

Minutes of the Pelagic RAC Working Group I meeting on 30 June 2011, at The Golden Tulip hotel, Leiden, Netherlands

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Working Group I

1. Opening of WG I meeting

The meeting was opened by the chairman Christian Olesen at 10:45. All attendants were given the opportunity to introduce themselves.

2. Approval of the agenda

The agenda was approved without amendments.

3. Approval of the minutes of WG I meeting on 11 October 2010

The minutes were approved without amendments.

4. Follow up on letter sent to HAWG (annex 1a and 1b)

After the last meeting the MT decided to open a means of communication with ICES through correspondence with the Herring Assessment Working Group (HAWG). Usually, ideas coming from the RAC were exclusively delivered to the EC, but the MT considered that it would be useful for experts in ICES to be reminded of the RAC's concerns as well. A letter was sent informing HAWG about issues regarding three herring stocks: North sea, Western Baltic and VIaSouth. Mark Dickey-Collas (member of HAWG) noted that the working group was happy to receive the ideas from the RAC, although it should be kept in mind that the group's response to it, which was incorporated in a separate section in the Working Group report, could in no case be viewed as ICES advice. It was merely a communication between the experts and the RAC, but very valuable nonetheless.

Regarding the RAC's raised concern about the origin of the 44.600 tons of herring caught by Norwegian vessels in area IV, it was noted that they were not counted against the North Sea herring quota. HAWG had clarified in its report that these catches were of the Atlanto-scandian stock. Although this was a reassuring message, the concern remained that the Commission was not strictly enforcing principles to manage by area with Norway. The RAC should consider where requests for other similar flexibility arrangements for other areas and stocks would be beneficial to the EU stakeholders as well. This should be revisited later.

5. Fishing opportunities for 2012

The chairman gave the floor to Manuela Azevedo to give a presentation on the ICES advice. Manuela Azevedo started by explaining that ICES has introduced a hierarchical approach in the catch options tables in the advice: LTM plan → MSY → PA. All options were included in the options table in that order. In addition for some stocks a 'transition to MSY' option was included in the case that fishing mortality was substantially above F_{MSY} , except in cases where the stock was in immediate threat of collapse. None of the pelagic stocks discussed today were in that category however. For stocks where no population size estimates were available, ICES advised that catches should not increase, but this also did not apply to today's discussed stocks.

5.1 North Sea herring

The stock biomass was assessed well above sustainable limits and above the biomass trigger point and fishing mortality substantially below the target. Recruitment was below average since the early 00's, although the last two years had been higher again.

Uncertainty in the recruitment estimates over the last years had been higher than in previous years. If the TAC would be set in accordance with the LTM plan, catches of maximally 230 kt could be taken by the A-fleet. SSB was expected to grow to 2.1 million tons in 2013, which would be the highest observed level of SSB since the 1960's. Setting the TAC based on the LTM plan excluding the 15% IAV constraint (which was also the option for F_{MSY} and for F_{PA}) would mean catches of 478 kt for the A-fleet.

Gerard van Balsfoort commented that he found it unacceptable for fishermen if managers continued to accept substantial under exploitation of the stock. The chairman asked for the rationale behind the statement in the advice that the LTM plan was in compliance with the MSY approach, when it was likely that continuing to apply it would lead to another ten years of under-exploitation. JJ Maguire responded that ICES' consideration was that with this management plan *it was possible* to reach MSY in the future, regardless of how long this would take and/or *whether or not it should* be reached. Ian Gatt asked why there was no MSY-transition option included. JJ Maguire responded that the transition framework was developed only for necessary downward adjustments. Mark Dickey-Collas notes that the transition option was devised for stocks for which there was no management plan in place, so it was not relevant in the case of this stock anyway. The chairman reiterated that he could not understand that the advice stated that the plan was consistent with MSY. The MSY philosophy was about active management towards a wishful outcome, in contrast to the PA approach which was to avoid a risky situation, after which the management is allowed to become passive. Saying that the plan was consistent with MSY would suggest that something active should be done when in an under-exploitation situation such as at present in order to get back to F_{MSY} within a reasonable time frame. Gerard van Balsfoort agreed with this and suggested that the uncertainty around the concept of MSY should be discussed and resolved. Jan Lindemann notes that the EC accepted that there was a problem with the management plan, and he thought that ICES would carry out some further work still to find a solution for this. Reine Johansson commented that it would be better if F_{MSY} would be expressed as a range of values, although this would still not stipulate action to be taken when within the range.

