REPORT

North Western Waters Regional Advisory Council
Focus Group on Northern Hake Management
Hotel Barceló Nervión – Bilbao
21st February 2008

Members:
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Hugo González
Víctor Badiola
Eduardo Míguez
Juan Carlos Corrás
Paul Trebilcock
Jacques Pichon
André Gueguen
David Milly
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Michel Bertignac (IFREMER – ICES scientist)
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SWWRAC Observers:
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Marina Santurtún (AZTI)
Lorenzo Motos (AZTI)

National Administration Observers:
Concepción Sánchez Trujillano (Spanish Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food)
Josu Santiago (Basque Government)

European Commission Representative:
Lisa Borges (DG FISH)

NWWRAC Secretariat:
Alexandre Rodríguez (rapporteur)

WELCOME

The Chairman opened the meeting by explaining practical aspects of its organisation and passing on the apologies of the Irish representatives who had been unable to attend because of a last-minute commitment with the Irish government. He also thanked the Regional Ministry of Fisheries of the Basque Government and the AZTI Foundation for their collaboration and logistical and financial support related to the organisation of the event.

The Director General of Fisheries for the Basque Government, Josu Santiago, gave a warm welcome to Bilbao to all the participants and praised the work of the Regional Advisory Councils as a forum for dialogue and encounter among representatives of national government bodies, the fishing industry, the scientific community and the European Commission. Lastly, he encouraged the sector to continue to take part actively in the discussions and debates that these organs have on Community fishing management guidelines and decisions, stressing the importance of the matter under discussion.

This was followed by a round of presentations by all participants and those attending the meeting.

Background: proposal to create a focus group

The Chairman briefly summarised the process of creation of this focus group, formally adopted by the Executive Committee last November, and added that he expects this group to provide with a broad consensus on proposals for action that will then be forwarded to the working groups and the Executive Committee for their deliberation and, where applicable, adoption.

Hugo González briefly described the different regulations and plans introduced since 2001 for the recovery of Northern hake stocks and reminded to all participants of the meeting that the level of 154,000 tonnes of biomass had been reached in 2007.

Since the Commission has already given its favourable opinion on the immediate introduction of a management plan for 2009 onwards, a proposal was made to debate the effects or repercussions that adoption of the plan could have directly on fishing and indirectly on the economic activity of the industry. Topics were proposed for discussion, such as progress in the management of Northern hake stocks towards a Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) model, the collateral effect of measures such as the readjustment of fleets or the reduction in the fishing effort and the impact on the dynamics affecting other related species, such as anglerfish or megrim.

Adoption of the agenda

No comments or suggestions were made regarding the points of the agenda so it was adopted.

CURRENT NORTHERN HAKE STOCKS: ICES INFORMATION

Michel Bertignac (ICES-IFREMER) explained the different data and parameters used to estimate the aggregate levels of spawning stock biomass (SSB) and fishing mortality (F) for Northern hake stocks in the attached presentation: landings by country, total landings and their distribution in size and age, by type of gear, abundance indices. Michel points out the uncertainty mainly linked to growth, as manifested by the marking and re-catching experiences.

In reply to a question from David Milly, Michel Bertignac confirms that the used landing data are the official data coming from statistics drawn from Member States and that discards have not been taken into consideration due to non-sufficient evaluation.

Moreover, he concluded that there is a relative degree of uncertainty regarding both the historical data series and the data on landings and discards (thus, it is reminded that the latter have not been used for stock assessment in the ICES report) This has consequences on the evaluation results, leading to an underestimation of both fishing mortality of juveniles (group 0 and 1) and stock biomass, as well as results of the simulation of production in the long-term. However, the point was made that, in general terms, F has fallen almost to precautionary mortality levels (Fpa) and SSB has increased considerably and it is situated at Bpa level.

OPEN FLOOR: ANALYSIS OF THE INFORMATION BY THE INDUSTRY

Given the importance of the fleet targeting hake, many participants convened to affirm that the official landing figures were quite lower than the real ones and that the level of discards was also very relevant. Therefore, an estimation of the real volume of both landings and discards should be fundamental not only for a proper and reliable assessment of the stock but also as a main requirement for a constructive thinking about how to deal with a long term management plan. It is suggested the idea of organizing an observation campaign addressed to reduce the existing uncertainties on these data. It is also stated that the lack of reliable data on landings would also affect to other species such as anglerfish or megrim.

