



PELAGIC ADVISORY COUNCIL

Newsletter 2/2020

April - June 2020

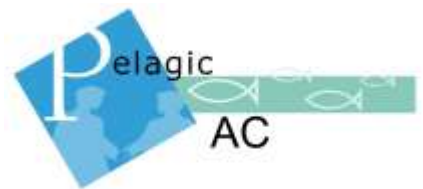


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PELAC MEETINGS

FOCUS GROUP WESTERN HORSE MACKEREL (25 MAY 2020, WEBEX)

On May 25th 2020, the Western horse mackerel (WHOM) Focus Group meeting took place. Due to the COVID-19 circumstances, the meeting was held virtually through WebEx.

The main objective of the meeting was to establish the progress made with regard to the development of the rebuilding plan for the stock and set a timeframe for completion of the work. The chairman was keen to have a proposal finalized to present to the PELAC July Working Group II and ExCom meetings, in order to allow timely submission of the plan for revision at the ICES expert group WG WIDE late August.

The meeting started with an update by Edward Farrell and Angela Fuentes Pardo from Upsala University on the latest progress in relation to the genetics work carried out on horse mackerel. This work has been ongoing for a number of years, financed by the PELAC industry members. The work involves trying to genetically differentiate the different horse mackerel stocks to see where the exact stock boundaries lie. It is believed having a better grasp on the population structure of horse mackerel would solve many issues now in place in the assessments of the different stocks. The Western horse mackerel stock is in particular poor shape and would benefit from a stronger knowledge base to help solve some of the assessment issues.

Following up from previous stages of the project, Ed Farrell in collaboration with Upsala University developed a draft genome for horse mackerel to identify informative genetic markers of interest (SNPs). The results from this analysis broadly aligned with findings from previous stages: that the North Sea samples were the most differentiated group while the structure of the Southern and Western samples was much less clear. Also, a north/south genetic break was observed in ICES area 9a suggesting possible mixing in that area. Ed Farrell proposed the validation of the identified SNPs as a follow-up project, to help further investigate the fine scale population structure and help assign mixed samples back to stock of origin. The PELAC budget currently allowed for the financing of this follow-up project. The results are expected in two-months time and will be presented at a future Focus Group meeting and the PELAC October meeting.

Furthermore, the ad-hoc rebuilding plan working group presented their progress over the past year on the management strategy. It was considered that because of the low stock biomass the development of a rebuilding plan rather than a management strategy would make more sense. The stock is very close to Blim according to the latest assessment. Rebuilding techniques currently developed for WBSS herring, Celtic Sea and 6a herring had been discussed and worked on to see to what extent these techniques could be applied to the rebuilding of Western horse mackerel. The work included input from the ICES workshop WKREBUILD earlier this year, where horse mackerel was presented as a case study. Preliminary evaluation results were presented based on an adaptation of the EqSim software. A number of scenarios have been tested including no HCR, the ICES advice rule and the NFD “no further decline” rule whereby if the target F would lead to a decline in SSB, it is reduced to maintain SSB at current levels. The results were considered exploratory and further work was required. A timeframe was established by end of June to finalize the rebuilding plan, and a next meeting was planned for 2 July to go over the progress, in the hopes of finalizing a draft rebuilding plan to present to the July meeting.

PELAC MEETINGS

JOINT PELAC-NWWAC FOCUS GROUP ON SEISMIC IMPACTS (15 JUNE 2020, WEBEX)

The joint Focus Group was set up because both the Pelagic and NWW ACs have sent the Commission a similar request asking for the setup of an ICES working group to investigate impacts of seismic activities on the life stages of relevant commercial stocks. The Commission response to the NWWAC, indicating that such a request could only be met in the form of a non-recurrent request to ICES, was relevant to both ACs. The PELAC and NWWAC have therefore decided to join forces to co-draft a basis for such a non-recurrent request, in order to develop knowledge and research on these issues.

The aim of the Focus Group meeting was to formulate specific research questions that will enable the drafting of a non-recurrent request to ICES, and maximize a successful output for both ACs. It was agreed to finalize a draft special request to ICES to the NWWAC and PELAC for adoption at the July 2020 ExCom meetings.

