CONSEIL CONSULTATIF POUR LES EAUX OCCIDENTALES SEPTENTRIONALES
NORTH WESTERN WATERS ADVISORY COUNCIL
CONSEJO CONSULTIVO PARA LAS AGUAS NOROCCIDENTALES

MINUTES

WORKING GROUP 1 (WEST OF SCOTLAND)

Virtual meeting

Tuesday 8 July 2020

11:45 – 13:15 CET

1. Welcome and introductions

The Chair, Mike Park, opened the meeting and welcomed the members, observers, ICES and COM representatives to the meeting.

No apologies were received in advance of the meeting. The agenda was adopted as drafted.

Action points from the minutes from the Spring electronic procedure were discussed:

1. Send letter to COM with request to extend deadlines for the delivery of reports by national scientific bodies in support of existing exemptions

Letter sent on 1 April requesting for clarification on impact of the COVID-19 crisis on functioning of Commission, Member State and Advisory Council work. The NWWAC suggested to initiate a thorough review of the feasibility to achieve currently existing deadlines, including the one for the Joint Recommendation Discard Plan and to amend these taking into account the current circumstances.

Reply received on 16 April: The Regional Groups are already working on the various joint recommendations focused on the specifications of the landing obligation, the technical measures, or on directed fisheries in accordance with the Common Fisheries Policy and the Technical Measures Regulation. The STECF timetable for assessing those joint recommendations is expected to remain unchanged.

2. ICES advice for the West of Scotland

- **Presentation by Ghislain Chouinard (ACOM Vice-Chair)**

Ghislain presented the advice released on the 30th June. ICES rules used in developing advice and fishing opportunities are similar to previous years, so were not included in this presentation. However, an overview on this is available as a presentation on the NWWAC website.

COVID-19 had an impact on how ICES develops the advice. Usually, there are physical meetings for the expert groups and the advice drafting groups. This year, all of this was conducted remotely. As such, ICES proposed to provide abbreviated advice to the recipients, which was agreed. This abbreviated advice only includes salient facts in terms of the advice and the relevant graphs and tables. The previous advice that provides some of the other background information such as the reference points has been added in annexes.

For those stocks that were benchmarked in early 2020 (for the West of Scotland, cod in 6a and whiting in 6a), the complete advice sheet is available.

Also note that there's advice to be released in the Autumn for the following stocks: angler fish, megrim in 6b, as well as Nephrops and skates and rays.

- Cod in the West of Scotland (6a)

The advice remains unchanged at zero for both 2021 and 2022. This is a stock where the assessment was looked at back in 2019 and benchmarked again in 2020. As you know, there's always been some issue about stock structure and as well in connection with North Sea cod. That issue hasn't been resolved yet: there are indications that there could be three subpopulations in the area.

There is a workshop coming up in August to look at the North Sea and adjacent areas in preparation for a benchmark on North Sea Cod in 2021. Hopefully, there will be new information and a more comprehensive review of the stock structure issue for the North Sea as well as the links with the West of Scotland.

The assessment is similar in terms of the status of the stock to what we had previously. The spawning stock biomass is estimated to be extremely low. Fishing mortality is above FDA, well above FMSY.

Generally, recruitment has been low since early 2000 and appears to be impaired. In terms of status, both in terms of fishing pressure and stock size, we're above the FMSY and below the MSYB trigger and in fact, below Blim as well, hence the zero-catch advice. The SSB for the spawning stock biomass at the beginning of 2021 as you can see is very low, 3,000 tonnes, well below Blim, which is estimated around 14,000 tons, hence zero-catch advice.

This is one of the stocks where ICES provided, as part of the technical service to DG MARE, the likely catches in 2021. This technical service was released last week and is available on the ICES website.

- Cod at Rockall (6b)

Only limited information available, ICES provides advice for three years, and the advice is for 14 tons, which is the same advice that we gave for the previous 3 years. There is a new survey that was looked at, it was not used for the assessment now, but suggests some increase. However, the abundance is still considered very low. There are issues with stock identity and the advice was based on the recent advice catch that we had previously. In terms of fishing pressure and stock size, the status is really unknown.

