

Minutes of the Pelagic RAC Working Groups I & II meeting, Tuesday 12 February 2008 at the Schiphol A4 Hotel, Amsterdam

The meeting was attended by 26 people (see participants list, Annex 1).

Annex 1 - Participants list

Annex 2a - Reply EC TACs 2008

Annex 2b - Reply EC TACs 2008

Annex 3 - Mackerel Focus Group Report

Annex 4 - Consultation EC on Action Plan Sharks

Annex 5 - Reply EC SACs

Annex 6 - Call for Evidence CFP

Working Group I

(1) Opening

The Chairman of WG I, Mr Christian Olesen, opened the meeting at 9.05, after welcoming all participants.

(2) Approval of agenda

It is asked to include the closure of the fishing area around the Isle of Mann on the agenda. The point is included as point 6a and the agenda is approved.

(3) Approval of the minutes of WG I & II meeting held on 24 October 2007

The minutes are adopted without changes.

(4) Outcome of the December Council

The Chairman, Christian Olesen, presents the outcome of the December Council and Pelagic RAC results by comparing the outcomes with the Pelagic RAC's recommendations (see Annex 2a).

The discussion focuses on the fact that the recommendation for herring in the North Sea was not followed. Even though the Commission took the recommendation onboard, the result was a bigger cut in the TAC. It was mentioned that it might have been a disadvantage that the Norwegians had full access to the meetings in the RAC, but had no obligations to follow the recommendations.

Furthermore, Stewart Harper adds that he feels that the pelagic stocks are being used as bargaining tools for non-pelagic species that are low in numbers. The pelagic species should be discussed at separate meetings to avoid this. The Pelagic RAC should ask for a meeting with Mr Joe Borg on this issue, as it is essential for the functioning of the Pelagic RAC.

Conclusion: the management team is encouraged to meet with Mr Borg and discuss the functioning of the RAC and to include the remark of Stewart Harper.

ICES-WKHMP workshop

At the ICES – WKHMP workshop in Copenhagen, the Pelagic RAC was represented by Mr Christian Olesen and Mr Reine Johansson. The workshop discussed Management plans for North Sea herring and Western Baltic Spring Spawning herring. All elements of the Management Plan – including the trigger points – were discussed. At the request of Olesen and Johansson the workshop amongst other topics also dealt with year-to-year-flexibility. As there was no conclusion, Christian Olesen proposed to send a letter to the EC to request ICES to make further examinations of the proposal.

Gerard van Balsfoort mentions that the issue is more complicated. The ICES advice on North Sea herring is based on the low recruitment of recent years, while a sudden increase is thought to be unlikely. ICES currently presumes an SSB of 1 million and wants to get back to the target level of 1.3 million. Stewart Harper notes that it would be more realistic to bring Bpa down and work with a trigger point of around 1.1 million which would allow for a TAC of around 200.000. Christian Olesen replies that the workshop

last week acknowledged that the catches in the medium term can stay in the region of 200.000 tonnes, with a SSB of about 1.1 million tonnes.

Conclusion 1: The results of the workshop can be used to support our further argumentation in recommending TACs in the region of the present level. This issue will be put on the agenda of the next WG I agenda. A scientist will be asked to present the report to the meeting, so that together, we will come to a better understanding. Suggestions for scientists can be e-mailed to the Secretariat, otherwise Ad Corten will be asked to present the report. The Secretariat will send the ICES WKHMP report 2008 report to the members for information.

(5) Mackerel: scientific assessment issues

A summary of the outcomes from the mackerel focus group meeting (31 January 2008) was distributed and clarified by Derek Duthie (Annex 3)

One important message from the scientists was that the results from the assessment will always be as good as the data going into the assessment. A discussion was held on possibilities for providing the scientists with better data regarding unaccounted mortality, as the industry felt that the assumed high unaccounted mortality percentages do not reflect the current situation, and therefore skew the data. The scientists noted that having more accurate historical data would certainly help the overall understanding of the stock dynamics much, but would not necessarily lead to an adjustment of the TAC, since this data is not directly used as input for the models. The main conclusion regarding this, was that the industry is not able to provide the scientists with historical data, but is willing to discuss how the industry can help in the collection of future data in other ways.

During the focus group meeting, one of the scientists, Paul Fernandes (FRS Marine Laboratory Aberdeen) suggested ways for how the data collection could also be improved. For instance, if the industry was willing to provide some vessel time (e.g. 2 vessels for 3 weeks), it would be possible to increase the survey frequency, which would improve the real time perception of the stock. To start with, in 2009 a survey could be done, with special focus to the North-Western boundaries of the distribution area, in order to address the question whether the distribution is shifting (of which there were some indications during the last survey) and accordingly adjust the research area if needed. The scientists felt that they have not missed data which could have significantly influenced the assessment yet, but it would be good to anticipate to these indications already.

