
Location: West-Indisch Huis, Amsterdam, NL (Herenmarkt 99, Tel: +31 20 625 7528)

Date: 1 July 2013

Start time: 14.00

End time: 17.00

More info: see www.pelagic-rac.org

Participants

Iain MacSween (chairman), Alan McCulla, Audun Maråk, Christian Olesen, Christine Absil, Claus Reedtz Sparrevohn, Eibhlin O'Sullivan, Esben Sverdrup, Fuensanta Candela, Francis O'Donnell, Fredrik Lindberg, Gerard van Balsfoort, Ian Gatt, Ignacio Fontaneda Lopez, Jens Christian Holst, Jesper Juul Larsen, John Ward, José Beltran, Laurent Markovic, Marc Ghilia, Mark Dickey-Collas, Nico Bogaard, Niels Christian Jensen, Pieter-Jan Schön, Reine Johansson, Sarunas Zableckis, Sean O'Donoghue, Stewart Harper, Verena Ohms, Victoria Beaz

(1) Opening of the meeting by the chairman, Iain MacSween

The chairman opened the meeting at 14.10 hrs noting that some people were still missing due to delayed flights. Nevertheless it was necessary to start the meeting given the extensive agenda.

(2) Approval of the agenda

The chairman explained that item 4 on the agenda would have to be deleted, because Pascale Savouret had to cancel his participation on short notice. Other than that the agenda was approved.

(3) Financial matters

The chairman provided an overview of the budgeted costs for the period 17 August 2012 until 16 August 2013 and the realized costs until 1 June 2013. While staff costs and costs for other contracts have been estimated fairly accurately, the costs for participation in meetings, preparation of meetings, operating costs and interpretation will likely be higher than what has been budgeted originally due to the additional discard meetings from 25 April 2013 and 3 July 2013. Nevertheless it is expected that there will be neither a deficit nor a surplus this year thanks to an increase of income caused by some Member States and members paying their contributions late. This will have to be processed through a budget amendment of which the Commission has already been informed. The chairman noted that the secretariat deserved credit for balancing the budget given the difficulty of foreseeing all costs.

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(4) Presentation by Pascal Savouret, EFCA

This presentation had been cancelled on short notice.

(5) Presentation by Jens Christian Holst on ecosystem dynamics in the Norwegian Sea

The chairman welcomed Jens Christian Holst who was going to give a presentation on ecosystem dynamics in the Norwegian Sea.

Jens Christian Holst introduced himself and pointed out that until recently he worked as a scientist at the Institute of Marine Research in Bergen, but decided to leave this institute and start as a freelance consultant in fisheries. Today's speech would therefore be his first as a free scientist. He explained that he has been working on the management of pelagic resources for many years and that in 2008 he put forward his hypothesis on overgrazing. According to this hypothesis the Norwegian Sea's zooplankton is overgrazed by large pelagic stocks leading to increased natural mortality at least for Norwegian spring spawning herring due to starving fish. He said that the strong rise in temperature from 1995 onwards led to an explosion of pelagic fish stocks which expanded northwards and a parallel collapse of the plankton concentration. This resulted in decreasing length at age for mackerel, herring and blue whiting, whereas in recent years length at age has been increasing again for blue whiting after the stock got small enough to have sufficient food available. Over the past 30 years age at length has decreased by 4,5 cm in Norwegian spring spawning herring corresponding to a 31,5% weight reduction in the spawning population. Jens Christian Holst furthermore showed a graph that illustrated historic and present condition factors of herring. While the average and 1999 length- condition factor relationship in May is rather flat ($K= 0,9$), there is a negative trend in recent years ($K= 0,6$) with many fish being in a bad condition and likely not surviving the winter. He also observed changes in the migration pattern of Norwegian spring spawning herring. Large herring which should have been around Iceland in May remain just outside the spawning areas with empty stomachs, probably too weak to feed and therefore lacking the energy necessary for migrating. Fishermen, however, do not find these starving fish in their trawls as they follow the migrating herring schools. There are also significant changes in the migration patterns of mackerel with mackerel being found all around Iceland, in Greenland waters and in the Irminger Sea. Spawning in the Bay of Biscay takes place 1-1,5 months earlier than usual as does entering the Norwegian Sea. In terms of maturity herring now builds gonads in August directly after feeding which previously happened in October. There are indications that the same happens in mackerel as it spawns earlier. Regarding natural mortality there is an increase in Norwegian spring spawning herring in 2010-2012 compared to 2004-2009 while the stock decreases twice as fast now as it did during the 1950ies. The ecological consequences are numerous and include strongly reduced individual growth in pelagic fish, heavy predation on herring larvae by mackerel and reduced condition of plankton feeding seabirds. Possible strategies range from continuing the current management while awaiting its consequences to catching a large biomass of the grazing population, a proposal not

