



Response of the Scottish White Fish Producers Association

to

Commission communication on the use of closed areas to protect spawning aggregations of Blue Ling

Introduction

In its continued commitment to protect deep-sea stocks, the Commission (CJON) has requested a response to its paper on the use of closed areas as the principal tool to protect spawning aggregations of blue ling¹ off the West Coast of Scotland. The following is an evaluation by the Scottish White Fish Producers Association on the appropriateness of such a measure.

Overview

1. The Scottish White Fish Producers Association (SWFPA) acknowledges the continued commitment by the CJON to afford protection to the blue ling stock in area VI and VII. We appreciate that a regime which promotes vessel activity away from aggregations during time of spawning is sensible. However, we fundamentally disagree with the CJON that a closed area is the only or fairest approach to reducing mortality during this period.
2. Council Regulation (EC) No 2015/2006 shows the UK share of the EU blue ling Total Allowable Catch (TAC) in area VI and VII to be 482 tonnes in 2007 (total TAC of 2510 tonnes) and 386 tonnes in 2008 (total TAC of 2009 tonnes); this low allocation provides little incentive, or opportunity, for Scottish vessels to pursue a directed fishery for blue ling.

¹ *Molva dypterygia*

3. Scottish vessels which fish area VI do so mainly for species such as anglerfish², ling³, haddock⁴, megrims⁵ and saithe⁶.
4. Some catches of blue ling are taken by a limited number of Scottish vessels; the domestic management of quota ensures that targeting of blue ling is extremely limited, the practice has decreased significantly since the introduction of quotas for deep sea species in 2003⁷
5. Scottish vessels largely avoid spawning aggregations of blue ling by ensuring they fish depths shallower than 500 metres (250 fathoms). Blue ling in general, and spawning aggregations specifically, are largely found in depths greater than 500 metres.
6. Anecdotal information from the fishers indicates a spawning period of May and June for blue ling in area VI and VII, not March-June as indicated.
7. Use of the deep sea permit⁸ in the Scottish fleet has reduced over time, an indicator of reduced activity in deep sea fisheries.
8. A substantial area of sea to the North West of Scotland was closed in 2004⁹ as part of the measures to recover EU cod stocks. This area remains closed.

Alternative Regime

9. Closed areas as a means of protecting spawning aggregations of blue ling in area VI to the west of Scotland should be avoided. **The Socio-economic impact of such measures on an already vulnerable Scottish West Coast catching sector is clearly disproportionate and discriminatory in its effect.**
10. **Spawning aggregations can be protected by the use of less severe but equally protective measures.**
11. The catch rate of blue ling is extremely 'depth sensitive', very few fish are caught in waters where the depth is less than 500 metres; consequently, **it is easy for vessels to actively avoid blue ling while fishing for other stocks on shallower areas of the shelf edge.**
12. Over time fishers have built up detailed charts on the contours of the shelf edge, this enables them to avoid spawning concentrations with a degree of confidence; **use of this distribution characteristic has worked well for Scottish fishers over recent times.**

² *Lophius piscatorius*

³ *Molva molva*

⁴ *Melanogrammus aeglefinus*

⁵ *Lepidorhombus* spp.

⁶ *Pollachius virens*

⁷ Council Regulation (EC) No 2340/2002 fixing deep-water TACs for 2003 and 2004.

⁸ "deep-sea fishing permit" means the fishing permit referred to in Article 3 of Regulation (EC) No 2347/2002.

⁹ COUNCIL REGULATION (EC) No 2287/2003 of 19 December 2003

13. **As a secondary driver, we propose that a by-catch limit of 10% be imposed on landings during May and June.** Such a mechanism can be catered for by a foot-note provision in the current deep sea TAC and quota regulation¹⁰.
14. Further, we propose a programme of onboard observers be set up to monitor the effectiveness, and adherence to, of vessel avoidance schemes. This would necessarily add the 'confidence factor' for the commission.

Summary

Through necessity, Scottish fishers have developed a pattern of fishing geared towards avoiding stocks on the shelf edge for which they have little or no quota. This system has been developed over time through the sharing of knowledge and experiences. Quota managers view the system as being effective while the fishermen see it as being efficient, allowing them to pursue stocks for which they have quota.

Blue ling has specific characteristics which are ideally suited to depth avoidance techniques. The blunt approach of closing vast areas of sea to protect localised groups of fish is outdated, and lacks the sophistication which the CION has been trying to develop over time.

We recommend to the CION: The system of avoidance our fishers have developed is evaluated through the introduction of an onboard observer programme during the spawning period of 2008. We also advocate that the CION take due consideration of the results from these observed trips, and our scheme in general, before building any new proposal for the management of blue ling in area VI and VII .

¹⁰ COUNCIL REGULATION (EC) No 2015/2006 of 19 December 2006

Mike Park 12th October 2007