

Opinion

North Western Waters Regional Advisory Council

Response to European Commission's Non-Paper on Effort Management in Zone VII_{fg}

1. General

This paper is the NWWRAC response to the non-paper produced by the Commission Services circulated in June 2010.

The Non-Paper represents a departure from the Commission's approach to date to the management of Cod in the Celtic Sea (VII_{fg}) insofar as its focus has been widened to embrace a range of demersal stocks. However, its central plank remains an effort regime based on Kw/days system that is also the centrepiece of the Cod Recovery Plan which applies to the Cod Recovery Zone, an area which excludes the Celtic Sea. The most recent ICES advice suggests that the measures applied under the current Cod Recovery Plan (EC Regulation No. 1342/2008) have not been successful in reducing fishing mortality or in reducing discards.

A central argument to date has been that the characteristics of the fisheries in the Celtic Sea (and in particular the large number of species caught) are incompatible with effort based management measures. Alternative measures have been advocated and to some degree implemented, notably the closure of areas off the Cornish Coast and off the Irish Coast areas during the spawning season (Trevose Closure).

Although the effectiveness of management measures applied in combination are notoriously difficult to assess, there is no reason to believe that the Trevose closure has been any less successful than those adopted in the Cod Recovery Zone.

2. Co-Decision Procedure

It is worth noting from the outset that as the issue of a new regime to protect cod in the Celtic Sea goes well beyond the setting of TACs or effort limits, we anticipate that the adoption of these new arrangements will be subject to co-decision procedure with the European Parliament, as required under the Lisbon Treaty.

This will require a different approach to the one we are familiar with. A brief consultation followed by a Commission Proposal that will serve as basis for discussion for the adoption of TACs and Quotas Regulation at the December Council will be replaced by trilateral negotiations between the Commission, Council of Ministers and the Parliament, leading to an agreed decision. This process should allow all of the principal issues to be openly discussed.

The Commission presents its non-paper as an “ecosystem approach”. Although in it is true that focus in the non-paper is wider to take in a range of demersal stocks caught in the Celtic Sea, this label is rather misleading. In view of the current debate on appropriate management for the Celtic Sea it is appropriate to summarise the main features of ICES advice for 2010, with regard to Celtic Sea demersal stocks.

3. Status of Stocks and ICES Advice 2010

The following summary is based on a presentation made by Dr Colm Lordan of Marine Institute Ireland in the course of the North Western Waters RAC Focus Group meeting to discuss management measures for VIIIfg, held in Paris the 7th of July¹.

Celtic Sea Cod

ICES advice remains uncertain on this stock. It is possible to identify trends only in assessment, although it is stated that the age structure of this stock appears truncated.

Although some signs of reduced Fishing mortality (F) there is a high degree of uncertainty. Given the significant reduction in effort it was anticipated that there would be a significant reduction in F. This has not been shown in assessment process and needs to be explained. Thus at present there is no evidence of a link between decreasing fishing effort and reducing F in this stock.

Given that this stock is at the southern extremity of its range uncertainties in natural mortality due to temperature, feed distribution and natural predation (such as seals) could be factors in unaccounted mortality.

A positive feature of this stock is that it is extremely fast growing. There is evidence that suggests reduced amounts of high grading and new tagging data is being collected by using DST and conventional tags that will be used in future assessments.

¹ Dr. Lordan’s presentation is available for consultation at the meeting site:
http://www.nwwrac.org/Meetings/Meetings_ENG/Navigation.php?id=421&language=English

Celtic Sea Haddock

Trends show increasing SSB and F fluctuating but low in recent years. There are no reference points for this assessment and there has been good recruitment recently. There is a perceived issue with discards in some fisheries.

Celtic Sea Whiting

Trends show increasing SSB, F fluctuating but low in recent years. There are no reference points for this assessment and there has been good recruitment recently. There is a perceived issue with discards in some fisheries.

Celtic Sea Plaice

Trends show SSB low but improving in recent assessments, F fluctuating but decreasing in recent years (possibly effect of Trevoise Closure).

Celtic Sea Sole

Trends show SSB high and increasing, F low and reducing (below MSY targets).
Good level of recruitment.

Celtic Sea Nephrops (FU20-22)

Trends show landings relatively stable, and an overall reduction in fishing effort.

