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Date: 12 June 2012
Our reference: 1112PRAC114
Subject: PRAC Recommendation on a new harvest control rule for the management of blue whiting

Dear Ms Evans,

In 2010 the PRAC decided to establish a focus group which aimed to explore possibilities for adjusting the current blue whiting management plan in a way that would provide stability in TACs between years with fluctuating stock assessments.

Between November 2010 and June 2012 this focus group has gathered a number of times and included industrial stakeholders from the EU as well as non EU-countries, NGOs and scientific experts. The PRAC had set a time frame of mid-July this year to finalise its views on the existing long-term management plan. However in light of the Commission's request that the PRAC provide if possible its views on the long-term management plan for blue whiting in advance of the Coastal States meeting in London on the 13th and 14th of June the PRAC has expedited its work. I am pleased to say that the PRAC is in a position to provide a unanimous recommendation on a key aspect of the existing long-term blue whiting management plan relating to the harvest control rule as set out hereunder.

Recommendation

It is the PRAC's firm belief that the current F rule does not respond in an optimal way to shifts in recruitment regimes and noise from the survey. Therefore the PRAC is recommending a new harvest control rule to replace the existing F rule and would kindly ask the European Commission to submit a request to ICES for its evaluation. The new harvest control rule is based on the basic principle of two trigger points and a TAC rule (see figure 1).

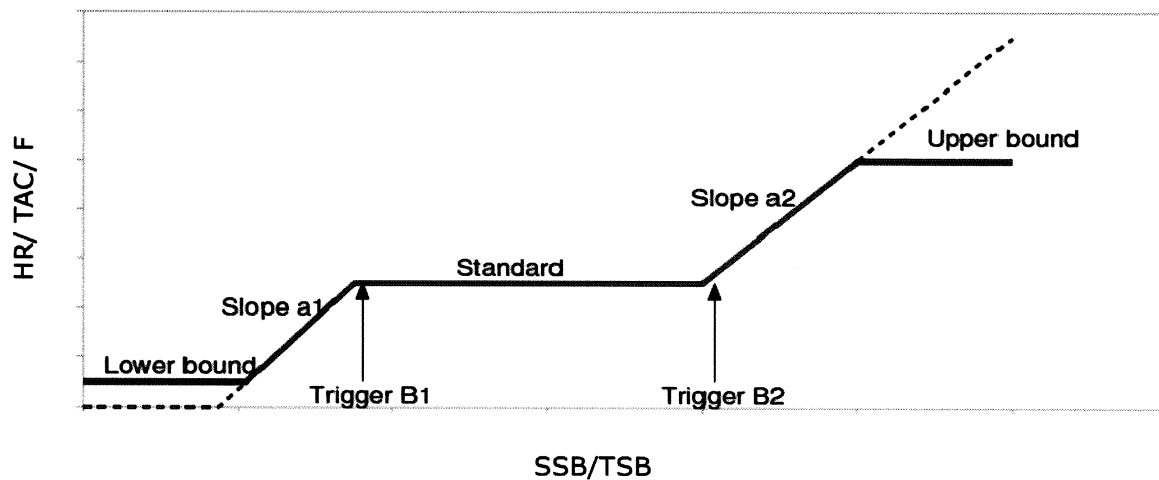


Figure 1. General outline of the new harvest rule examined, with different parameters indicated.

This rule has 5 parameters and optionally a lower and upper bound for the TAC. The parameters are:

- **Trigger B1:** If SSB/ TSB falls below this point, some reduction in exploitation is prescribed.
- **Slope a1:** Determines how strongly the exploitation shall be reduced in the region where SSB/TSB is below trigger B1.
- **Standard:** This is the TAC to be applied under normal conditions.
- **Trigger B2:** If SSB/ TSB exceeds this value, exploitation will be increased. The purpose of this part of the rule is to handle situations with exceptionally high productivity.
- **Slope a2:** Determines how strongly the exploitation of the stock should be increased when SSB/ TSB is above Trigger B2.

The most important advancement of the new HCR rule is that it is based on the basic principle of two trigger points and a TAC rule. Having two trigger points is not the norm in stock management however the PRAC considered that due to shifts between the different recruitment regimes of periods of both very high and very low recruitments associated with blue whiting a second trigger point to take account of high recruitment was desirable. The PRAC wishes to emphasise that it views this as an exception rather than the norm for stock management. The TAC rule uses a fixed TAC in order to provide stability. This means that even in periods of rather large stock sizes where the stock size approaches Trigger B2 the TAC is not increased, but remains constant.

Managing the blue whiting fisheries has two major challenges which the PRAC considers are fully addressed by the new recommended harvest control rule. These challenges can be summarised as:

1) Shifts between different recruitment regimes

There have been periods with both very high recruitment (late 1990ies and early 2000s) and with very low recruitment (2004-2009) and still other recruitment regimes prior to 1996 with fluctuations around a stable mean. No management plan existed taking into account such shifts and in hindsight the response was not optimal. Such shifts between recruitment regimes lead to major shifts in stock productivity and fishing opportunities. Therefore, rules should be designed to

handle regime shifts which constituted a substantial challenge since experience with rules handling regime shifts is limited.

2) Unstable assessments

From a scientific point of view, the assessment of the blue whiting stock is difficult. A major problem has been strong year-to-year variations in survey results. This is not surprising given the large area that has to be covered, the often difficult weather conditions and the migration of the stock during the survey period. The method for assessing the stock has also changed over time. This year a new method was introduced which likely offers an improvement. However, experience is still limited. Proposed rules therefore should avoid undue response to variable assessments while at the same time still respond to real changes in stock abundance.

Finally it should be noted that the PRAC hopes to be in the position after its next Working Group II meeting on the 11th of July to supply the necessary scientific and technical reports in support of its new recommended harvest control rule i.e. the TAC rule.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Verena Ohms', written in a cursive style.

Ms Verena Ohms
Pelagic RAC Secretariat