

This meeting looked at the latest advice from the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICES) on the key commercial species for the UK supply chain, and provided an update on two initiatives helping to support the sector.

Demersal fish stock status in the North East Atlantic. Ewen Bell, Cefas.

- ICES assess stocks for which quotas are set or other international management measures. It does not assess most non-quota stocks of economic importance such as crabs, lobsters, scallops and whelk.
- There are 119 stock assessments: 21 benthic (flatfish); 38 demersal (round fish incl sandeel); 14 crustaceans (Norway lobster and pandalus); 15 pelagic; and 32 elasmobranch (skates and rays etc). The North East Atlantic (NEA) splits into the Greater North Sea Ecoregion (GNS) and the Celtic Seas Ecoregion (CSE).
- The analysis gave an historical perspective. In the GNS landings peaked at ~4 million tonnes in the 1970's and are currently at ~ 2 million. Benthic stocks are doing relatively well; most have some reference points with two-thirds of low concern. For demersal stocks only 50% have reference points, of those that do, 50% are fished outside safe limits. Most Crustacean stocks are data limited and the largest biomass stocks are covered by Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) assessments.
- For CSE this area is dominated by pelagic species. Benthic landings are comparatively low but an increasing %. Demersal landings peaked in the late 1980s, with a slight recovery in the last few years. Over 50% of benthic stocks have some reference points, of these, most are harvested within MSY. Around 50% of demersal stocks have some form of reference points. Of those that do, just under half are fished outside safe limits. Most Crustacean stocks are stocks covered by TV surveys. The series is too short for several 'biomass ref points.
- The specific management challenges for 2021 are zero TAC advice for 6a cod and whiting, 7a whiting and 7e-k cod balanced by reasonably strong haddock stocks in the North Sea, Celtic Sea and Irish Sea and slightly better cod recruitment in the North and Celtic Sea.

Discussion

- Not a question but the large decline in demersal landings in the late 90's early 00's could be offset somehow by the large decommissioning schemes the fleet went through.
- **Q. Can you foresee a shift, in this large region, from single species management advice to a more holistic multi-trophic ecosystem based approach?**
A. This is definitely where ICES advice is heading and has been for a while now. Their overviews are giving more help to managers in this respect. Mixed fisheries results look at the interaction of stock and fleet and how fleets are exploiting the stocks. This needs to be used to help set Total Allowable Catches (TACs).

Further information

- [ICES advice sheets](#)

Pelagic stock status in the North East Atlantic. Steve Mackinson, Scottish Pelagic Fishermen's Association (SWFPA).

Key points:

- For NEA mackerel, blue whiting, Atlanto-Scandian (AS) herring and western horse mackerel. There are no real surprises in the advice and no real changes.
- For mackerel the picture is very similar to last year, but the estimate of 2019 biomass is reduced, due to poorer recruitment in 2015. There are contradictory surveys – with the summer survey showing biomass up and the egg survey down. This has resulted in the model not giving much weight to either. Recruitment is high again so the future looks bright and the stock should head upwards.

- Blue whiting is a much more cyclical stock. The 2020 survey was cancelled. The stock had been high for a while, it now looks like the cycle has hit the bottom and is now coming up again.
- AS herring has good status. The 2016 year-class (2018 recruits) is very strong in both surveys and through the 2019 catch. TAC recommendation up by 24%.

Discussion

- **Q. How would you characterise the changes in mackerel range. Which countries' waters seem to have the greatest increases and decreases? What are the reasons/hypotheses for the change in the westward expansion of mackerel?**

A. There has been a lot of discussion over the last two years when the mackerel assessment came under such scrutiny. A number of papers have been written on these distribution shifts. The principal reason is related to range expansion and contraction due to changes in temperature predominantly - maps show the temperature at different depths. Constant movement, temperature change and the sheer size of the stock, coupled with the fact big old fish swim quicker and further, hence movement and expansion of the distribution area.

Further information

- [ICES pelagic advice for 2021](#). SWFPA.

[Progress of the North Atlantic Pelagic Advocacy Group](#). Tom Pickerell, NAPA.