The Focus Group discussed the scope of the joint Focus Group and of the draft request to ICES. It was decided that the sheer variety of issues that were considered important, such as seismic impacts, but also broader noise impacts such as from wind farms warranted the expansion of the Focus Group scope moving forward. It was however decided that to avoid unrealistically over-asking ICES given the workload involved, the basis for the draft request to ICES would be limited to seismic impacts only. A possible second request on impacts from wind farms could be dealt with as a separate request later that year.

The Focus Group formulated specific research questions for ICES, as a basis for a non-recurrent request. It was decided to ask ICES to evaluate existing scientific studies on seismic impacts on egg/larvae/reproduction/migration of commercially exploited stocks in the NWW region, and to identify the knowledge gaps. It was also decided to ask for input as to parameters in existing environmental impact assessments that would be relevant to include, which are not currently covered. Finally, some species specific questions were formulated that are relevant for stocks under the NWW and Pelagic ACs remit.

Due to the busy timelines and remaining discussion involved to finalize the draft request, it was decided to finalize the draft straight after the July meeting and adopt it by written procedure.

All detailed meeting minutes can be downloaded from the PELAC website:

<https://www.pelagic-ac.org/2020>

EXTERNAL MEETINGS

DIALOGUE ON FOOD SYSTEMS (16 APRIL 2020, WEBEX)

On April 16, DG MARE organized a Dialogue on Food Systems and invited representatives of the Advisory Councils for a discussion on the Farm to Fork Strategy, part of the European Green Deal. The meeting was held through WebEx due to the sanitary crisis in relation to the covid-19 outbreak.

The European Green Deal came to life to address the permanent threat raised by climate change and environmental degradation. To overcome these challenges, the European Commission presented its new growth strategy that aims at transforming the Union into a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy. The overall aim of the Green Deal is to turn climate and environmental challenges into opportunities across all policy areas and making the transition just and inclusive for all.

Through its Farm to Fork Strategy, the Commission seeks to promote a more sustainable and resilient food system for Europe. This is a broad initiative, which will cover a wide range of issues, including food safety, agriculture and, of our particular interest, fisheries and aquaculture. DG MARE wanted to provide ACs with some updated information on the Strategy, in terms of timelines and main priorities. DG MARE also sought to hear individual as well as collective views about the strategy.

The meeting consisted in a number of broad policy presentations on the EU Green Deal; as well as the objectives of the Farm to Fork Strategy; and a brief explanation of the Roadmap from different perspectives (DG SANTE, AGRI AND FISHERIES). An update was given also on an ongoing public consultation on Review of Marketing Standards.

The aim of Farm to Fork is to accelerate the transition towards a sustainable food system that should:

- ensure food security;
- have a neutral or positive environmental impact;
- be capable of adapting to climate change and contribute to mitigation;
- create a food environment that makes healthy diets the easy choice for EU citizens;
- preserve affordability of food while generating fairer economic returns and promoting competitiveness of the food supply chain.

DG SANTE presented a number of key challenges that lie ahead, such as adapting to climate change and striking a balance between affordability and competitiveness of supply chains. The need to raise sustainability standards should be done at international level. DG SANTE underlined the importance of research and innovation moving forward.

DG MARE highlighted the role of aquaculture and fisheries. The sustainability of wild caught fish has made significant progress through the CFP. The full potential of aquaculture can now be explored further and will need to involve the consumer that plays a key role in identifying sustainable products. Criteria needs to be set to communicate product sustainability. At the end of the day, the role of consumer choice is significant.

During the meeting the Commission explained this was the first phase of the Dialogue. Upon presenting the main priorities, challenges and targets, Advisory Councils were invited to further

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discuss and send us their common position on the matter if they wish so. The Commission confirmed that the meeting was in fact, the first and only formal consultation of the Advisory Councils on this topic.

ACs were surprised to hear during the meeting that the session was intended as a formal consultation of the Advisory Councils, and that the consultation on the roadmap of the Farm to Fork Strategy that was open for comments during 4 weeks (17 February 2020 – 20 March 2020) was the intended channel through which ACs were informed and expected to provide input.

The shared confusions over this process between ACs resulted in the drafting of a collective letter. The PELAC co-signed the letter asking to be informed directly, seeking a proper consultation on the Farm to Fork Strategy and asking for recognition that covid-19 situation has changed everything.

[Annex: Letter co-signed by PELAC and 4 other ACs](#)

STECF EWG OBSERVER MEETING (27 MAY 2020, WEBEX)

The regional MS groups have submitted JRs on the pelagic and demersal discards plans to the Commission. The STECF EWG was tasked to evaluate the proposed exemptions (de minimis or high survivability exemptions) to form a basis from which the Commission can judge if JRs should be granted or not. STECF has reviewed supporting information of over 60 exemptions. The supporting information was assessed to determine if they sufficiently support the exemption, and to identify knowledge gaps.