In other order of things, the industry believes that the Technical Conservation Measures (TCM) have contributed considerably to stock recovery and that the time has come to fine-tune the system and design the TCM to continue this positive trend, which would focus mainly on improving selectivity parameters and harvesting patterns. A correct assessment is also required of the potential socio-economic impact of future measures on the industry’s economic activity in the short, medium and long term.

A question was raised regarding the average size of the female hake when it reaches sexual maturity. Scientists set this figure at 55 cm for 50% of females, based on sampling and research studies carried out by national science institutes and laboratories.

Hugo González requests to find out more in detail which are the reasons explaining the setting up of a first maturity size for hake females in 55 cm., and Alvaro Fernández replies that this size has been based on biological analysis of thousands of hakes of all sizes, both through scientific campaigns at sea and boxes containing non-eviscerated fish acquired to FPO by scientific institutes.

It is concluded that this size differs from the minimum landing size of 27 cm established for catches, which was the result of a political – not biological – compromise or decision to bring it into line with the size of mesh currently used and to avoid further discards in a context of multi-species fishery. In this sense, the legal size is not only fixed for hake, insofar as other species of commercial interest and with lower sizes are also considered (whiting, blue whiting, mackerel, megrim or nephrops, amongst others)

The participants agreed that a serious debate and discussion are needed on the details of the future TCM, with the dual aim of reducing fishing mortality and protecting female hake to guarantee reproduction. At this respect, Jacques Pichon reflects on the key importance of finding an adequate balance between the capacity of the different fleets with flags of the Member states and the quotas they have. Jacques affirms that for the moment this is not the situation by now, and that the best way to reach the objectives of a future long term management plan is, rather than implementing new technical conservation rules, to ensure first the enforcement of the existing regulations on this matter and mainly the TAC and Quotas regulation.

The meeting was also invited to reflect on the figures and trends revealed in the scientific presentation, since the exact reasons why mortality is falling are unknown: some of those at the meeting asked what the relationship was between the reduction of F and the reduction in fishing effort, and what the best way of reducing F would be, given that we should be focusing on quotas and having the right fleet capacity as well as size. In answer to a question from Jacques Pichon, Michel Bertignac said that the response elements are not sufficient to explain the behaviour of F: recruiting probably had an effect but a reliable answer could not be given.

Lorenzo Motos (AZTI) insisted that improving our knowledge of discards (and landings) is very important for the correct application of the socio-economic assessment model in comparison to existing management alternatives and made the point that the RACs must help to reduce these uncertainties.

Lastly, NGOs were called upon to offer constructive contributions to the debate, rather than offering a simplistic view to the media of the existence of high percentages of discards for all hake fisheries.

SUMMARY OF THE STECF ECONOMIC AND SCIENTIFIC REPORTS

- STECF BIOLOGICAL REPORT (Lisbon, June 2007)

Manuela Azevedo (IPIMAR) made the attached presentation and confirmed that spawning stock biomass levels of at least 140,000 tonnes had been reached for the second consecutive year, although this is a prevision for 2007 that depends on the recruitment levels and it must noted that a certain degree of uncertainty exists for these and other parameters such as absence of discards.

The purpose of this report was to make conservation of the resource compatible with the exploitation interests of the fishing industry. Hence, it proposed a strategy to adopt F target points for a maximum sustainable catch level (Fmsy) by approximation, considering the uncertainties about the relation between SSB, the level of recruitments and the F target point in relation to the level of maximum sustainable catch level by recruitment or Fmax. Furthermore, they were considered higher (+20% Fmax) and lower (-20% Fmax) levels.

It was adopted as tactic a gradual annual decrease of fishing effort with three levels of reduction: 5, 10 and 15%.

The synthesis of the results coming from the analysis made in Lisbon were presented using a "traffic light" system and considering conservation criteria (SSP stability and probability below the precautionary biomass or Bpa) and exploitation criteria (violation of rule of annual variation over or below 15% of the TAC) for the following scenarios:

- Taking (section A) and not taking into account (B) the application of restriction +/- 15% TAC.
- Taking (section A) and not taking into account (B) management uncertainties.
- Levels of Discards.

Moreover, Manuela referred to the carrying out of complementary analysis for considering other uncertainty sources such as growth levels (faster?) and discards.

From the Lisbon meeting, it was convened that by reducing F to the levels of Fmax, SSB would be much higher. It would not jeopardize the volume of catches and would improve long-term economic efficiency. For the various situations studied, the conclusion was that maintaining the current fishing effort would not be beneficial to the conservation of the resource, since F is very close to Fpa.