- NAPA is a retail-led initiative. It is a shared and non-competitive solution to sustainability issues in the NEA pelagic fisheries complex. The proposed outcome is to achieve an agreement on TACs for NEA pelagic fisheries in line with scientific advice, and for a long-term science-based management agreement. The catalyst was the decision in August/September 2019 (following ICES advice) not to reinstate the NEA mackerel MSC certification. NAPA was officially launched in June 2020. The group covers mackerel, blue whiting and AS herring (the latter two are also in danger of losing MSC certification).
- The suspension of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certificate for NEA mackerel is all to do with management and harvest control rules not biomass (which is high), by-catch or habitat.
- The independent assessors responsible for certifying fisheries to the MSC Fishery Standard announced that the AS herring and blue whiting fisheries will also be suspended from the programme on 30 December 2020. This affects eight certificates and is due to the lack of an international agreement on how to manage catch levels between different nations.
- What is NAPA doing to address this? Many NAPA members are also part of the Sustainable Seafood Coalition (SSC) which provides a platform and has devised Codes of Conduct to define sourcing policies with a decision-tree approach. This provides a framework to support Fishery Improvement projects (FIPs).
- The NAPA strategy includes: 1. A Fishery Improvement Project for herring and mackerel, and a Marine Trust Improver Programme for blue whiting; 2. Advocacy for better management; 3. Support Catchers with a roundtable planned for next year to potentially advocate for a catcher-led agreement.
- **Our asks of coastal states are around:**
 - Following the advice. Regarding multilateral North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC) coastal states negotiations on large pelagic stocks (mackerel, herring and blue whiting), the contracting parties should ensure that the overall catch for each stock does not exceed scientific advice.
 - Management plans. Multi-annual management should be the underlying approach by default. All stakeholders benefit from agreeing to and working toward long-term sustainable management objectives. That includes stable sharing arrangements and harvest strategies that include precautionary harvest control rules for setting catch

limits, a periodic review process, and any necessary mechanisms to transition from previous arrangements to a new system.

- Allocation. Contracting parties should prioritise resolving the allocation issues round these stocks and re-establish the NEAFC WG on Allocation as a first step.

Discussion

- **Q. There is a rumour about pelagic species and the Brexit negotiations, and the suggestion that pelagic stocks will no longer be part of the annual EU negotiations but will be covered by NEAFC?**

A. It is worth mentioning the rumour but nothing is likely to change much and this is probably just a rumour. It could be a misunderstanding and not describing anything new as this is quite a complex political process.

- **Just a clarification. Tom described the FIP as an MSC-FIP, but just to clarify the FIP isn't housed within the MSC programme, perhaps you meant it will reflect the MSC fisheries standard requirements? But it has been described as a Policy-FIP so far.**

A. Just to note I described the FIP as 'MSC' to distinguish it from the Marine Trust IP.

- **I just wanted to clarify the Tom's presentation when speaking about 'herring' is referring to the Atlanto-Scandian herring stock, not North Sea herring stock.**

A. Correct - NAPA is concerned by Atlanto-Scandian herring (aka Norwegian spring spawning).

Further information

- [North Atlantic Pelagic Advocacy \(NAPA\) Group](#)
- [Sustainable Seafood Coalition](#). Anybody interested in learning more can contact ssc@clientearth.org

[The cross-industry cod group and upcoming North Sea cod benchmark meeting. Kenny Coull, Scottish White Fish Producers Association.](#)

- Early in 2019 the Scottish industry responded to national consultation on supplementary measures to rebuild cod stocks (as did most other countries). The release of ICES advice for 2020 highlighted continued issues with stock and assessment, with the advice for a 61% reduction in the TAC. This prompted the UK and Danish fishing industry reps to jointly consider consequential loss of MSC certification with Norway engaging soon after.
- There were concerns by other Member States in the North Sea Advisory Council about this side group but following open and frank discussion, it was agreed that a wider, inclusive group would be beneficial in developing an industry response to potential discussions on catching opportunities and potential rebuilding measures. It was clear that additional supporting measures (over and above a reduced TAC) would be required in 2020. As a result for 2020 there were 12 spawning areas with temporary closures, and spatial measures, but with a wide range of derogations where Member States scientific bodies could provide supporting evidence to STECF.
- Same group has now collaborated to prepare follow up paper for 2021. This sets out the rationale why abiding by ICES advice on TAC (for 2021) fails to accept the complexity of operating in mixed fisheries and the implications for the fleet. It highlights the operational pressures with regard to choke species (no banking reservoir this year), and recognises the need for a rebuilding strategy. The key aim is to protect aggregations of spawning cod and protection of juveniles.
- A cod benchmark exercise by ICES took place in November 2020 with a further meeting in January to assess progress. The benchmark dates are 22 – 26 February 2021.

Discussion

- **Q. This work is happening in multiple dimensions When this cross-industry group first kicked-off, when North Sea cod lost its MSC certification, there was some talk over whether this was due to overfishing or climate change. I can see you are looking at the biological stock components. Is this shedding any light? Has the slower stock recovery in the southern stocks be attributed to climate change?**
A. Several factors have led to the state of the stock now including overfishing and climate change. However the recovery of the stock in the north following the last rebuilding/recovery plan has not really happened in the southern North sea so we need to think about how we are managing the stock and are we doing it in the right way. Should we treat the stock as one large stock or as different components?
- **Q. Is the cross-industry group engaging with the cod FIP for the North Sea?**
A. Not directly as a group as each country has its own issues. The group is really focussing on catching opportunities.