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Subject: Setting of reference points

Dear Mr Gatt, Mr Johansson and Mr Predki,

Thank you for your letter concerning ICES calculation of biomass and fishing mortality reference points.

I am very pleased to read your appreciation of the opening of part of ICES advisory process to participation of observers. I agree with you that this has facilitated mutual understanding and contributes positively to ICES advisory process. However, your letter indicates that there still is room for improvements in the dialogue between observers and ICES and I would be pleased to work with you to achieve this.

You write that you think the positive development is being challenged by the way ICES recently have decided to change reference points for a number of stocks in the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. You question the process where WKMSYREF was asked to calculate reference points for a large number of stocks as well as the work itself at the workshop, which you found not to be accessible.

Reference points are normally reviewed and updated as part of the benchmarking process where the assessment methods including reference points are been evaluated and developed typically for a limited number of stocks from an ecoregion or with similar population dynamics.

The experiences with the benchmarking process are variable. Some have been very successful resulting in updated and improved assessment methods and reference points, while others have been less successful in meeting the goals. In relation to reference points a need for developing a generic approach ensuring consistency in definitions of reference points and methods used to develop them was identified and a workshop (WKMSYREF2) was convened in

January 2014 in order to evaluate the basis for reference points for ICES fish stocks, and propose operational definitions.

The WKMSYREF2 workshop provided a basis for estimation of F_{msy} and $B_{trigger}$ that conforms to ICES MSY framework and is compatible with the ICES precautionary approach and the definition of B_{lim} . F reference points (F_{lim} and F_{pa}) were not explicitly considered.

A normal stock benchmark process is very resource demanding and normally runs over a period one to two years. There is therefore a limit to the number of benchmarks we can have at the same time.

During the summer of 2014 ICES was requested by the Commission specifically to provide MSY ranges for a number of North Sea and Baltic stocks. ICES had not previously provided estimates of MSY ranges and to be able to respond to the requests from the EU Commission for advice on F_{msy} ranges ACOM decided to setup a separate process involving two workshops (WKMSYREF3 and WKMSYREF4).

WKMSYREF3 met in November last year and the work was centered on guidelines for estimating F_{msy} ranges and proposal for ranges for North Sea demersal stocks, Baltic Sea stocks, anchovy in Subarea VIII and horse mackerel (Western stock). The specific stock list for which the Commission was requesting advice was only finalized in December 2014, this led to some work in WKMSYREF3 on some stocks which was then not used when answering the final request. In developing F_{msy} ranges for the stocks concerned the workshop also evaluated the reference point and suggested new values for a number of the stocks. This work was reviewed externally, and ICES held an ADG and issued advice in March 2015, where relevant MSY values were updated based on results from benchmarks taking place between November and March. You should note that ICES benchmarks do not set reference points, they are usually proposed at the benchmarks but as with the MSY ranges they are agreed by ACOM through the ADG process which is also open to observers.

In order to respond to another request from the Commission WKMSYREF4 is scheduled to meet 13–16 October to estimate MSY reference points including F_{msy} ranges for a number of stocks in Western Waters.

I have noted your criticism of the process. I can ensure you that ICES has no intention or interest in implementing a process that is seen as opaque. I will bring your concerns to the attention of ACOM with the aim of discussing how we best ensure that the positive development in making the advisory process transparent is maintained.

Reference points will continue to be reviewed as part of stock benchmarking process but there will likely still be cases where revisions of reference points will take place outside planned benchmarks for example in response to specific requests, where the timeline does not allow for a normal benchmark process, or in cases where information indicates that the reference points are outdated and can be updated without running a full benchmark. As before in all cases

reference points will be agreed by ACOM before ICES gives advice according to these values. I recognize that it may be difficult to get a clear picture of when reference points are going to be reviewed and I suggest we discuss at the MIACO meeting in January next year how we best ensure you get the information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of several loops and a long horizontal stroke, likely representing the name Eskild Kirkegaard.

Eskild Kirkegaard
ACOM Chair