Generating scientific data to support survival exemptions can be technically challenging, but ICES gives some guidance. Considerable research has been done in the recent years to estimate discard survival. It remains challenging to fully understand the different factors involved and the importance of them. Much more knowledge is needed before discard survival can be extrapolated.

STECF highlighted two main criteria used in their evaluation: rationality of the arguments supporting the exemptions and disproportionality of costs. STECF noted that much of the supporting information provided was the same as last year, though updated. Very little information was received on monitoring and control of the exemptions. In some cases information was lacking whether exemptions were still necessary. Pelagic exemptions were an example of this, some have been in place for many years and STECF was unclear whether they are still needed.

According to STECF, the relationship between the level of de minimis requested and the wanted catches was poorly described in many cases. In some cases, discards appear to be much less than the exemptions. Sometimes even no discards are reported and still exemptions of e.g. 5% are asked for, or de minimis of different stocks are combined together. This weakens the argument why the de minimis is needed.

STECF has reviewed over 60 exemptions. STECF went through the different exemptions by region. Exemptions were classified in different categories:

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- 1) Already assessed by STECF last year, and no new supporting information was provided. In these cases references to the previous STECF assessments was made.
- 2) Additional information was requested through a Delegated Act, and an evaluation was performed.
- 3) New exemptions and information was proposed by the regional groups.

The JRs combined both the demersal and pelagic discard plans this year. The JR from the North Sea included 13 survivability exemptions, 4 of which had previously been assessed, 7 were conditional on new supporting information and two new exemptions were proposed. The EWG assessed the representativeness of existing studies to the exemptions. The two new exemptions included an exemption for pelagics.

For de minimis exemptions, 8 consisted of existing exemptions, and one was provided with more information. The new exemptions included one pelagic and one demersal exemption. EWG noted that the supportive evidence had not been updated and had trouble understanding the existing exemption for blue whiting. It was clarified by the Scheveningen group that the exemption only applied to one particular fleet and not the entire TAC. It was added that it was always difficult to clarify what is needed with what is actually applied.

Also the nature of the vessels as a basis for the herring exemptions were hard to follow. The de minimis exemptions were based on generic studies.

No particular remarks on pelagic exemptions were made for the NWW region. The SWW JR included a new pelagic survivability exemption regarding slipping in pelagic fisheries, though no new information was provided for evaluation.

The STECF working group report would be finalised by written procedure in time for a Delegated Act, and would replace the STECF plenary. A virtual MS expert group meeting will be organised to finalise the JRs.

DG MARE INTER-AC FINANCIAL SEMINAR (12 JUNE 2020, WEBEX)

DG MARE organized a Financial seminar specifically dedicated to Advisory Councils, on 12 June 2020 via WebEx. The aim of the meeting was to present changes in the applicable financial rules relative to Advisory Councils, as well as the changes in the allocation of funds to the different ACs. The meeting also covered the revised Commission guidelines and foreseen changes in the way ACs should manage their budgets from the onset of the new financial rules, as well as what other changes are foreseen in the near future. Finally, the meeting aimed to invite ACs to ask questions in light of these changes.

The Commission opened the seminar by explaining the background to the allocation of funds to the different ACs. This allocation was already shared with ACs in advance of the meeting. The change came forth from a request from ACs at a previous Inter-AC meeting, to change the current pre-financing mechanism to a single pre-financing moment at the start of the Operational Grant Agreement, rather than two 40% pre-financing instalments that are currently in place. The Commission has decided approve this, and grant ACs an 80% pre-financing at the start of the grant

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period, followed by a final instalment of 20% at the end of the term. This change in pre-financing meant that each AC would no longer be granted the same amount each year, but that the individual needs of each AC would be taken into account. The resulting allocation showed a distribution of funding that differed from AC to AC. The Commission covered the methodology behind this allocation, and explained that the historical expenditures from the ACs over the 2016-2018 period were taken into account, as well as the distance from the seat to Brussels, the number of GA members and translation needs. This was an objective exercise based on these criteria, and not on any other preferential treatment.