- Haddock in the North Sea, West of Scotland, Skagerrak (4, 6.a and Subdiv. 20)

The advice for 2021 is for a substantial increase to 69,280 tonnes for the whole stock. The spawning stock is mostly above MSYB trigger since 2002. The fishing pressure has declined in recent years. Generally, the recruitment since 2000 has been at a low level, but for 2019, the 2019 year-class is much larger than anything that has been seen since the early 2000s. The increase in advised catches is due to that recruitment increase. In 2020, quota in 6.a is 5.2% of TAC for the stock.

- Haddock at Rockall (6b)

The advice is for reduction to 6,239 tons, based on MSY. The spawning stock has mostly been above MSY Btrigger since 2002 and that has increased quite a lot with some decline recently. There was good recruitment in the 2017 year-class, but the recent year-classes are below average, coming a bit back down. The decrease in the advice catch is mostly due to decreasing or revised SSB estimates and change in selectivity assumptions for older ages.

In terms of stock status, the fishing pressure is just below FMSY and the stock size is above MSY Btrigger, the highest that we've seen for the stock. The F for 2020 (0.229) corresponds to the catch constraint. The SSB is well above the MSY Btrigger and so we can give advice at the FMSY. There would be some decline in the spawning stock biomass with that catch by the beginning of 2022 of about 6%.

- Hake Northern stock (3.a, 4, 6, 7, 8.abd)

The advice for 2021 is some reduction to 98,657. The spawning stock is above MSY Btrigger. Since 2009, it's near the highest values.

Recruitment is variable, there's no obvious trend there. The fishing pressures declines and is around FMSY since about 2013. Some reduction in the advice is due to revised perception of the stock and discussion around retrospective pattern in that assessment, which seem to be increasing. That means that recent assessments have progressively revised lower the spawning stock biomass from what was previously estimated. This will need to be monitored and examined in further details. The advice is based on MSY, but the EU map option is provided. The fishing pressure is considered to be below the FMSY, and the stock size is above MSY Btrigger.

- Megrim in the northern North Sea and West of Scotland (4a and 6a)

The advice is based on the EU multi-annual plan. The FMSY advice is 7,300 tons, which is about a thousand tons lower than the advice we had for 2020. There has been an increase in the spawning stock biomass since the mid-2000, and it's well above MSYB trigger, but now there has been some decline in recent years, which is the reason for the reduction in the advice. In terms of fishing pressure and stock size, they were below the FMSY fishing pressure and were above the MSY B trigger.

- Saithe in the North Sea, Rockall and West of Scotland, Skagerrak and Kattegat (4,6,3a)

The advice is based on MSY and is a substantial reduction over the advice for 2020 to 65,687 tons. The spawning stock has fluctuated without trend and has been above MSY Btrigger since 1996, but now has declined some and is just above MSY Btrigger.

The main reason for the reduction in the advice is that the estimates of stock have been revised downwards; this is another stock showing some retrospective pattern. This stock had been showing retrospective patterns in previous assessment, but it seems that now it's even larger. Close examination is needed. The fishing pressure is above the FMSY, has been for the last few years, and stock size is also above the MSY Btrigger. The fishing mortality for 2020 is assumed to be the average of the recent years, which is above the FMSY. For 2021, the SSB would be just above MSYB trigger, and the advice is based on the full FMSY.

- Whiting in 6a

This stock was benchmarked in 2020. Quite a bit of information here was examined. Unfortunately, the benchmark had recommended to use a SPiCT analysis. However, the advice drafting group and ACOM, upon seeing the confidence intervals of the data analysis, considered that that was not of sufficient quality to be used for the advice. The assessment has been downgraded from category 1 to category 5 and the index change is used as an indicator solely for stock status and suggests that the stock is still below possible reference points.

There appears to be no sign of rebuilding. There used to be quite large catches there from the period prior to about 2000. It's not possible really to forecast catches for this stock, given the lack of an assessment that could be used to make projections. However, the best estimate of unavoidable catches for 2021 would be those that we've seen in 2019 of 1,444 tons.

- Whiting in 6b

This advice was provided in 2018 and it's for 9 tons. This will be examined again next year.