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realistic today. Another strategy would be to dramatically increase the scientific focus on this subject, preferably through the new ICES working group on integrated assessment of the Norwegian Sea (WGINOR). Jens Christian Holst strongly argued for prioritizing this working group and providing the necessary resources to build appropriate models for evaluating ecosystem dynamics in the Norwegian Sea. He finished his presentation by pointing out that the egg method for assessing the mackerel stock is not appropriate anymore due to large changes in spawning behaviour with a longer spawning period and larger spawning area. Therefore all resources should be re-distributed from the egg method to the trawl and RFID tag method as soon as possible. In order to liberate resources he suggested focussing on optimal harvesting of given parameters like quality, market demand, price, CO₂ output and economic viability rather than wasting energy while fighting about small changes. He therefore advised that fishermen become more engaged in research and management by raising internal competence to move things quicker and use all available channels for this. The ultimate goal should be the step away from single species models towards ecosystem models taking into account food availability.

The chairman thanked Jens Christian Holst for his interesting presentation and invited questions from the audience.

Mark Dickey-Collas pointed out that one has to be careful about how things will change within the ecosystem. He said that the new ICES working group (WGINOR) which will investigate these issues further was rightly pointed out. He wanted to know whether Jens Christian Holst thought that the science-base was already strong enough to justify action or whether the science base will first have to be strengthened more.

Jens Christian Holst replied that it was necessary to first get a stronger science-base through WGINOR and then take action accordingly. At the same time he expressed worries that the ICES working group does not have any resources yet and that it would be in the interest of European fishermen to invest in that group. He said that much more revenue could be produced by fishing correctly.

John Ward wanted to know whether the pelagic stocks are larger than scientists have been saying or whether the amount of plankton is smaller.

Jens Christian Holst replied that both are the case and that at least the mackerel stock is probably much larger than has been assumed so far.

Gerard van Balsfoort said that different scientists provide different answers regarding what kind of data are needed to improve the mackerel assessment. While some scientists (mainly Norwegian) encourage focussing on trawl and tagging and forgetting the egg survey, others say that the egg survey is still needed, because it provides the only long time series. It appeared to him that many people wanted to move away from the egg survey due to its high costs, but he wondered how easy it would be to get rid of it since it has been used for so long. He invited the industry to clearly request from scientists which data would be the best to collect.

Jens Christian Holst was certain that the benchmark will shed more light on these things and that therefore it will be very important to have people participate in the benchmark. He said that this year's egg survey will deliver some surprising results.

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Gerard van Balsfoort asked whether the egg survey is working if it shows that the stock is larger than assumed until now. However, Jens Christian Holst expected the survey to show a decrease in biomass which simply is not true. He again emphasized the need for focussing on multi-species interactions.

Christine Absil wanted to know what was meant by bottom-line in the presentation and whether the management options provided have to be studied or the underlying scientific basics. It seemed to her that many factors are not yet understood and she wondered to what extent there is a discussion on these issues in ICES.

Jens Christian Holst replied that it is the lack of understanding of interactions which has to be solved. In single species modelling interactions are not taken into account even though they are very important. He said that the dramatic decrease of length at age in herring is an alarming signal and should be used as indicator in the future together with other kind of indicators, e.g. one year old salmon. The term bottom-line purely referred to economic revenue.

