

DRAFT MINUTES

Deepwater gillnets

NWWRAC Focus Group meeting CNPMEM, Paris, 6 February 2008

Members:

Jacques Pichon (Chairman)
David Milly
Thomas Díaz
Stéphanie Tachouires
Gaelle Kervella
Juan Carlos Corrás
Jesús Lourido
Eduardo Míguez
Mercedes R. Moreda
Michael Walsh
Gerard O'Flynn
Norman Graham (scientist)
Phil McMullen (scientist)

Scientific experts and technologists:

Dominic Rihan
Myles Mulligan
Phil Large
Nils-Roar Hareide
Jacques Sacchi
Xavier Harlay
Alvaro Fernández
Dave Peach
Peter Randall

National government observers:

Gline Bonhomme (France)
Borja Velasco (Spain)
Robert Misund (Norway)

Commission representative:

Francois Theret

NWWRAC Secretariat:

Alexandre Rodríguez (rapporteur)

1. Welcome

- Adoption of the Agenda

The Chairman suggests bringing forward the discussion of item 6 to the period after the coffee break. The Secretariat asks for discussion of item 7 to be deferred to the following Focus Group meeting at the express request of Ian Gatt, since he is unable to attend this meeting and introduce the topic for which he was the designated speaker. These changes are made and the agenda of the meeting is approved.

- Adoption of minutes of the last meeting (June 2007)

No comments are put forward, so the minutes for the previous meeting are treated as formally adopted.

2. Summary of decisions made by the Council of Ministers in December:

The Chairman explains that, after the last Council of Ministers, there appears to be a wide difference in views between the various Member States' representatives regarding certain matters, such as harmonisation of mesh sizes for *volanta* hake gear. The Chairman hopes this Focus Group meeting will be of use in moving forward with some of the matters discussed at the Council of Ministers.

To help sharpen the focus of the discussion, the Chairman asks the Commission representative to outline the current regulations on gillnets. Francois Theret provides an overview, reminding attendees that there is a ban on fishing at depths of more than 200 m, except for two species – hake and monkfish – which may be fished down to 600 m. Mr. Theret emphasises that the Commission made a formal proposal to the Council of Ministers to harmonise mesh sizes to 100 mm on both sides (north and south) of the 48th parallel, but the Council finally decided to keep in place the difference of 120 mm for the north and 100 mm for the south, respectively.

3. NWWRAC contribution to coordinated national observation campaigns and 4. Mesh sizes for hake fisheries in Areas VI and VII

In the course of discussion, the attendees decide to deal with these two items together.

- A conversation ensues among Focus Group members with differing views on the matter, depending on their nationality and/or the composition of their fleet. There emerge opposing positions among the fishing industry members:

1) Representatives of French- and Community-registered but Spanish-owned vessels advocate for no difference between mesh sizes because it is the same stock (northern hake), and argue that the industry should work towards developing a single protocol to amend the TCM Regulation so as to establish a single mesh size for hake in all areas of northern hake stocks. They argue that the fleets are presently under-utilising their quotas given their inability to use that mesh size. Only those individuals being really big may be caught with a mesh size of 120 mm. They also indicated that a 100 mm. mesh size allows catching hake of 60 cm of average size, most part of them having reached their first sexual maturity. Therefore, they deem that this practice does not put stocks in danger insofar as it is quite selective and has a low discards rate. Finally, it is also reminded that there is a current Regulation of TCM for northern hake in force that limits the use of mesh size of 100 mm. in some areas (“biologically sensitive areas”) of protection of hake juveniles in ICES VII (Regulation CE n° 494/2002)

2) Representatives of Spanish fleet do not take a definitive position over the harmonization of mesh sizes though they acknowledge that this would not in principle affect to hake juveniles. They give their support to the work being undertaken by this Focus Group and to the possibility of financing from the Spanish administration of a research campaign even though the Spanish fleet only sums up six vessels for this hake gillnet modality.

3) Representatives of Irish-flagged vessels are firmly opposed to reducing mesh size for hake to 100 mm, and think 120 mm is the most efficient measure to ensure compliance with caught hake size; they do not think any change would be appropriate in economic or environmental terms. They remind that, at the early 90s, there was a fleet of hake gill-netters in Ireland. This fleet has made the same mistake consisting in gradually reducing the mesh size that they used for facing the decrease of catches and this has had consequences for the hake stock insofar as we do not find any of these vessels anymore within the inshore waters of Ireland.

- The scientific sector mostly think there are already sufficient studies describing the selectivity of the different mesh sizes and they all confirm that the average size for hake is around 60 cm. with a 100 mm. mesh size. Therefore, they conclude that it is not necessary to organize additional campaigns in this respect, considering that any new results which might be obtained would not differ significantly from existing data. Attendees verbally present a number of papers by national scientific bodies (CEFAS, IEO, IFREMER).

Álvaro Fernández (IEO) asks for this issue to be included in the agenda of the hake focus group to assess how changes in hake gear might impact recovery of the species.

In response to the scientists' proposals, the fishery industry makes the following comments:

- The Spanish delegation is willing to assist the conduct of new research campaigns on hake gear, provided the terms and conditions of the studies are reframed and focus not only on selectivity but also on gear-related working methods (soak times, number of nets, net lengths...)