Mark Dickey-Collas explained why scientists were generally more certain about bad than about good recruitment. This was due to the framework design being focussed on estimating recruitment the Northern area, where most of the recruitment came from when the stock was smaller. The Downs stock component was thought to be more susceptible to overfishing. When recruitment increased, the Downs component became a more important contributor to the stock, and the framework in place to monitor that was not really suitable since the Downs spawned later and the MIK net survey failed to catch them properly, as the larvae were still too small. Stewart Harper did not accept that that explained large miss-estimations since the Downs component was only very small. Only 11% of the TAC was allowed to be caught in that area. Mark Dickey-Collas replied that the TAC percentage was not precisely related to the components' abundances. Stewart Harper asked what then the basis was for the statement in the advice that it was probable that the Downs component was fished at a too high level. Mark Dickey-Collas replied that it had probably been the case 4 years ago when this was last investigated and as long as there was no new information, the statement would remain there. Reine Johansson felt that the statement that the stock was still in a low recruitment regime was not valid anymore since it was not much below the long term average. Mark Dickey-Collas explained that ICES still claimed this because the number of recruits per spawner was still only at half of the average, which the graph in the advice did not show.

Gerard van Balsfoort noted the assumed catch of 188 kt in 2010, which was higher than the TAC, but there had been no overshoot to the TAC as far as he had understood? Mark Dickey-Collas replied that this was caused by variation in catch composition in area IIIa.

The chairman gave a short presentation tabling a number of considerations related to the current LTM plan and ICES' process of evaluating it. He noted that there were substantial

discrepancies between the workshop WKHERMP's results and the advice from ACOM, which worried those who had attended the workshop on behalf of the RAC. He asked the meeting how the RAC should continue with this endeavour.

Jan Lindemann noted that the exchange of letters between DG Mare and the RAC on the further evaluation of alternative for LTM plan had been valuable, but that DG Mare would now like the RAC to provide specific input on options to be tested, which could be used to draft ToR for ICES. Kenneth Patterson added that it was important to be able to distinguish between normal fluctuations and responses to noise. Christine Absil noted that she would like to see the current LTM plan included in the request to ICES in order to allow assessment of the need to change the LTM plan. Ian Gatt suggested that there should be an option included similar to the MSY transition but then increasing to the target from below. Gerard van Balsfoort suggested that the discussion on what MSY meant was important to continue as well. Christien Absil replied that she thought this was pointless because the NGO's disagreed with the industry on this fundamentally, because they simply regarded it as an upper limit. The chairman responded that indeed this view was fundamentally different from how he understood the principle of MSY, namely that it pointed at an average F_{MSY} value that the fishery should be accepted to fluctuate around, because F_{MSY} was regarded as the average fishing pressure that the stock could sustain in the long term while providing max yield. If that was the case then this would not be achieved if you accepted it as a limit every individual year. JJ Maguire confirmed that that indeed was correct and therefore it was also useful to take the Reine Johansson's approach, namely to define MSY as a range of values. The chairman concluded that the above could be accommodated and a short list of options could be drawn up rather quickly to provide input to DG Mare for formulating the request to ICES. He asked the meeting for a mandate for the MT to draft the letter, which could be formally adopted by the ExCom through written procedure. The meeting agreed.