Sean O'Donoghue wondered whether fishing down mackerel and blue whiting would lead to a much more balanced pelagic system and what would happen to Jens Christian Holst's hypothesis if the egg survey gave a positive result. He moreover wanted to know whether other scientists supported the overgrazing hypothesis.

Jens Christian Holst admitted that he has been quite alone for a long time with his hypothesis. However, as understanding of interactions is increasing, so is the support for his hypothesis, even though there is not much sympathy for it among EU scientists. If the egg survey suddenly indicates a much bigger mackerel stock then this will only emphasize the uncertainty around this survey. Regarding Sean O'Donoghue's first question he said that it was necessary to await the outcome of future research. Increased knowledge on the effect of mackerel predation will provide a clearer picture of the interactions overall. He also stressed that not only small pelagic species are affected by these interactions, but also e.g. sperm whales which change their diving patters. If this had happened on land it would have been treated as a national catastrophe, but under the water surface people do not see what is going on. Those fishes with the ability to migrate and feed in other areas do that, while those not able to stay behind and starve.

Reine Johansson was not surprised that the egg survey is very unreliable, because in the last 5-6 years fishermen have been very certain that SSB is much larger. He also pointed out that the advice Jens Christian Holst is giving the stakeholders cannot be discussed in the right way within the Pelagic RAC, because some stakeholders do not agree with each other and are not open enough for new ideas. He furthermore said that Jens Christian Holst must encourage his own country to take up his ideas too.

Jens Christian Holst agreed in some respects, but also pointed out that the issues he presented should be prioritized much more. Even though ICES started working on the ecosystem approach, progress is made far too slowly, because scientists are over-worked and resources have to be invested in the new ICES working group. Maybe re-distributing resources among institutes could provide a solution.

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Ian Gatt noticed that in terms of starvation the presentation was exclusively referring to pelagic stocks. However, there is a very large stock of Barents Sea cod and he wanted to know whether this is contributing to the fact that herring is starving. He also understood that the EU might participate in the Nordic trawl survey in the future.

Jens Christian Holst confirmed that he received the same information and urged the EU to get involved in that survey right away and not wait until after the benchmark. Regarding cod starvation he was not sure about the situation, but using the same models led to the same results as with the other stocks and he was worried about this stock too.

When asking the EU industry to participate in the Nordic trawl survey Audun Maråk got the impression that this could have an impact on the sharing of the mackerel stock. He therefore stressed that his intention is to better manage the stock, not change the sharing agreement. He said that ecosystem based management is the goal and that the industry has to put pressure on policy makers to achieve this. The Norwegian industry has asked Dankert Skagen to identify areas in which more research effort should be put into and he encouraged the EU industry to work together on this with the Norwegian industry. He said that the less is known the less can be fished in the future.

Mark Dickey-Collas explained that ICES has provided the first draft of multi-species advice for the North Sea and second for the Baltic Sea. Although it is a slow process, ICES is getting there as quickly as it considers it to be robust. He also pointed out that the multi-species advice is causing trouble as many people got upset about it.

José Beltran wanted to know whether Jens Christian Holst has talked to scientists in the southern areas and whether they observe a similar problem with mackerel. He was sure that fishermen there would be in favour of catching more mackerel as the stock has a deep negative impact on other fish stocks like sardine. He also wanted to know what will happen once the discard ban got implemented and there will be no discards anymore to decompose and provide food for other organisms.

Jens Christian Holst replied that he has been discussing his hypothesis with Spanish scientists, but not gone into details. He could confirm that in Spain very thin mackerel has been observed and the interactions described with sardine are comparable to interactions with other stocks that get eaten by mackerel, like sprat. He emphasized that his hypothesis should be discussed on a broad basis since it affects all ecosystems, not only the Northeast Atlantic. Regarding discards he explained that most of the fish is dead when it is discarded and therefore not really removed as a food source from the pelagic system, but rather from seabirds and the bottom system. He said that he would have liked to give another presentation, but that the remaining time was too short and he advised the audience to have a look at the second presentation which will be uploaded to the Pelagic RAC website. This second presentation shows that fishing the entire ecosystem including plankton, would allow to fish much more as long as it is done in a very controlled way. He suggested performing a big experiment on balanced ecosystem based management.

