

Minutes of the Pelagic RAC Working Group I and II meeting on 11 October 2010 on board HQS Wellington in London, UK

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Working Group II

1. Opening of WG II meeting

The meeting was opened at 11:30 by the chairman, Sean O'Donoghue. He welcomed the participants and gave the floor to a representative of the HQS Wellington who gave a short introduction about the history of the ship that the meeting was being held on.

2. Approval of the agenda

The agenda was adopted without amendments.

3. Approval of the minutes of WG II meeting on 30 August 2010

The chairman noted that a draft position text on the issue of governance after the reformed CFP had not been produced by the focus group and secretariat yet, due to time constraints with organising relatively many meetings recently. He proposed that the established focus group and the secretariat would start working on it soon aiming to send it around to the members for comments before the middle of November. The meeting agreed. Otherwise, the minutes were adopted without amendments.

4. Fishing opportunities for 2011

The chairman gave the floor to Reidar Toresen, the Norwegian ACOM member, to give a presentation on the ICES advice.

4.1 Western horse mackerel

After a short introduction on the new ICES framework for advice based on F_{MSY} Reidar Toresen showed the latest assessment results, starting with Western horse mackerel. Fishing mortality had been below F_{MSY} and SSB was stable. Recruitment was relatively low but the stock seemed to be coping with that. The ICES advice based on the HCR was 181 kt. Beatriz Roel added that the model had been worked on since the LTM plan had been developed and the scientists were confident that as long as fecundity did not show a trend, the model was quite accurate in its predictions. The management plan would likely be evaluated again in 2013. Gerard van Balsfoort asked if he understood correctly that the slope between the three latest egg surveys must be nearly horizontal, considering that the advice was almost a roll-over with the TAC. Beatriz Roël confirmed that this was the case.

Alex Wiseman asked whether the Norwegian horse mackerel catches in IVa were of the North Sea or Western stock, considering that the Norwegians had doubled their landings. In case it was Western horse mackerel, were they then included in the landings data, because then an overshoot of the TAC should be visible. The chairman answered that the Norwegian catches indeed were included in the Western horse mackerel landings data

but due to the fact that the EU member states had not all exhausted their quota, there was no TAC overshoot.

The chairman proposed that the RAC would recommend that the TAC should be set based on the LTM plan, i.e. at 181 kt. Gerard van Balsafoort noted that this was a lower number than what the MSY option in the ICES advice gave. He supported that the LTM plan should be followed, emphasising that that should also be the case in the future when the situation might be the other way around. He added that the RAC should also again draw attention to the Norwegian catches and urge that these should be brought under control. The meeting agreed to the proposed recommendation, including Gerard van Balsafoort's comments.

4.2 Southern horse mackerel

The status of this stock was unknown. Probably, the stock would be moved from WGWIDE to the working group dealing with sardine and anchovy. The stock would also be benchmarked at the beginning of 2011. Gerard van Balsafoort asked whether catches of this stock in area IX were mixed with catches of mackerel? Jose Beltran confirmed that the fishery indeed took both species at the same time because they were impossible to separate.

The chairman noted that this stock was put in category 6 by the Commission's policy statement, meaning that the TAC should decrease by 15%. Gerard van Balsafoort asked when STECF was supposed to publish its advice, because ICES should first still evaluate the Commission's Policy Statement rules, but that report was not available yet? Reidar Toresen promised that he would look into it and inform the secretariat. The chairman proposed that the RAC would recommend to follow the policy statement document. The meeting agreed.

4.3 North Sea horse mackerel

Also the status of this stock was unknown. The only data available for the assessment was commercial landings data. Catches had been increasing gradually over the past years, but this did not prove detrimental to the stock. The Commission categorised the stock as category 11. In 2010 the TAC was 47.454 tons. The chairman proposed that the RAC recommended a roll-over of the TAC. The meeting agreed.

