

The North Sea Regional Advisory Council



Whiting Focus Group Brussels, 7th April 2010

Chairman: Barrie Deas

Rapporteur: Tony Hawkins

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Apologies were accepted from Fred Normandale
- 1.2 This Focus Group meeting stemmed from a discussion of discard initiatives at the Ostend Demersal Working Group meeting held on 17th and 18th February 2010. This was the fifth year of heavy whiting discards. There is clearly a shortage of quota in relation to whiting abundance, especially on the western side of the North Sea and this is leading to heavy catches which cannot currently be landed and must be discarded. The background is one of a stock which is declining but also redistributing itself. The Focus group was set up to identify the roots of this problem and to look for possible solutions, not just for whiting but for other stocks affected in the same way.

2. State of North Sea whiting

- 2.1 Chris Darby described the contradictory trends observed for whiting from research vessel surveys and commercial catch data. The whiting assessment is truncated. No reference points have been defined since 1991 and the stock now appears to be at its lowest level. Because of the declining abundance and poor recruitment ICES is recommending a strong reduction in fishing mortality (F).
- 2.2 Currently, whiting are concentrated on the western side of the North Sea and catch rates in this area along the eastern coasts of England and Scotland are high. There are major differences in the TAC uptake rates in different regions. Denmark takes 3% of the quota available to it. Norway takes zero. The UK uptake is up to 125%, taking into account quota which is bought in. Some 60-70% of the total quota is taken. There is clearly a regional allocation problem.

- 2.3 Andy Revill described the results from an observer programme in NE England. The fleet is fishing for whitefish and *Nephrops* but is discarding whiting. The discarding represented lost income and a drain upon the whiting stocks, but it appears that nothing can be done about it.
- 2.4 At least half to two-thirds of the fish being discarded were under-sized, but a significant proportion included marketable fish of high quality. Nevertheless, the problem is not just one of insufficient quota; there is also a selection problem since young fish are being caught. Recruitment for the last 5-6 years had been low but last year's year class may have been higher.
- 2.5 Michael Park pointed out that Scottish vessels were using square mesh panels and larger meshes but were still discarding whiting. Leslie Tait said that in Shetland the 120mm whitefish fleet was catching lots of large whiting. In these circumstances it was difficult to convince fishers that the science was right. The North Atlantic Marine Centre was about to embark upon a whiting discard study.
- 2.6 Andy Revill confirmed that in the 80mm mesh fleet almost half the whiting caught were being discarded and that one third of them were above minimum landing size. Leslie Tait said that undersized whiting were not being caught at Shetland.
- 2.7 Andy Revill stressed the importance of avoiding actions which would fail. There had been an attempt to persuade the industry to adopt the Seafish cutaway cover-less trawl, but although it had worked in trials the industry had failed to take it up. Similarly, an expert-led attempt to introduce square mesh panels had failed. It was better to move towards industry finding its own solutions. What is important is to set the target and then leave fishers to decide how to reach these.

3. Discussion

- 3.1 Michael Park said that there was particular scope for fishers developing methods which would allow them to buy back days at sea. However, becoming more selective is a negative development if it loses marketable fish. In addition such buy-back measures have currently to be attached to the cod recovery plan. If a net prevents the discarding of whiting but still catches cod then recovery of days at sea is not possible. Some Scots vessels were moving to 160mm and even 200mm square mesh panels, which work for cod. They are aiming to make *Nephrops* vessels as selective for cod as the 120mm vessels.
- 3.2 Leslie Tait thought we should not lose sight of the fact that letting whiting go was not what fishers wanted. When whiting were as abundant as they are now fishers wanted to land them and gain income from them. Michael Andersen agreed. Fishing mortalities of 0.3-0.5 were being set for whiting and being achieved these were below F_{MSY} for whiting. What was the problem?
- 3.3 Chris Darby replied that whiting stocks were as low as they had ever been and ICES wanted the stocks to be rebuilt. The fishing mortality is appropriate, but it could come

down to 0.3 in the long-term. The need was to reallocate the quotas to where the fish were. Michael Andersen asked whether there was more than one whiting stock; perhaps one in the South East and the other in the North West. The reply was that there is no evidence for that. Whiting in the past had been considered a major predator of cod and haddock but now the stock is in a low state that is no longer of concern.

- 3.4 Michael Park said there was a case for fishers being allowed to land all that they caught. That would provide the incentive to become more selective. Peter Hopkins from the Commission said that these arguments were important. The whiting stock has decreased because of poor recruitment. However the quotas were not allocated to the fleets which were catching whiting, which were in the western part of the North Sea.
- 3.5 Barrie Deas summarised the discussion by suggesting that there were two problems. The first is that there is not sufficient quota for whiting in the areas in which this species is being caught. The second was that there were problems with the superstructure. The solution to the first problem might be for vessels to land all the fish they were killing. Fish above the minimum landing size which were currently being discarded could be sold. The *quid pro quo* would be a move to more selective gears to reduce the proportion of undersized fish in the catch. The problem with the superstructure hinged on the distribution of quotas. Norway was not interested in whiting and fishers in the eastern part of the North Sea were not catching whiting. However relative stability was standing in the way of redistributing the quota. If there was no CFP then the solution would be clear. It was the requirement to share out the stock which was the problem.
- 3.6 Leslie Tait raised the possible solution of multi-species quotas. Where the price differential was not too great then quota for two or more species could be consolidated. Whiting might be coupled with haddock. Monkfish could be coupled with megrim.
- 3.7 Michael Park suggested the alternative of moving to a 'catch quota' system, allowing a percent of the quota to be transferred between stocks. The SFF is currently preparing a paper on this topic. Barrie Deas said that such a method would have general application to other stocks. There could perhaps be a pilot scheme of this kind to resolve multispecies restrictions
- 3.8 Transferring quota for whiting from one place to another is difficult. A more flexible quota transfer system is needed. Currently fishers have no currency to exchange for whiting quota, and some countries simply refuse to trade. Giles Bartlett suggested that there could be a penalty for not using quota. Some countries are discarding particular species while other countries are not using their quota. These superstructure problems may be insoluble however.
- 3.9 There was general interest in the mechanism suggested by Michael Park. Is there a scientific opinion on multi-species quotas? Chris Darby thought they were certainly possible where quotas were currently not being taken. The least common species would need to be protected, which might have adverse implications for the larger