The chairman thanked Jens Christian Holst for his very interesting talk and moved on to the next point on the agenda.

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(6) Presentation by Pieter-Jan Schön and Alan McCulla on the progress of the Irish Sea herring long-term management plan

Alan McCulla appreciated the opportunity to have this presentation especially since this is one of the smaller stocks. SSB has increased while F has decreased in recent years and this good news is also reflected in the latest advice. He informed the meeting that there had been a GAP2 workshop dealing with this stock in May and a webex meeting in June and he thanked the GAP2 project for funding the workshop and the Pelagic RAC for organizing the meetings as well as AFBI for performing simulations.

Pieter-Jan Schön provided a quick history of the development of the management plan followed by an update on the management plan itself. The process started in 2007 with an enhanced survey series based on a huge disagreement between the industry and scientists on the state of the stock. Despite it being very small there has been no assessment for a long time and it has been causing lots of headaches. After continuing the surveys the idea was to develop a management plan and Dankert Skagen, but also the Marine Institute in Ireland and CEFAS, have played an important role in that process. In 2012 the stock was benchmarked which resulted in an assessment. There has been a dramatic increase in SSB since the survey increased and the assessment provides the same signals. In the late 1980ies and 1990ies the stock was at a very low biomass while catches stabilized in the 1980ies. Fishing mortality is currently at F_{msy} and the assessment model works well. The early part in the 1970ies after which the stock collapsed has been excluded from the simulations. Pieter-Jan Schön explained that cyclical changes in productivity are quite common for pelagic stocks and the time series has been split into high and low productivity regimes to better fit the model. It remains unclear, however, whether low recruitment is caused by low SSB. He pointed out that stakeholders expressed a strong preference towards a fixed TAC rule in the management plan and he has tried a simple harvest rule which was also suggested for blue whiting. He tested a few parameters with different setting. While individually they do now have a huge impact on the assessment model, they do in combination with each other. Many scenarios tested turned out to be precautionary, but also an extreme scenario has been included in the simulations to see what happens when the system gets pushed to the extreme. Stakeholders uttered the wish for a constant TAC between 5000 and 6000 tons, but under the current recruitment regime a fixed TAC of 5000 tons seems to lead to problems. This was very disappointing, particularly because the stock has usually been fished at 5000 tons which did not pose a problem. Therefore, in terms of a management plan, the process is almost back to the start. Reference points will have to be looked at again and maybe even the assessment will have to be adjusted. The type of harvest control rule also has not yet been agreed upon even though Pieter-Jan Schön considers it still useful to pursue a TAC rule. He said that another stakeholder meeting is needed during the summer to discuss whether the work should start all over again and whether other rules, like an F-rule, should be explored or not. The aim is to have a complete management plan by the end of the year and get it through the scientific review.

Sean O'Donoghue expressed deep disappointment that the model did not seem to work as such. Given that the stock has been maintained in a healthy state for a long time by catching approximately 5000 tons he suggested looking into the mathematics again.

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Pieter-Jan Schön fully agreed with this suggestion. He already spend two days having a closer look at the assessment model, but could not find anything in the model set-up that explained the simulation results. He also wanted to explore further options.

The chairman thanked Pieter-Jan Schon for this update and announced a 15 minute coffee break.