4.4 Blue whiting

The blue whiting stock showed a dramatic development in recent years. SSB had been declining fast from a very high level to below B_{LIM} at present and recruitment had been low. Fishing mortality was relatively high. In addition, there was substantial uncertainty in the assessment of the stock, which had much to do with the fact that the distribution area of the stock was vast and highly variable and it was simply really difficult to survey. Despite this uncertainty, the trend was clear and there was no doubt that the stock was in a poor condition. The ICES advice gave several options among which a TAC based on the LTM plan (40,1 kt) and a transition to MSY (between 50 kt and 223 kt for a transition in 1 to 5 years respectively). The option for the Precautionary Approach was a TAC of zero because it was impossible to rebuild the stock to above B_{PA} within one year, due to the low recruitment. Gerard van Balsafoort asked whether the magnitude of the uncertainty in this assessment compromised the assessment's status of being analytical, and if the assessment model was fit for purpose or if in fact it might be better to categorise the stock as category 11 in the policy statement. He wondered if it was not better to take a more pragmatic approach. Jerome Nouis expressed that he was still worried about the issue of identification of separate stock components. It was possible

that some components were depleted, while others were performing reasonably well. Literature from the 90's showed that there was a stock component whose spawning area is in the waters around the Faroe Islands and Hebrideans and a separate one further South whose spawning area is around Porcupine bank. He thought that the differences between them were becoming clearer, e.g. in terms of morphology and in terms of temperature of the water stratum in which the fish is caught. This year's ICES Working Group report showed that the stock was much more depressed in the North than in South. Despite this, ICES still only addressed the combined biomass, which drove the advice to take dramatic action in all areas. Recruitment was very good in 2009 and this year in the Bay of Biscay, but this was not visible in the ICES report. The RAC had asked the Commission several times to investigate this issue, but it was not being followed up on. And second, he wondered whether ICES' recruitment data could have been influenced by a change in fishing pattern, considering that commercial catch at age data was used? Reidar Toresen stated that ICES accepted that there were indications that there likely were more than one single stock. However, at present ICES was not able to do anything about that. Changing to a situation of possibly dealing with those separate stocks would first require genetic analyses to identify the components and then a time series of data on boundaries of distribution area and possible mixing etc. It was needless to say that this was a long and complicated exercise, although of course not impossible. He promised to report the RAC's concerns in relation to this issue back to ICES. In response to Jerome Nouis' second question, Beatriz Roël responded that also survey data was used, which showed exactly the same trend as the catch data. This was from a separate survey in May/June.

Gerard van Balsfoort asked whether due to the decline of the stock, the stock was congregating into EU waters mostly in recent years in comparison to a number of years ago? This should have implications for access to the fish for Norway who were now catching the majority in EU waters. Was there scientific information available on the development of the distribution of the stock? Reidar Toresen confirmed that indeed when a stock was declining as much as the blue whiting stock was, usually it would 'retreat' into its core area, which in the case of blue whiting was the Porcupine bank area. It was consequently also possible that in this area relatively high densities may be found still by fishermen.

The chairman asked whether there were mistakes in the catches table, because it indicated that Iceland had reported catches inside EU waters, which surely could not be right? And also Russia was indicated to have fished off the South East coast of Ireland. Either the ICES working group was working with wrong data, or illegal fishing activities were taking place. This should be investigated. Beatriz Roel responded that she would look into it.

Lunch

The chairman gave the floor to Beatriz Roel for a presentation going into the survey in more detail. Beatriz Roel explained that the assessment was mostly based on the International Blue Whiting Survey (IBWSSS). The assessment uncertainty much had to do with the fact that it was a difficult survey because it covered such a vast area. This year, there had been a problem with the timing of the survey, which had resulted in a coverage gap of 18%, for which the working group had had to interpolate with data from the rest of the area. The missing area was mostly around Porcupine bank and Rockall. Regarding the possibility of regarding separate stock components, she remarked that the most difficult thing would be to separate catches accordingly, because borders between possible different distribution areas of the components were not clear and would be changing continuously. It was unlikely though, that the issue of stock components was at the basis of the problems with uncertainty that the scientists were facing. The HCR did indeed not deal with uncertainty in the assessment, although it should be able to buffer variability because of it. The benchmark assessment that would take place in 2012

should address all of this. The chairman thanked Beatriz Roel and proposed to move on to formulate a recommendation by the Pelagic RAC.