Megrim VII

Catch in Celtic Sea is less than 10% of TAC, with no increase in effort or catches.

Anglerfish VII & VIII

Catch in Celtic Sea is less than 10% of TAC, with no increase in effort or catches

Hake VI, VII & VIII

Catch in Celtic Sea is less than 5% of TAC, with data missing from assessment but recent trends are generally positive on SSB and F.

Fishing Effort

An overall reduction in fishing effort has been recorded from over 25million KW days in 2003 to around 15million KW days in 2008. Particularly large decreases were shown in French TR1 trawling effort and Beam-Trawl effort since 2003.

Numbers of vessels operating in Celtic Sea have remained consistent since 2000.

Effective effort trends by ICES statistical rectangle clearly demonstrate significant reductions in all gears. There is a significant reduction in beam trawl gears in Trevoise Closure rectangles and more general reduction across Celtic Sea.

In considering the most appropriate management measures for the Celtic Sea mixed demersal fisheries, we take from this stock summary the following important conclusions:

- Although there are acknowledged uncertainties in the stock assessments, there has been a significant reduction in fishing effort deployed. However, there appears to be a very weak correlation between this reduction and a reduction in fishing mortality. The truncated age structure for cod suggests that discards or possibly seal predation may be significant factors in the high level of unallocated removals.
- This suggests that the Commission's advocated approach based on progressive reductions in effort from a recent baseline is misplaced in that it would be unlikely to deliver the desired outcome – a reduction in fishing mortality for cod and other demersal socks in the Celtic Sea.
- A determined effort is required to reduce the level of uncertainty in the stock assessments by improving the quality and quantity of the input data.
- Alternative, more tailored means of reducing fishing mortality in the Celtic sea mixed fisheries are required. A focus on the different elements within *total removals* is required, including ways of successfully reducing discards.

4. Scientific Assessments – Industry Partnerships

It is vital that the gap in understanding regarding stocks (particularly Cod) is immediately addressed. The real time experience and observations of fishermen must be incorporated into the scientific process.

Recent developments at Member State level augur well for improving this situation and encouraging a closer relationship between science and industry:

- Collaboration between CEFAS and industry in UK is ongoing and recent work included research on relative age compositions.

- Ireland has established an industry science partnership and research into Celtic Sea Cod is a priority task. An Irish Industry-Science partnership survey was initiated in Quarter 1 of 2010.
- The French industry established a self sampling programme in 2008 that is contributing to a significant improvement in the data collection process.

It is important to build on these initiatives. The NWWRAC has proposed to set up a regional Task Force to address the present deficiencies. These initiatives will provide for more timely provision of real time data and an enhanced shared awareness of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats faced by various stakeholders.

5. Days at Sea Regime

We can understand the short-term attraction of moving to effort control for mixed fisheries in this area particularly given the perverse incentives involved in the current system. However, both the economic theory and practical experience show that this system is unlikely to deliver benefits in the longer term and results in an over-capitalized and inefficient industry with high monitoring and enforcement costs.

The effort management regime for the Cod Recovery Plan has proved administratively complex and costly. As such it runs counter to the need to simplify and reduce the regulatory burden of the current CFP. Imposition of an effort management regime at EU level would not be sensible and would be at odds with the need for a reformed CFP to provide greater flexibility and devolved responsibility for management of individual fisheries.

6. Capacity Cap

There is recognition that increased fleet levels operating in the area is seen as a potential problem. However rather than the blunt days at sea regime proposed in the Commissions non-paper (for the reasons described above) the proposal presented here is to implement a capacity cap to avoid significant increases in fleet levels

National fleets operating in VIIIfg measured by Kw and GT would be limited to the aggregate level pertaining in 2007. This in effect would be a capacity cap in the area (VIIIfg) not an effort regime based on days at sea.



National administrations would be free to issue permits to vessels subject to the overall ceilings (this would only apply to demersal species) on the basis of vessels operating in the area (VIIIfg) on or before the date of adoption of the measure. This would avoid unreasonable and unjustifiable retrospective effects, while preventing future growth.

No deductions from the ceilings would be envisaged in respect of any decommissioning.

National administrations would provide the Commission with vessel lists in a reasonable timeframe. A period of three months would be allowed for the development of national agreements and submission of lists.

Exemptions from the measure would apply to vessels that operate specific cod avoidance measures, subject to validation by STECF.

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