(7) Consultation on Fishing Opportunities 2014

Fuensanta Candela presented the consultation on fishing opportunities for 2014. She explained that the general news are not bad at all since there has been a steady decrease in stocks sensed to be overfished since 2008/09. At the same time the number of stocks for which an assessment is available has increased thanks to the ICES approach to data-limited stocks. Regarding the information she presented for Northeast Atlantic stocks Fuensanta Candela pointed out that it was based on the advice issued by ICES last year, because when the consultation was drafted, this year's ICES advice had not yet been released. Most herring stocks and Baltic sprat were now fished within MSY rates and TACs corresponding to Fmsy have been set for most stocks. There was some increase in F above Fmsy in Western horse mackerel, herring in North-western Ireland, the Gulf of Riga and the Baltic main basin. The total mackerel outtake is again 36% higher than the ICES advice excluding Russian catches. Some demersal stocks in the Skagerrak and Kattegat are fished at MSY, but a large number of stocks are either overfished or there is no information available. Cod remains a problem. She pointed out that a landing obligation for this area is underway and she hoped that this would improve the situation. In the Baltic Sea some pelagic stocks are fished at MSY, and generally pelagics are not a reason for big concern. Furthermore BALTFISH is a good example of regionalized management and some member states are already implementing a landing obligation in that area. In the Celtic Sea 10 out of 18 assessed stocks were fished at MSY, but there is still a very high degree of discarding of whitefish and the impact of selectivity measures will need to be evaluated. In the Bay of Biscay and Iberian waters there is a good recruitment of southern hake even though the stock is still overfished. Nephrops is still doing very poorly and there is a 0 catch advice. Improvements to catch and effort recordings are being put in place. In the Mediterranean Sea number of assessments increased strongly, but the participation of Coastal States remains an issue and given that the Mediterranean consists mainly of international waters Coastal States need to work together to provide assessments. In the Black Sea there are only two stocks: sprat and turbot. Sprat is overfished and turbot mortality is at its highest ever observed. An international agreement is therefore urgently needed. In terms of effort there has been a decline in kw-days since 2003 in many areas. However, information on this is very limited for pelagics. Profit has been improving probably due to increased prices. While there was a 5% decrease in employment, income and net profit have increased. However, there are significant differences between métiers and the gap between those profitable and those not has increased. Fuensanta Candela also reminded the meeting of the ICES data-limited approach in which ICES suggested a 20% cut in TAC last year for certain stocks. Commission and Council agreed to keep the TAC of 21 of these stocks

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unchanged in 2014 unless different advice warrants a change. She also pointed out the ICES has refined the approach and that there is now a decision-making. The date for the landing obligation for pelagic fisheries, industrial fisheries and all quota fisheries in the Baltic Sea has been postponed for one year and is now expected to come into force on 1 January 2015. ICES has been asked this year to start working on catch advice. We will have to assess how this is dealt with in the advice, once it is released end of June. Fuensanta Candela invited the Pelagic RAC to keep up their reflection on anti-discard measures. She said it would be very risky to increase TACs while the landing obligation is not yet in place and discarding still allowed in 2014. She emphasized the need for providing corresponding data now as well as the importance to work together on developing discard plans. Regarding long-term management plans there are no major changes. Where a plan is in place the Commission advises following the plan. A couple of recovery plans are in force, but their internal mechanism implies that the Council has to decide on a new target. Due to the deadlock between Council and Parliament, however, these plans cannot be applied anymore and thus the Commission has to advise following MSY.

Gerard van Balsfoort remarked that the communication on fishing opportunities starts with mentioning that things are improving. However, a number of stocks are fished below MSY which is not mentioned anywhere and this made him wonder what the management objective is in terms of MSY, i.e. is it a target or a limit? Next time this should be mentioned. He also was puzzled about Parliament and Council and wanted to know whether the Pelagic RAC should continue developing management plans or whether it should wait until the deadlock has been solved. In terms of the 20% TAC reduction for data-limited stocks he explained that the Council did not agree to this approach. Last year the Pelagic RAC came up with the idea of reducing the TAC by 20% over a period of three years while developing a long-term management plan which would have priority if evaluated precautionary by ICES. However, it seems that if the Pelagic RAC has decided to do nothing there might not have been any TAC reduction at all. He emphasized his ambition and willingness to develop a long-term management plan, but also pointed out that he does not like to be threatened by another cut if the plan cannot be implemented quickly enough.