- Black scabbardfish in the Northeast Atlantic and Arctic Ocean

Advice for 2021 and 2022 is for 4,506 tonnes, which is a reduction over the previous advice. The total biomass index is flat but showing a slight decline in recent years.

Question: The forecast made for 2021 are based mostly on the levels of fishing mortality that has been seen recently. They focus on the fact that the fishing efforts used is going to be the same as the one applied for the most recent period. This year, we have seen an important change to the activities of fishing vessels in Europe because of the COVID-19 crisis. Many vessels have stopped fishing, others have had to change their fishing strategy and obviously, we cannot say as of today how the production of 2020 will have an impact, but I'm convinced that there will be important decreases in production. How were these changes of vessel behaviour in 2020 considered taking into account the COVID-19 crisis? It would be interesting perhaps to consider some other supplements to the advice issued such as the fishing pressure being reduced by 10% compared to the fishing effort in 2019 or 20% less. Or perhaps, after the summer, we may altogether try to assess the production level of the different stocks on a real basis after having seen the catch levels in the first month of the year.

Ghislain: It's actually a very, very good point and one that was discussed between ICES and the recipients of the advice. At the time of the assessment, we were in the beginning of the COVID-19 situation and the experts didn't have very strong basis to advise on some other level of catch other than the assumptions we normally use, which are either that the fishing effort would be about the same or that in other cases, it'll be the fishing effort corresponding to the TAC. There was a consultation with recipients to see what sort of thing they might like to have.

In some fisheries, it was felt that there was maybe some reduction in effort at the beginning of the year, but they would be able to catch up. If there are stocks where towards the end of the year it's clear that the uptake will be a lot less than what was anticipated in the advice, ICES would entertain special requests. We do receive special requests from the Commission and from other recipients of advice and that this would be probably the best way to deal with that.

Another option could have been to update all the advice in the next year TAC when the fall catches are known. But in the end it was considered that there might be some special requests for cases where there's a significant difference between what was anticipated and the uptake because of the COVID-19.

Question: In the benchmark for cod in 6a was the natural mortality looked at and particularly, was the significant increase in the seal population and the effect on cod considered?

Ghislain: I will have to check the benchmark report in more detail but my understanding, looking at it is it's a time-varying mortality based on weight at age. Not so much related to the seals. There might have been other considerations, but as far as I can remember, that wasn't part of it. (Note: the seal predation was examined but in the end the natural mortality is based on the weight at age.)

Question: There are a few things about the cod in 6a. One is this 40% estimates of the misreporting, which you see is very uncertain. What is the basis for that estimate? The other issue relates to the fact that there's a significant downward trend in the stock size and an upward trend in the fishing mortality. How exactly did the benchmark really affect this analysis, which were the underlying assumptions? In that regard, it would be very useful if you did give us an outline of the advice or the response to the Commission's request on the zero-catch option for a cod in 6a.

On the Rockall haddock, it is very difficult to understand the 40% reduction when you look at the artificial mortality and at the stock size. I realize that there was an issue here about the selectivity of the older ages of the assumptions, but it is unclear what those assumptions were and how much of the 40% reduction relates to the selectivity and how much of it relates to the declined stock sizes, such are the anticipated decline stock size.

For whiting in 6a, it is a significant difference as ICES has completely downgraded the assessment from category 1 to category 5. Why was this downgraded totally to a category 5 rather than for example a category 3?

Ghislain: The basis for misreporting in the benchmark should be using VMS data from the UK. However, for 2019, the data that was received on VMS was not available in the needed format. The basis was the estimates that are provided by Marine Scotland compliance. There was some sensitivity analysis done in the assessment to see the impact of that assumption and that was found to be not too sensitive.

Regarding the special technical service for the cod in 6a for anticipated catches, the technical service suggests that the expected catches for division 6a cod would be in the range of 1,625 and 1,914 tons.

This is considering the advice for haddock and saithe, particularly for saithe where the advice is for a reduction in effort. There was a projection done with that to get to these numbers. The other point is that with these catches, the spawning stock biomass in 2022 would be expected to increase between 17% and 30% for the cod in 6.a.