Another question that the industry had asked the scientists, was to explain how they thought it was possible that the industry was experiencing that the fishing grounds are really full of mackerel, which is also indicated by the occurrence of mackerel by-catch in fisheries and area's where it wasn't any issue before. And since at the same time, ICES agrees that the 2002 year class is very big, why wasn't all this visible in the 2007 egg survey, and accordingly reflected in the TACs as one would expect? The answer of the scientist was that the egg survey did show a small increase of 10%, which they saw as the first sign that the stock is growing, and that the increase will become more visible in one or two years. The reason that it was not visible in the egg survey as clear as one would hope, is that this one year class of 2002 only makes up such a small percentage of the total stock, that its contribution to the stock size will only accumulatively become apparent when the fish become reproductively mature, which means that the effect is delayed and not as direct as one would think.

Stewart Harper underlines that it is important to deal with these issues. Also in the light of large organizations that would like to be MSC-certified, so we should be working on a code of practice. Sean O'Donoghue suggests trying to obtain a commitment from ICES to establish a working group on data collection for mackerel.

Conclusion: the Chairman lists 4 proposals for proceedings:

1. Send a letter to the Commission recommending that ICES establishes mackerel data compilation Working Group (Sean O'Donoghue will draft a letter)
2. Address the question of how to actively transform the data from industry to scientist? This could be done in the next Pelagic RAC WG meeting, for which a scientist could be invited for support.
3. Investigate possibilities of changing the tri-annual egg survey to bi-annual

4. Investigate ways of improving the data available as input for the models. Collecting jigging data would for instance be valuable.

Point 2 – 4 will be discussed at the next meeting in WG I to which the scientists from the Mackerel Focus Group will be invited.

In additional, during the meeting Borja Velasco (MAPYA) addressed the issue of the lacking of translation at the focus group meeting. Certain groups felt that they were being left out because of this. The Chairman replied that all the members that were not present during the focus group meeting were now (during this WG) invited to comment on the outcomes of the focus group, and that everything could be discussed now. Furthermore, the Chairman suggests to reflect on the issue of translation at meetings again at the next ExCom meeting. Gerard van Balsfoort (PFA) notes in addition that the secretariat had received the official complaint from the Spanish government, amongst others addressing this issue. During an informal meeting with EC services, this complaint was addressed and will be followed up still.

12.50: the meeting breaks for lunch

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13.45: meeting continues with point (6) of the agenda

(6) Consultation: Review of the Common Fisheries Policy

The Chairman, Christian Olesen proposes that the Pelagic RAC will provide no official input. It can be left to the independent members of the RAC, to respond to this consultation if they wish to do so. The meeting agrees to this.

(6a) AOB

It is proposed to put the issue of the closed area near the Isle of Mann on the agenda for the WG I in April.

Working Group II

Sean O'Donoghue, Chairman of WG II takes the chair. He introduces and welcomes Sancia van der Meij as the new Pelagic RAC Secretariat staff member and expresses his hope to work closely together in the future.

Marc Ghiglia requests to put the UK Natura 2000 sites consultation on the agenda. The point was adopted as part of point (7).

(7) Outcome of the December Council

The Chairman presents the outcomes of the TAC and quota for 2008 (Annex 2b). The Pelagic RAC was both successful and unsuccessful with some recommendations. In two issues, the Pelagic RAC had been strikingly successful.

The recommendation for the western horse mackerel had in the end proved to be a success story for the Pelagic RAC. However, the Commission have indicated that a management plan proposal is planned for the autumn, which means it will be too late to be taken into account at the December Council in 2008 therefore, the Chairman suggested that the Pelagic RAC put pressure to the Commission to address the plan earlier in 2008. In addition, some Member States still do not fulfil their obligations on providing catch at age data. It was agreed that the Commission should again be made aware of this situation, in order to ensure that the Member States fulfil their obligations under the Data Directive.

Secondly, the exemption sought by the Pelagic RAC for pelagic fisheries in the protected coral areas in south and west Ireland was accepted by the Fisheries Council. The Chairman proposes to use the same line of argumentation in the Natura 2000 process, where more and more protected areas are being proposed by the Member States. Christien Absil notes that some conservation objectives are not bottom habitat-directed. Therefore, it might not be relevant to use the same line of argumentation in some cases. The Chairman acknowledges that this line of argumentation is only relevant in relation to the habitats directive.

Conclusion: The secretariat will send a letter on behalf of the Pelagic RAC whenever the RAC is consulted on special areas of conservation relating to corals, reefs or sand banks similar to the Lyme Bay letter. In other cases the approval by the ExCom (through written procedure if necessary) will be required.

(8) Blue whiting management plan and scientific assessment

Several aspects related to the blue whiting management plan were identified as having importance to the Pelagic RAC. (1) The targeted level of fishing mortality (F), (2) the spawning stock biomass trigger (Bpa), and (3) incorporation of aiming for stability of catches. It was suggested that the most effective way forward, to address this, would be by putting forward a request to the Commission to be invited to participate in the Coastal States Working Group on blue whiting long-term management plan, which will probably have a meeting in the first quarter of this year. The Chairman proposes that a letter is sent to the EC as soon as possible (by the end of the week). The meeting agreed to this.