The Commission further covered legal principles that lie at the basis of the Commission/AC collaboration, as stated in the Framework Partnership Agreement and the Specific Operating Grant Agreement. The Commission underlined the expected changes in some of these rules and procedures, that followed from the change in pre-financing method. In the background to this, was the ascertainment by the Commission that much of the reporting requirements from the ACs and the Commission controls thereof, were disproportionate compared to the amount of the Grant. This called for simplification for some of the administrative requirements. The most important change regards the use of the contingency reserve, which is now much more constrained and needs Commission approval before use. In principle, the contingency reserve can only be used for the purposes of considerable exchange losses for ACs operating in non-Euro currencies. The rationale for this follows from the changes with regard to the need for submissions of amendments and adjustments, which are now only required in very rare and specific cases. AC's now have more freedom to shift money between budget categories, without a ceiling. With this change, the contingency reserve would no longer be needed and would only add to bureaucracy. At the same time, changes in the pre-financing mechanism to a single point in time instead of two, removes the need to submit mid-term reports, thereby removing some of the administrative requirements for both parties.

There was also more emphasis on the final report, as the means to justify any changes made to the estimated budget. The ACs will still be required to fulfil their obligations by submitting a final report, financial technical report and a financial statement accounting certificate. The Commission is preparing a template for the financial statement accounting certificate because there is much difference between the statements from ACs at the moment.

In the future, the Commission expects to finance ACs through so-called 'lump sum' grants, where the Commission will hold bilateral discussions with the ACs before the signing of the grant agreement, and grant fixed amount contracts that will remain unchanged for four years. A very precise estimation of foreseen costs will be key before signing of the grant. At the basis of the lump sum contract, the Commission underlined the increasing importance of the work programme and the need to establish clear deliverables. This will lie at the heart of the operating grant.

For a number of recently established ACs, the changes in the allocation of funds raised some questions. It was perceived that the allocation did not fully reflect the reality of their current expenditures, since the historical data used as reference were 'start up years' and thus not considered representative. The Commission encouraged these ACs to justify their needs more clearly and bilaterally.

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The question was also raised as to how often this evaluation of AC needs would be updated, to which the Commission responded this was a one-off exercise, applicable until a new lump sum procedure was in place. There was an overall concern amongst ACs over the use of 2020 as a benchmark year for incurred costs by ACs since the exceptional covid-19 circumstances were not considered representative. This was recognized by the Commission, and assurance was made that ACs would not be penalized for this.

Further detailed questions were asked with regard to caps for catering, which no longer apply and rules with regard caps for travel and subsistence costs. The Commission advised ACs to follow the Commission guidelines for travel and subsistence costs, but can also take local government guidelines into account. The Commission strongly advised the adoption of an internal policy on this as ad-hoc changes to these rules from year to year was not considered acceptable.

Overall, the ACs were happy with this meeting organized by DG MARE and the opportunity to comments to proposed changes and ask detailed questions.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

REIMBURSEMENT OF TRAVEL COSTS

Please remember that the secretariat has to receive your reimbursement claims within 1 month after the meeting by post or email including copies of all receipts. Reimbursement sheets received after the deadline will not be taken into account. If you cannot meet the deadline, please inform us as soon as possible. To find out more about reimbursement rules please consult the PELAC's "Rules of procedure" or contact the secretariat.

<https://www.pelagic-ac.org/aboutus>

UPCOMING MEETINGS

ADJUSTMENTS FUTURE MEETINGS DUE TO COVID-19:

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, it was necessary to make some modifications to the scheduled PELAC meetings:

- **9 and 10 July - Working Group I and II and Executive Committee meetings:** the meetings will be held [online](#) and will include simultaneous translation.
- **7 and 8 October - Working Group I and II, General Assembly and Executive Committee meetings:** the dates for this meeting will remain in place but the meeting venue has been [changed](#) from Paris to [the Netherlands](#). We will inform you if this meeting will be held in-person or remotely **by end of August**.
- **Control Focus Group, 6a herring Focus Group and Southern horse mackerel Focus Group:** a date for an online meeting in September will soon be set, further information will follow on short notice.

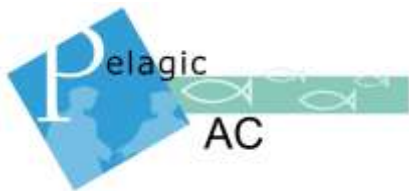
For more information please visit our website:

<https://www.pelagic-ac.org/pracmeetings/upcomingmeetings>

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