Gerard van Balffoort stated that it was very difficult to give a recommendation on an exact TAC number considering the weak scientific basis, and because the industry of course could not support setting a TAC of 40,1 Kt. However, he felt also hesitant to not give any number at all. Should the RAC perhaps debate the category that the stock was placed in the Commission's policy statement document or use another basis such as the transition to F_{MSY} ? Jose Beltran noted that a TAC of 40,1 Kt, which virtually meant a closure of the fishery, would put huge pressure on the fishing companies, which would likely result in them putting extra effort in fishing for other species which negatively affect them. Christian Olesen responded that another option was to argue that article 6 in the management plan should not actually apply, because the fishing mortality never reached the threshold level that should invoke that article. In that case the TAC should be 137kt. Stewart Harper responded that the entire situation was just a shamble and no sense could be made out of such a bad assessment. Therefore it would be best if the RAC would write that and all the points that were made on how to make improvements, starting with setting up a PRAC focus group. It should also be noted that the proposed reduction by the management plan was completely unacceptable from a socio-economic perspective. Jerome Nouis proposed that the access agreement with Norway and the Faroese should be arrested until the stock had recovered. This would reduce pressure substantially and at least the remaining quota would then be primarily used for human consumption in the EU, rather than for fish meal. In that case not such a big reduction would be necessary for the EU. The chairman noted that the Pelagic RAC had never before gone into commenting on allocation keys and should probably not start now.

The chairman summed up the issues that were discussed and proposed that the main message from the Pelagic RAC to the Commission should be that the Pelagic RAC:

- Acknowledges that the stock is in a poor state and action should be taken accordingly, but;
- Feels that the assessment and the management plan HCR are not fit for purpose, because they are not dealing with the major uncertainties in the survey data in a satisfactory manner;
- Can therefore unfortunately not make a recommendation on a specific TAC number, because it feels that there is no decent scientific basis to find common ground on;
- Will be setting up a focus group that should address the management of this stock. Norwegian scientists as well as stakeholders will be invited to participate in this group. The results should feed into the ICES benchmark assessment which should take place a.s.a.p.;
- Hopes that the Commission will be supportive of this initiative and will show its support by tabling the issue during the Coastal States meeting;

The meeting agreed to write to the Commission focussing on these points. The secretariat should in addition start organising the focus group, including the definition of clear terms of reference.

5. A.O.B.

There were no other business.

6. End of WG II meeting

The chairman closed the meeting at 15:15.

Working Group I

1. Opening of WG I meeting

The meeting was opened by the chairman, Christian Olesen.

2. Approval of the agenda

The chairman proposed to start with the presentation by Emma Hatfield on the SGHERWAY results. The meeting agreed and the agenda was otherwise adopted without amendments.

3. Approval of the minutes of WG I meeting on 30 August 2010

The minutes were approved without amendments.

4. SGHERWAY results

The chairman gave the floor to Emma Hatfield to give a presentation on the conclusions by the ICES study group SGHERWAY which had reviewed the outcomes of a scientific study WESTHER on possible mixing of herring stocks West of Ireland and the UK (VIaN, VIaS/VIIb,c and VIIaN) and consequent implications for the assessments and for management. The group's report could be found on the [ICES' SGHERWAY webpage](#).

The scientists carried out a combined assessment of the three stocks and investigated its utility for advisory purposes. 43 scenarios were run, unfortunately all with poorly matching retrospective patterns. It was concluded that a combined assessment was unlikely to be useful for management advice purposes. The group carried out Management Strategy Evaluations (MSEs) as well, for the three stocks, VIaN, VIaS/VIIb,c and VIIaN, while varying:

- The level of mixing of VIIaN and VIaS/VIIb,c into VIaN;
- The accuracy of three survey indices obtained from the single survey;
- The number of samples taken;
- The management objective.

The results showed that increased mixing leads to increasing overestimation of the VIaN stock. When the VIaN population is larger than the VIaS/VIIb,c population, error in identification of the fish in the survey, leads to underestimation of the VIaN population. When the populations are of approximately the same size, error in identification has no significant effect. Especially for obtaining a relatively accurate SSB estimate for the VIIaN population, a rather large sample size is required in comparison to when the populations would be surveyed separately. The MSEs further showed that sustainable management of all three populations together was not possible. When VIIaN was excluded, however, sustainable management of VIaN and VIaS/VIIb,c together, based on a combined survey was possible under different mixing scenarios on condition that the two populations were of approximately the same size and fishing mortality would be kept low, i.e. at 0,2. This conclusion was different from the WESTHER project, which had suggested that the VIIaN stock in theory should be included, but the MSEs had shown that this was practically just not possible due to its small size.