Eibhlin O'Sullivan said that the communication on fishing opportunities stated that if MSY can be reached by 2014 with no or a small cut in TAC the Commission would advise accordingly. She wanted to know what a small cut in TAC would be.

Fuensanta Candela recalled that the agreement reached in the context of the CFP reform included the objective of progressively restore and maintain stocks above biomass levels capable of producing MSY. There might be stocks fished below F_{msy} , but in which SSB is below B_{msy} . This, however, is not the reason why such stocks were not mentioned in the Policy statement. There had been no explicit intention to omit information on such stocks. They are simply comprised in the group of stocks considered to be fished sustainably. The reasons why such stocks are underfished can be varied and very different, from good stock development to lack of commercial interest.

In terms of what classifies as a small cut in TAC she said that this will be decided on a case by case basis, because several aspects will have to be taken into account, like discarding and how other species are doing.

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Mark Dickey-Collas pointed out that ICES was strongly against the introduction of Bmsy, especially in multi-species plans, but unfortunately the politicians have decided otherwise. He said that this will result in a huge struggle and experience in North America shows that implementing Bmsy is a disaster.

With regard to management plans, Fuensanta Candela replied that Parliament and Council have agreed to set up a task force with the Commission to seek a solution for the deadlock. The Court case on the Cod plan amendment, on the other hand, is also pending. She encouraged the Pelagic RAC to continue making progress on the technical side of things since the Council has found it easy to agree on TACs stemming from RAC proposals that have been scientifically assessed as precautionary. Regarding North Sea horse mackerel she emphasized the advantage of a long-term management plan providing some predictability and stability, rather than keeping it as data-limited stock.

Sean O'Donoghue expressed his believe that none of the management plans will be formally agreed in the next two years due to the power struggle and he concluded that it was a waste of time developing any further plans, especially given that ICES does not always advise according to such plans, as is the case with Western horse mackerel. He also wanted to know what inside Fuensanta Candela could give on the implementation of the discard ban from 2015 onwards.

Fuensanta Candela answered that ICES may indeed take into account harvest control rules which have been developed by the RACs when they have been tested and found precautionary. These may be seen in the catch option tables in the advice, where ICES provides the TAC calculation that corresponds to the HCR in question. She also explained that ICES has been asked to re-evaluate the Western horse mackerel management plan and the result was expected to be available after the summer. Some people believe that discard plans have to be developed through regionalization, others through the Commission. Fuensanta Candela pointed out that at the end of the day the Commission only cares about results.

Jens Christian Holst warned everybody to remember the risks associated with underfishing. He said that while less and less stocks are overfished, the likelihood of underfished stocks increases, but management has to seek balance to avoid what is currently happening in the Norwegian Sea.

The chairman thanked Fuensanta Candela for her presentation and closed this point on the note that for most fishermen the discard ban is only one more fishery away which is a lot closer than 12 months away.

(8) Pelagic RAC action plan

Due to time limitations it was decided to follow up on this through written procedure.

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(9) Consultation on Fishing Authorisation Regulation

The chairman explained that the deadline for this consultation is in two weeks and he wondered if this is really an issue for the Pelagic RAC to deal with.

Gerard van Balsfoort noted that this is a very important topic for the PFA, especially regarding reflagging and private agreements between private companies and third countries. However, he considered these issues to be more in the domain of the Long Distance RAC and therefore suggested leaving it to this RAC to answer the consultation.

Christine Absil agreed with the proposal. She said that NGOs are not able to handle the additional work associated with replying to the consultation and would prefer leaving this to her colleagues represented in the Long Distance RAC.

(10) AOB

There was no other business.

(11) End of meeting

The chairman closed the meeting at 17.20 hrs and thanked all attendants for their participation.

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Annex I: action list

- Arrange focus group meeting on Irish Sea herring (Alan McCulla, Sean O'Donoghue, Secretariat)
- Follow up on Pelagic RAC action plan through written procedure (Secretariat)