheries Science Manifesto

### Context

The Irish Sea was the first area to experience EU cod recovery measures, initially in the form of industry-led strengthened selectivity requirements and later, in the form of an imposed seasonal closed area during the assumed cod spawning area/period. Subsequently, the whole panoply of EU cod recovery measures, including drastically reduced TACs, the effective decommissioning of a substantial part of the whitefish fleet, strengthened landing controls and effort restrictions were applied. These measures had extensive socio-economic consequences.

### Diversion of Effort

Given the economic pressures associated with the recovery measures, the most salient feature of the Irish Sea demersal fisheries since 1999 has been a major diversion of fishing effort from whitefish to nephrops as the principal target species.

### Recovery

In contrast to the North Sea, ICES assessments for the Irish Sea have not suggested a significant change in fortunes for the Irish Sea cod stock, although the industry view, which is often more up to date than the formal assessments, is that the local cod stocks are rebuilding quite rapidly.

## Stock Assessments

Objectively, Irish Sea fishermen, fisheries scientists, and fisheries managers share a common interest in stock assessments and fisheries advice that is:

- accurate
- relevant
- impartial
- accessible
- useful

## A Broken System

Despite this common interest, it is true to say that during much of the period when, annually and incrementally, additional cod recovery measures were applied, relations between the fishing industry and fisheries scientist in the Irish Sea were strained, even baleful. In large part this reflected the familiar vicious cycle of poor data, leading to poor assessments, leading to precautionary TAC proposals, leading to low TACs, leading to misreporting, leading to poor data.

## New Beginnings

A break with this self-destructive pattern was seen with the emergence of a number of initiatives:

- The fisheries science partnership projects which from 2003 funded collaborative work between fishermen and fisheries scientists

- Collaborative projects outside the FSP framework (expand)
- The introduction of buyers and sellers registration that effectively ended large scale misreporting and meant that official landings data could again be used in stock assessments
- Collaboration in the Irish Sea Discards Project

Current Position

The current situation is a difficult one for Irish Sea fishermen. Draconian measures have forced many changes on the fleets, including the redirection of fishing effort to alternative species and distant grounds, reducing crew numbers, deferring upgrades etc. At the same time there is little sign that the sacrifices that have been made are having any effect. The layers of successive measures mean that it is not possible to determine which have been effective and which ones haven't.

There is a strong sense of frustration that despite signs at sea that cod stocks are again rebuilding it will be years before this improvement is reflected in ICES assessments and further years before the constraints in the form of extremely low TACs are lifted by the Commission and the Council of Ministers.

It is against this background that we propose a radical change to the science regime in the Irish Sea. By this we do not suggest jettisoning ICES assessments but reinforcing them in various ways with industry data and knowledge in order that they track more closely the main trends in the fishery earlier and more precisely.

Industry Led Science Support

The Irish Sea fishing industry proposes a number of initiatives that would:

- Provide ICES scientists with additional data on fishing and fish stock trends through self-sampling to address areas such as discards where there are significant data gaps
- Participate in well designed, scientifically valid fisheries science partnership projects that fill significant gaps in ICES knowledge about the Irish Sea fisheries. We envisage research voyages aboard commercial fishing vessels, validated through observers or CC TV coverage
- Produce Annual Fisheries Reports that provide industry data on relevant aspects of the Irish Sea demersal fisheries including changes to fishing patterns, reaction to management measures, new technologies, and economic drivers of new behaviours.
- Participate in regular dialogue with ICES scientists, including involvement in the new ICES benchmark meetings that will allow fishermen and other stakeholders the opportunity to participate in a fundamental review of the assessments, stock by stock
- Make available to ICES fishing diaries which contain precise and useful data on spatial and temporal stock patterns and fishing activity

In aggregate, these initiatives would aim to:

- reduce uncertainties in the ICES assessments
- bring new streams of knowledge into the assessment process
- make ICES advice more relevant by bringing real time data into the assessments

- Help to design new measures such as cod avoidance plans and real time closures, that might strengthen protection for cod without unduly impacting on the capacity of individual vessels to earn a living

## Conclusion

There is recognition that over the last decade the fisheries management and information systems in the Irish Sea have witnessed a comprehensive failure. A move to a more collaborative industry/science approach is a prerequisite for a strong scientific underpinning that is required for effective management measures whether the cod stock remains in a depleted state or whether the stocks show signs of recovery. We know from published science and the experience of the North Sea that cod recovery can be quite rapid. We also know that industry sources of information tend to be more up to date than allowed for in the ICES assessment models. Therefore, a collaborative science programme to support and supplement the more orthodox, formal, assessments will act as a sentinel for recovering cod stocks and facilitate the early adoption of cod avoidance measures that would avoid problems such as discarding seen in the North Sea. This paper is an attempt to take the initiative by launching a new comprehensive and systematic partnership approach to fisheries science in the Irish Sea.