Gerard van Balsfoort asked if the information about mixing should not indicate that F should be reduced in VIaS/VIIb,c while at the same time it could be increased in VIaN? The stocks were probably not mixing at the time of the fishery. Instead, it was concluded that we

should be more precautionary overall by reducing F to 0.2. Then why was this question posed, because we would be better off not asking any such questions? Sean O'Donoghue asked whether the study results could explain the 'missing' VIaS recruitment? Emma Hatfield responded that the combined assessment had indicated that there were fish other than just VIaN present in the area at the time of the summer acoustic survey. Based on this scientists had felt that it would be worthwhile to investigate the issue of mixing of the populations on the Malin shelf. Even if the fisheries do not overlap, the populations at the time of the summer survey do and it is the survey that produces the separate biomass indices. The various uncertainties in the level of mixing and identification require F to be kept at a low level to ensure continuing productivity of the populations. The 'missing' recruitment could indeed be explained by the study results.

The chairman thanked Emma Hatfield for her presentation.

5. Fishing opportunities for 2011

The chairman gave the floor to Mr. Reidar Toresen to present the ICES advice on mackerel and Atlanto-Scandian herring.

5.1 Mackerel

The status of the stock was rather good fortunately. The egg survey results showed the highest index since the time series started. Sean O'Donoghue noted that he thought that this was not fully reflected in the SSB. Did this mean that the fecundity had changed? Gerard van Balsfoort asked whether the indicated high unaccounted mortality (1.7-3.6 times the TAC) did not compromise the advice? Reidar Toresen explained that these numbers reflected the consequence of when they would change from relative to absolute abundance numbers. However, he did think that the abundance estimates were quite accurate. Emma Hatfield added that the egg survey index and the fecundity data were draft estimates still, because not all data had been processed yet. Therefore the fecundity figure was the average of the last three surveys.

Ian Gatt asked if the scientists could give an estimation of when the stock would become in real trouble when current levels of fishing mortality would be maintained, if Iceland and Faroese Islands continued to fish as they did. Emma Hatfield responded that this was difficult to predict exactly, because you had to make a number of assumptions, but SSB would likely decrease below B_{PA} within 5 years. Assuming that Icelandic and Faroese TACs would decrease if the SSB decreased. If they would keep their TACs constant, it would probably happen sooner than that.

Considering that the major problems in this fishery were at a political level, in which the PRAC engaged as little as possible, the chairman proposed that the PRAC would recommend that:

- All parties should spare no effort in finding an international acceptable agreement, with an outtake based on the existing management plan;
- In the case that no agreement is found in 2010, the EU and Norway should together base their TACs on the existing management plan.

The chairman furthermore proposed that the PRAC would urge the Commission to ensure sufficient control measures in relation to catches within the EU. The meeting agreed.

5.2 Atlanto-Scandian herring

This stock was in a very healthy state and fishing mortality was approximately at F_{MSY} . The chairman asked what the proposed substantial TAC reduction was based on then? Had a part of the population died due to an illness? Reidar Toresen replied that stomach sampling had shown normal patterns. Plankton abundance had reduced in the Norwegian sea, however, so perhaps the stock had migrated outside of the survey area. Emma Hatfield added that the scientists had hypothesised that the fish had changed distribution to higher levels in the water, in which case they could (partly) be missed in survey because there was a 'dead zone' under the survey vessel because of the way the acoustic equipment worked. They also had had more difficulty catching the fish during the survey. Sean O'Donoghue pointed out that the ICES advice indicated that the fishing mortality of recent years was now estimated to have been higher than thought earlier. He had understood that this had to do with the TAC reduction as well. Emma Hatfield replied that it had not, but that it merely explained a change in perception of the fishery. The chairman proposed that the PRAC recommended that the LTM plan would be followed, but in addition that the HCR should be evaluated to see if the target F could be increased, considering that F_{MSY} had been estimated at 0,15 and realised fishing mortality had been higher than estimated earlier, without having had any negative consequences. The meeting agreed.

5.3 Western Baltic herring.

The chairman explained that there had been a change in the ICES advice in relation to the MSY transition option in the catch options table, which had taken place after the PRAC had made its recommendation in June. It should be noted, however, that this meant no change in the perception of the stock, of which the condition was thought to be very poor. Considering that the PRAC had not made its recommendation based on the MSY transition option, the chairman proposed to let the recommendation stand as it was decided upon in June. The meeting agreed.

6. A.O.B.

Philippe Maraval (French Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries) asked whether the PRAC had heard back from the EC on its recommendation on an in-year revision of the NS herring TAC for 2010. The secretariat replied that it had not yet. Other than that, there were no other business.

7. End of WG I meeting

The chairman thanked the participants and interpreters and closed the meeting at 17:30.