

Draft opinion for WG3 on a management strategy for sole in the Eastern Channel (7.d)

CNPMEM proposal

In 2015 and 2016, the Western Waters Advisory Council submitted a proposal to the European Commission for a management strategy for the sole stock in the Eastern Channel (7.d) in response to ICES assessments (Annexes 1 and 2). These efforts were part of the desire to see both the stock managed in a sustainable way, but also to provide a relative stability to the European fleets that exploit this stock, as well as medium-term visibility for the sector. Indeed, the ICES recommendations of 2015 for 2016 recommended a reduction of the TAC of 32%, and in 2016 a decrease of 22% for the year 2017.

Today, in the advice for 2018, ICES proposes a 40% increase in the TAC compared to 2017 to reach the FMSY. This large and unexpected increase can be explained both by the revision of the stock assessment model at the 2017 benchmark meeting (Annex 3) and by the exceptionally good recruitment year in 2015, which adds to the stock biomass available for fishing. However, up to now, the fishing industry has not noticed any notable change in sole catches in 7.d, which implies that 2015 recruits are not yet fully available and questions the estimated levels for the 2015 recruitment. It should also be noted that recruitment estimates for 2016 and 2017 (predictions) are lower than for 2015. Therefore, it is highly likely that ICES advice for the TAC proposals for 2019 and 2020 will decline again.

Thus, scrupulously following the FMSY approach for 2018 does not seem to be the most sensible strategy to follow. First, the stock biomass being still lower than the MSY Btrigger, imposing that a fishing mortality equal to FMSY would not guarantee the reconstruction of the stock in 2018. Second, it would also help to maintain the erratic fluctuation of the SSB, Year-on-year, which strongly impacts the profession and limits any visibility. Third, this sharp increase in quotas would destabilize the economic market of sole considerably. Therefore, to ensure a sustainable, responsible and respectful management of sole 7.d, French industry proposes to put in place a 3-year management plan for this specific stock that is still rebuilding. The proposals for management measures are as follows:

- To increase the TAC for 2018 by 25% (compared to 2017 (3,461 tonnes)) instead of the 40% recommended by ICES, in order to preserve the stock, avoid reducing the 2015 cohort too much and allow the stock to reach the MSY Btrigger. At the same time, this measure would also temporize the economic impact of the increase in landings on the market.
- Maintain this TAC level for 3 years (2018, 2019 and 2020) in order to stabilize the fishing pressure imposed on the stock, to limit the oscillation of the SSB, and to provide a minimum of visibility for the industry.
- Impose a minimum catch size of 25 cm for all European fleets (NB: this measure is already applied by the French fleet).
- Protect nursery areas in territorial waters when scientific data can support their existence.

The French industry is convinced that the introduction of these relevant and reasonable management measures will allow the sole 7.d stock to recover within its biological limits and allow exploitation at MSY levels hereafter.