5.2 Western Baltic herring

The stock was improving. The SSB had increased to the precautionary level, while fishing mortality had declined massively. After a period of relatively low recruitment, the 2010 year class coming into the fisheries now which was extremely high mainly contributed to this development. ICES advised based on the MSY framework in absence of a management plan for maximum catches of 42.7 kt. The chairman asked why the MSY-transition option was not included. Manuela Azevedo explained that this was because the projected SSB in 2012 was estimated to be above the B_{MSY} -trigger, which meant that the transition option did not apply. Gerard van Balsfoort asked whether ICES assumed that 50% of the IIIa TAC would be caught in IV (based on the flexibility arrangement) and if they assumed it remained in place. Manuela Azevedo confirmed that indeed it was assumed that the 50% was taken in IV and that the arrangement would stop in 2012. In addition, accidental outtake of WBSS origin was assumed by A fleet in area VIaEast of 800 tons (compared to approximately 4000 tons previously). Several members confirmed that they felt that this number reflected reality better and in fact that this issue was therefore becoming redundant for the management of the stock. The chairman presented some additional considerations including the LTM plan that the PRAC had recommended in 2009. Carl Jesper Hermansen asked how it was possible that the TAC in IIIa was composed of North Sea herring (which was increasing) and WBSS herring (which was increasing) but still received an advice for a reduction in TAC. The chairman proposed to postpone this discussion until September, since it was a rather technical debate.

5.3 Celtic Sea herring

This stock was developing very positively as well. ICES advised based on the MSY framework to set a TAC of maximally 26.9 kt in the absence of an agreed LTM plan. This implied an increase of 104%. Another option included in the table was the proposed

management plan by the Irish industry. Sean O'Donoghue asked whether ICES would have advised in accordance with the plan if it had been evaluated but not adopted by managers yet. JJ Maguire replied that it should be formally adopted as well. The chairman noted that it would be interesting to see how ICES would deal with the horse mackerel stock in relation to this in autumn then, considering the still ongoing quarrel between the EU Parliament and the Council inhibiting the formal adoption of the management plan. The chairman proposed to postpone a decision on this stock until September. The meeting agreed.

5.4 Irish Sea herring

The SSB of this stock was increasing and mortality was relatively low. ICES advised that catches should not increase based on PA. The stock would be benchmarked in 2012. Sean O'Donoghue suggested revisiting this stock in September. The meeting agreed.

5.5 West of Scotland herring

ICES advised maximum catches of 22,9 kt based on the agreed LTM plan, which was the same as the MSY option. SSB was estimated above B_{LIM} of 50 kt and increasing. Ian Gatt asked whether there was information available on mortality by predation by seals and if and how that was taken into account in the assessment. Manuela Azevedo answered that some assumptions were made in the assessment. Mark Dickey-Collas noted that some work was conducted on cod and haddock in relation to predation, but not on herring. ICES was currently aiming to obtain additional funds from the EC to expand those efforts onto herring, possibly also incorporating predation by birds. Sean O'Donoghue added that he would be interested to see how ICES would address this issue in the future, as it was not used in the assessment yet. He asked what the reason was for adjusting downward the SSB by 30%. Mark Dickey-Collas noted that the multi species WG was including seals into assessment models for the first time this year, which was a first step in this process. The adjustment came mostly from noise in the survey, because it was based only on the data of one survey vessel. Sampling from the fleet was not every year as robust either. Manuela Azevedo noted that this stock was an excellent example where there was a history of exploiting the stock around MSY and you could thus study the dynamics of it within the MSY framework. Ian Gatt noted that the plan in its infancy was doing its job and the Rac should advise that it should be followed. The remarks about seal mortality could be incorporated as well. The chairman proposed to follow the suggestion by Ian Gatt and also to include the issue of seal predation in a new letter to HAWG as well.

5.6 VIa South and VIIc,d herring

The stock trend was uncertain for this stock but it probably was below reference points. ICES advised that catches should be reduced. Sean O'Donoghue expressed frustration over hearing the same advice every year while he was convinced that the advice was majorly flawed. Manuela Azevedo noted that this stock (as well as some other pelagic stocks, e.g. North Sea herring) would be benchmarked in 2012, so the knowledge base issue should be addressed there. The Irish industry had taken the initiative to look again at developing a LTM plan. This issue should be revisited in September.

6. A.O.B.

There were no other business.

7. End of WG I meeting

The chairman thanked all participants and closed the meeting at 14:40 hours.