- STECF SOCIO-ECONOMIC REPORT (Brussels, January 2008)

Michel Bertignac briefly summarised the economic report of the STECF, drawn up to assess the economic impact of the measures and recommendations of the biological report of Lisbon (costs for the fleet, etc). Two types of simulation were carried out:

1) Maintenance of June's Fpa.
2) Consecutive reduction of F to Fmax by an annual rate of 5, 10 and 15%, respectively.

An estimation of discards was also carried out.

A very similar conclusion to the biological report was reached, i.e. shifting towards an Fmax would create greater stock stability and improve the economic yield of the fleet.

In response to this, scientists from AZTI pointed out that a thorough socio-economic study with specific simulations for different hake fleets cannot be carried out with the tools currently available, and that it would therefore be interesting to focus on the specific impact for each fleet with different exploitation patterns targeting hake but also other species (multi-specific fleets).It will be then interesting to have socio-economic models (tools) that would include: specific impacts for each fleet, uncertainty of the stock dynamics of hake and more species and the dynamics of the fleets.

OPEN FLOOR:

Move from a Northern hake recovery plan to a Northern hake management plan: timetable and action strategies for launch.

European Commission Presentation

Lisa Borges, the Commission representative, announced that the non-paper on the Management Plan for Northern Hake would be available in English in March and its French and Spanish versions, in April. She reminded the meeting that the Commission has a legal and political obligation to switch to a management plan and that the cautionary levels of hake stocks are still unstable from the point of view of long-term conservation, so they must be reinforced by a long-term sustainability approach.

After focusing exclusively on the STECF economic report, the Commission detected a clear overcapacity in the fleet for this species, which would presumably lead to financial problems for fleets that were economically inefficient. The Commission believes that the management plan will generate long-term economic benefits for the industry and in all of the alternative situations proposed if harvesting models are improved.

The Commission also pointed out the need to set an Fmax target of 0.17 (in contrast to the current Fpa of 0.25), in line with MSY criteria. To achieve this, the TACs and TCMs must be adapted in order to improve harvesting models and strategies and to reduce the resulting effort due to overcapacity.

The non-paper will contain a long-term management plan with specific questions on the above topics that must be answered by the RACs. Examples of possible questions are:

- Should they be regulated by TAC, F or both?
- Should the rule of 15% be maintained or changed to 10%?
- How would the fishing effort be reduced? By limiting kilowatt hours at sea, by applying decommissioning policies, or both? If so, which sector must be reduced first of all and by what amount?
- By what amounts should annual fishing opportunities be adjusted?
- How would introducing TCM improve harvesting patterns (e.g. average age of landings)?
- Juvenile protection measures → would it be feasible to close areas by seasons. If so, which, how many and how often?

Referring to its consultation timetable, the Commission set a deadline for receiving opinions from interested RACs of before the end of the summer, so that the Commission can present its regulation proposal to the Council of Ministers in October.

Reaction of the participants of the meeting:

This date was considered by all NWWRAC members and South Western Waters RAC observers as a very short and clearly insufficient period of time in which to arrive at a carefully informed and unanimous opinion, taking into account the importance of the plan (which represents a radical change from the current recovery plan) and the diversity and complexity of the issues and matters that it deals with.

Moreover, its contents have not yet been disclosed and neither have those of the proposed revision of the TCM Regulation CE 850/98. The meeting agreed that, first of all, the TCM Regulation has to be studied, followed by its implications for the different fleet segments ("metiers") and, finally, the specific TCM for hake.

It was also considered too soon and too hasty to switch to a management system based on the MSY concept, given the ambiguity and unclear definition of the concept and the fact that scientific, economic and social questions have been raised over its introduction into multi-species fisheries. In the opinion of the participants, no action should be taken before analysing the consequences of the socio-economic impact that these measures could have for the fleet using the appropriate assessment tools.

Alvaro Fernández resumes his paper "*The northern hake is recovering*", circulated previously to the meeting to NWWRAC members in general and Focus Group members in particular. This paper contains the main conclusions about northern hake stocks evolution from both ACFM-ICES and STCEF reports. The author put special emphasis on points 6, 7 and 8 of the conclusions, in which it is affirmed that by keeping an "status quo" situation (i.e. same fishing mortality and same exploitation patterns), the SSB would increase and reach 160,500t in 2009, with the prevision of continuing increasing progressively at least until 2014. Moreover, with the "status quo" conditions, fishing mortality could keep decreasing from the current level of 0.25 (Fpa), without considering future removals in the forthcoming years due to problems of economic profitability for some vessels.