For the Rockall haddock, there is the change in the perception of the stock and that accounts for roughly about 15% in the reduction that we see. The other change is the availability of age 5 in the fishery, which seems to be lower than what it was at age 4. That accounts for most of the rest of the change in the advice, as well the recruitment.

For the whiting in 6a the reason why you get such large confidence intervals in that SPiCT model is that these indicators are more or less showing different trends, which makes it difficult to fit the model. It's difficult to choose one index in that situation and that is why a category 5 assessment was used. ICES considered that this stock would be in need to be re-examined fairly soon.

Question: Can you clarify why the 1,444 tons catch prediction for whiting in 6a is provided by ICES? Our understanding was that ICES only provided unavoidable bycatch figures for zero TAC stocks.

Ghislain: We could use bycatch or discard rates, but the technical service is quite clear in saying that there's no way to forecast catches or by-catches in 2021 because we don't have a model to make that. Hence, the best estimate is that total catches, when we say catches, we mean total catches, would be 1,444 tons if everything remains about the same. I think that that needs to be considered when looking at the decisions about what should be unavoidable catches so that the discard rate should likely be considered with that as well. The catches are made in other fisheries, if they were discarded, they're still being made. ICES is looking at the total that is going to be taken from the stock.

- **Drafting advice to inform the development of the EU TAC proposal**

ACTION: Members to send their comments/input to feed the drafting of the NWWAC advice to the Commission's TAC & quotas proposal.

3. Upcoming elections of the Working Group Chair and Vice-Chair

The Working Group Chairs and Vice-Chairs are elected for a term of three years. This three-year term is coming to an end this September, so elections are upcoming.

However, the Secretariat had a proposal to all the members of this Working Group simply because the Advisory Council overall is facing some difficult times at the moment. Not only with the COVID crisis, but also with Brexit coming. To keep the stability going of the Working Groups and of everything that has been established over the last three years, the Secretariat proposed to extend the term of the chair and vice-chair for another year.

In this Working Group, the Chair is a UK member. Some of the UK members will remain full members until the 31st of December. It is up to this Working Group to decide which way they would like to go forward. No decision needs to be taken right now, but members should contact the Secretariat prior to the meeting in September.

Chair: Obviously, extending me by one year is probably not appropriate, but I will certainly be member of the NWWAC up until the end of December. Notwithstanding that you may take a decision in terms of the Vice-Chair in September, it may be also that you take a decision on the Chair, but I am more than willing to remain Chair while we are in membership, which will be until the end of the year.

ACTION: Members to inform the Secretariat if they want to continue with the current Chair and delay the elections until next year September, or rather wish to see elections this September.

This Working Group will most certainly need a new Vice-Chair come September, there's no need to make a decision now, but an election is needed in September. It would be great if members who are interested in this could volunteer for this position (by notifying the Secretariat via email).

4. Summary of actions agreed and decisions adopted by the Chair

1	Members to send their comments/input to feed the drafting of the NWWAC advice to the Commission's TAC & quotas proposal.
2	Members to inform the Secretariat if they want to continue with the current Chair and delay the elections until next year September, or rather wish to see elections this September.

5. Participants list

NWWAC participants	
Name	**Organisation**
Caroline Gamblin	CNPMEM
Hugo Boyle	ISEFPO
Jan Kappel	EAA
Jean-Christophe Vandevelde	The Pew Charitable Trust
José Beltran	OPP-07-Lugo
Kenny Coull	SWFPA
Luis Francisco Marin	OPPAO
Matilde Vallerani	NWWAC Secretariat
Mo Mathies	NWWAC Secretariat
Puri Fernandez	ANASOL
Sean O'Donoghue	KFO
Suso Angel Lourido	Puerto de Celeiro S.A.
Seamus Bonner	IIMRO
Llibori Martinez	IFSUA
Lydia Chaparro	Fundació ENT
Jean Marie Robert	Pecheurs de Bretagne
Mike Park	SWFPA
Javier Lopez	Oceana

Other participants	
Name	**Organisation**
Ghislain Chouinard	ICES
Juan Antonio Espejo	Ministerio De Agricultura, Pesca Y Alimentacion