- The French delegation also confirms its willingness to conduct further research; some associations (such as CAPSUD) even expressly offer the use of their vessels to make progress with further research. In relation to this, Thomas Diaz requests the Commission to ask for consultation to ICES about the potential impact of a hake-targeted fishery with a mesh size of 100 mm in both areas VI and VII. He supports his view by affirming that all known scientific reports have given as a result an average hake size of around 60 cm while using a 100 mm mesh size. Finally, Gaelle Kervella expressly asks for STECF to conduct a specific study on this matter.

- The Irish delegation discusses the size of its fleet and asserts that it has decreased drastically over the past 20 years owing to the impact of reduced mesh size. They say this has not helped stocks recover, and large hake is not plentiful. The Irish advocate keeping mesh size at 120 mm to fish larger, higher-value hake and help rebuild stocks. Finally, they say it is essential to reflect on technical conservation measures in tune with EU environmental policy. They think that a reduction on mesh size could be perceived as negative from public opinion.

The Chairman concludes that it would be of interest to ascertain exactly what catches are associated with each mesh size; this calls for detailed knowledge of the results or main conclusions stated in the available studies referred to by the scientists during their interventions. The key issue, then, is to find out the degree of impact caused to the stock by the technological modifications (shift to 100mm in ICES areas VI and VII) Similarly, it will be necessary to ascertain which measures must be undertaken for compensate the increase of fishing mortality linked to the mesh size reduction (adjustment of fishing effort and fleet capacity from gill-netters)

In response to a question from the Chairman, the Commission representative says that the Commission will act on this matter only if the parties concerned make an express request. Mr. Theret says that the STECF report indicates that complementary information is needed. This information could be a complement of observations from previous existing reports or it could be drawn from new campaigns (but not necessary through both ways). Moreover, he affirms that the Commission would be willing to consider the information in a new STECF report, and, based on such response, make a decision on whether to readdress the matter or request further scientific research, as appropriate. Questioned on whether the results should be based on new experiments or on previous studies, the representative says he does not know at present.

* NWWRAC actions:

- Compile the papers cited at the meeting by the scientists, which contain relevant information on sampling and observation campaigns regarding catch selectivity indices using different mesh sizes for hake.

- Ask the Commission to address STECF the request for a study of evaluation of the impact for the stock of an eventual mesh size reduction, and for a proposal of accompanying measures for allowing the reduction of the fishing effort of those affected fleets, with the aim of neutralising the effects of this technical modification.

5. Cooperation with the DEEPCLEAN project on identification and retrieval of ghost fishing nets at sea

Norman Graham, coordinator of the DEEPCLEAN project, thanks NWWRAC for inviting him to attend the meeting. He gives an account of the project and outlines its three core goals: to retrieve lost deepwater (below 200 m) fishing gillnets in waters west of Ireland and the United Kingdom; evaluate the scale and size of lost nets; and evaluate the biological consequences.

Nils-Roare argues that fishermen's cooperation is essential to the success of the project, and points out a precedent for successful cooperation between fishermen and scientists in this matter in Norway.

The French and Spanish industries offer their express initial support for this project, which they regard as being in the common interest (owing to the biological losses associated with ghost fishing). In particular, the French industry offers to provide SLB positions via IFREMER, which is already conducting a mapping project for hake and monkfish gillnets.

The NWWRAC Secretariat agrees that the initiative is beneficial to the fisheries sector, and offers to operate as a liaison for compiling relevant information from members. In addition, the Secretariat points out that the data compiled for the project will be aggregated, anonymous, and confidential, and will be used solely for the scientific purposes of the project.

* NWWRAC actions:

- Assist and cooperate with DEEPCLEAN project members by applying to Member State governments to allow them access to SLB data, subject to an undertaking of confidentiality and exclusive use for the scientific purposes of the project.

- Assess the possibility of implementing in future a defined code of conduct based on guidance from project members.

6. Review of fixed gear marking rules under Regulation EC 356/2005

David Milly outlines the key technical features of Regulation EC 356/2005 on the marking of passive fishing gear. Thomas Díaz points out that the practical difficulty is primarily associated with the height of the buoys.

With regard to the assessment project financed by the European Commission on the various techniques for setting buoys for marking passive fishing gear, Dominic Rihan (BIM) explains that BIM has finally been awarded of the project, which will focus on three issues:

- identifying existing practices in a range of countries (Canada, Iceland, etc);
- analysing gear types and their marking procedures: costs, components, etc;
- current Community Regulations and comparison with international regulations.

BIM will stay in regular touch and will report on the outcome of its project to parties concerned (gillnet and longline fleets) individually, and to NWWRAC as the European-level representative organisation. In addition, the BIM will ask NWWRAC to assess alternative proposals before submitting its final report to the Commission, in line with its representative's recommendations. The initial working timetable envisions having the report ready for the Commission in 8- 9 months.

* NWWRAC action:

- Through the Focus Group, cooperate with BIM in the implementation of this comparative study on international practices, and keep all members informed of progress made in the matter.

7. Vigilance, monitoring and application issues with respect to current regulations

Discussion of this item is postponed to a later meeting, given the absence of Ian Gatt.

8. Matters arising

No other business is addressed.

9. Conclusion

The Chairman thanks all members and attendees for their contributions, and thanks the translators and interpreters for their hard work.

The meeting is adjourned at 13.00 h.