Along these lines, Marina Santurtún (AZTI) reminded the Commission of the conclusions of the economic report on the economic benefits and long-term cost-efficiency of this management plan. She asked the Commission to remember that the model available at the moment was solely economic (rather than bio-economic), with assumptions that do not even cover all of the questions asked by the Commission (such as fuel price in the long term, fleet response to possible changes in stock biomass, changes in harvesting dynamics, etc). Thus, a potential reduction in F could lead some fleets to target other species as a reaction against the reduction in the fishing effort.

Several members believe that the fuel costs will have a direct effect over the SSB insofar as fishing effort will be reduced as a result of the decommissioning of an important part of the fleet targeting hake.

Hugo González made the point that, if this economic model did not cover the economic impact on other species of commercial interest for fleets, then this could have serious repercussions for monkfish and megrim. He expressly requested that, if this were the case, the annual harvesting plans in place for 2009 be maintained. In the meantime, he also favoured increasing the current tolerance margin of 8% between catches recorded in daily fishing estimates and the total volume of landings. Other members pointed out that the economic report does not discuss the necessary link between the markets policy and the policy of the sale of hake in the EU.

Everybody agreed that the Commission should adopt an in-depth approach, rather than general measures being applied to all sectors, since the impact is not uniform for all species.

After an arduous debate, the representative of the Commission confirmed that the management plan would finally be introduced from 2009 onwards due to the legal and political obligation acquired as a result of the adoption of the recovery plan. The decision was also confirmed to use MSY compliance parameters for the species, after thorough scientific consultation and investigation.

UPDATE ON THE EFIMAS PROJECT

Assessment tool for alternative models for managing Northern hake fisheries

Marina Santurtún (AZTI) presented the operational management models, a management council based on different hypotheses, which are shown in the attached presentation.

One representative from each RAC was also invited to take part in the EFIMAS Conference that will be held in Brussels on 11th and 12th March.

QUESTIONS AND REQUESTS

The possibility of drawing up a joint NWWRAC and South Western Waters RAC opinion or assessment proposal for the Northern hake stocks management plan was suggested. The Secretariats of the two RAC agreed to study the joint organisation of the next focus group meeting and to discuss the issues raised by the non-paper once it had been published.

FINAL CONCLUSIONS AND TIMETABLE OF ACTION

It was agreed that the rapporteur of the meeting, in coordination with the Chairman of the focus group, would write up the conclusions adopted in the meeting report and distribute it to members as soon as possible so that comments could be made before or during the Working Groups meeting, held in Manchester from 11th to 13th March.

Main conclusions

1. NWWRAC must take a close look at the effects or repercussions of adopting a multi-annual management plan for hake based on Maximum Sustainable Yield criteria (e.g. revision of the Fmsy). The application of an MSY-based management plan unilaterally proposed by the Commission would not be permitted without a prior thorough study, using the appropriate assessment tools, of the real impact that the future measures could have on the industry's economic activity in the short, medium and long term.

2. The measures to be recommended should be evaluated at future meetings and in close collaboration with the scientific establishment (individually or jointly: TCM, effort limitation, voluntary closure of areas, etc.), in order to lessen the considerable socio-economic impact that a plan of this nature could have (on hake and other species such as monkfish, megrim and prawn) for the industry in the short term.

3. Possibility of launching new campaigns through the industry-scientist partnership system in order to improve the current reliability and quality of data on landings and discards. This would allow consistent results to be obtained that would determine to a greater degree of reliability the level of spawning stock biomass and real fishing mortality for Northern hake stocks.

4. Study and issue of NWWRAC proposals and opinions on Technical Conservation Measure regulations, based on the hierarchy principle: first of all, a general assessment is required of the revision of the TCM Regulation, followed by an analysis of its implications from a fleet perspective (by "metiers") and a discussion of the specific TCM for hake complementing those of the management plan.

5. A second meeting of this focus group must be called immediately (scheduled date: end of April/mid-May) with the South Western Waters RAC, to debate and draw up a response (individual or joint, from the two RACs) to the questions raised in the Commission's non-paper, evaluating aspects such as the best way to reduce fishing mortality.

6. The Commission must be asked to involve the RACs in a preliminary phase of the consultation procedure before the adoption of non-papers that deal with issues of particular relevance for the scope of action of the RACs (e.g. TCM, long-term management plans, discards, etc).

THANKS AND FINISH OF MEETING

The Director of Fisheries of the Basque Government, Josu Santiago, ended the focus group meeting by thanking the participants for their contributions.

The meeting closed at 2pm.