Conclusion: A letter requesting for participation in the Coastal states Blue Whiting Working Group will be sent to the Commission as soon as possible. The Secretariat and Chairman will draft the letter for the approval by the ExCom through written procedure.

(9) How to deal with socio-economic aspects

The Group discussed how the Pelagic RAC should incorporate socio-economic aspects into their recommendations. Gerard van Balsfoort noted that this is a difficult question for all RACs, for instance also because Dutch fleets do not only fish in Europe, but also in Mauretania. Therefore it would be useful to tell policymakers to look at the relevance and priorities for different fleets with different perspectives. As a RAC we have to prioritize and it is not totally clear how to go forward. Christian Olesen points out that the Pelagic RAC discussions are now solely based on biology and may need the input of economic data. It could therefore be useful to invite an expert to a Pelagic RAC meeting to advise on this. He suggested that the Commission be invited to help formulate the right questions as it has recently set up an economic unit. .

Conclusion: Experts from economic institutes, the Commission, or from STECF will be invited to the next WG meeting in April, to give a presentation on what could be relevant socio-economic aspects that should be considered by the Pelagic RAC when making recommendations. The Chairman and the Secretariat will formulate a set of questions in advance of the meeting that will cover both the social and economic aspects that the Group wishes to be addressed by the relevant experts that will be attending. The meeting agreed to this initiative.

(10) Possible establishment of horse mackerel Focus Group

The Group discussed on whether or not a horse mackerel focus group should be established.. Marc Ghiglia notes that he is in favour of reconvening the focus group as some issues remain difficult to tackle in normal working groups. Alvaro Fernandez emphasizes that it is important to have translations available. Borja Velasco notes that Spain can provide financial assistance and translations for a focus group meeting, if the meeting would be held in Madrid. Gerard van Balsfoort notes that that completing a management plan takes considerable time, and that we should postpone starting with the development of a southern horse mackerel plan until the management plan for western horse mackerel has been fully

completed. Any work that is still required to do this management plan, can be done within the WG meetings. The meeting agreed with this proposal.

Conclusion: The establishment of a focus group will be postponed, and the Pelagic RAC will first continue with the western horse mackerel management plan in the WG.

(11) Norway Pout

It became clear that obtaining formal responsibility for Norway Pout and Sandeel was not as simple as it seemed. An amendment of the regulations may be necessary. This issue will be pursued by the MT and hopefully we will be able to start addressing these species further during the next WG meeting in April.

(12) Consultation: Action plan on the Conservation and Management of Sharks

Sonja Fordham (policy director of The Shark Alliance and shark conservation programme director of Ocean Conservancy) gave a short presentation on the Action Plan (Annex 4). She explains why she thinks this is relevant to the Pelagic RAC. She notes that she thinks that the Pelagic RAC is considered to be progressive and science based and therefore feels that it has a good opportunity to contribute to the issue. All data that can be delivered to scientists is valuable for shark stock assessments. It is noted by Alvaro Fernandez that any targeted shark fishing is currently done in a sustainable way. Plus, fining has been banned since 2004 in the EU and in Spain it is forbidden to land bodies without fins. Moreover, by-catch occurs most often in demersal fisheries. Therefore, the Pelagic RAC has not much to contribute in conservation efforts, since the problem is little related to fleets covered by the Pelagic RAC. Christien Absil notes that due to the sheer size of the vessels there is always a risk of by-catch, which may not have a significant harmful effect, but that providing data on these occurrences can be very helpful in obtaining more knowledge on the ecology and for instance, stock status of the animals. Sean O'Donoghue proposed to send a letter, expressing general support for the Action Plan, while noting that the pelagic vessels do not catch sharks.. The meeting agreed to this.

Conclusion: A letter will be sent, stating general support, but clearly stating that pelagic vessels do not catch sharks even as a by-catch. Christien Absil will write a draft letter, which will be approved by the MT and then ExCom, after which it can be send out as soon as possible.

(13) Priority issues WG II for 2008

Sean O'Donoghue proposes a list of topics, which he thinks should have priority for the WG in 2008 (not especially in order of importance):

1. Involvement in developing management options for blue whiting
2. Resolve timing issue around ICES advise and Coastal States meeting
3. Scientific advice for 2009 on blue whiting
4. Recommendations on TACs and quotas for next year
5. Sort out how to deal with the socio-economic issues
6. Completing the management plan for Western horse mackerel
7. Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)
8. Norway pout

(14) AOB

There was no other business.

The Chairman thanked the participants for their time and effort and the interpreters for their translation. The next WG I & II meeting will be held on the 29th of April in Amsterdam. Translation for English, French and Spanish will be available. He closed the meeting at 17:15.