stock. Michael Park thought that we should not be too prescriptive at this stage. We first needed to develop a system where member states can develop flexible single species quota allocations. Thought was being given to this in Scotland. If a member state decided to go for a catch quota (rather than a landings quota) then it might receive 90% of the total removals. Then 80% of that could be allocated and 20% held back to enable flexibility. The 20% retained acts as a buffer to be deployed to avoid the effort ceiling being exceeded. If too much is retained then it can be used before the end of the year. The quotas are of course larger than the current landings quotas as they are based on total removals. Such a system would depend on very robust monitoring of removals. A pilot project could be run to demonstrate that such a system works. It is important that such a proposal is not too prescriptive. There is scope for member states to come up with their own proposals.

3.10 Andy Revill agreed that a top down prescriptive approach would not work. It is for skippers to resolve the difficulties. With respect to improving selectivity, demonstration projects and competitions have been shown not to work. Fishers needed tangible incentives and technical support, but the different net designs had to be their responsibility. An independent survey had been conducted in SW England on the reasons for discarding. That then gave clues on how to proceed. A similar survey was now being conducted in NE England and this should reveal the barriers to further development

3.11 Michael Park said that discards were found in all fisheries and that gains were to be made from reducing them. Any recruitment which occurred was not being made best use of. Moreover, the discards were not always being recorded.

3.12 Barrie Deas thought we were close to defining the actual problem:

- Discards of whiting are very high in some areas of the North Sea, representing unwanted fishing mortality and lost revenue, and undermining the industry's reputation
- The presence of large concentrations of whiting on the west side of the North Sea, when the scientific message was of an overall stock in decline because of successive years of poor recruitment, had caused tensions between fishermen on the one hand and scientists and fisheries managers on the other
- There is mismatch between quota availability and the areas where fish are being caught
- Gear selectivity is not always being used to best advantage
- The overall TAC is not being taken
- International transfers are difficult to achieve

There are several layers to these problems, one of them being that the framework of the CFP is standing in the way of resolving the issues. Any solution has to work at a number of levels for all the parties involved: fishermen, member states, the

Commission, Norway and the scientific community. The construction of an approach that delivers to each of these parties the outcome that they desire is the challenge and goal for the group. The objectives for the different sectors are:

- **Fishing industry:** authority to land a higher proportion of the whiting currently caught and discarded in order to generate revenue
- **Member states:** security for their national allocations under the principle of relative stability, a reduction of discards, reduced fishing mortality on whiting
- **Commission:** a secure and safe way to ensure that a reduction in fishing mortality and discards is achieved
- **Norway:** the elimination of discards within the framework of the annual reciprocal fisheries agreement between EU and Norway
- **Scientists:** reduction of discards and fishing mortality in a way that provides verifiable data on the magnitudes of both

4. Possible solutions

- 4.1 One approach would be to achieve a trade-off between landings and discards at member state level. Motivation of fishers is important. The allocation of catch quotas might offer a solution. There is scope for a pilot project.
- 4.2 There was a view that this might work for targeted fisheries, but not for non-targeted fisheries. However the contrary view was expressed; that it could work in a non-targeted landings controlled fishery through increasing selectivity - where there might be a trade off in terms of increased TACs.
- 4.3 Improving gear selectivity is also desirable and it may be possible to learn lessons in this respect from the survey currently being carried out in NE England. Square mesh panels do reduce the whiting catch and are already used extensively within some fleets to avoid the discarding of small whiting.
- 4.4 Against this background, it was agreed that a solution that could deliver the multiple objectives required would have to be sought in two parts, at the level of the fishery and at the level of international decision-making.
- 4.5 At the level of the fishery. a pilot project using volunteer vessels would be set up. The project would:
 - Provide an increase in quota for those vessels currently discarding significant quantities of whiting in both target and by-catch whiting fisheries
 - As a quid pro quo for the increased quota allocation the vessels involved in the pilot would be required to eliminate discards from their operations using the means of their choice

- Vessels involved in the pilot would be obliged to demonstrate that all catches were recorded under a CCTV or observer programme

This arrangement would deliver the win-win-win of an increase in revenue for the vessels, a reduction in discards, and an overall reduction in fishing mortality within a framework that provided confidence that the terms of the project were being followed.

4.6 At the level of international decision-making approval would be required from:

- The member states which hold quota of North Sea whiting
- The European Commission
- Norway

In the same way that in 2010 an additional 5% of the cod quota was agreed to provide incentives for participation in Catch Quota projects in Denmark and the UK, a proportion of the additional whiting quota could be ring-fenced to provide the incentive to reduce discards and achieve a reduction in overall mortality in the whiting fishery.

5. Conclusions – the way forward

5.1 The NSRAC would aim to produce an agreed paper in summer/autumn, setting out a number of options to go forward to the EU/Norway negotiations, including the one described above. The paper would:

- Give examples of initiatives already under way to reduce discards through technical adaptations to fishing gear
- Stress the importance of good governance
- Underline the importance of aligning economic incentives with management objectives
- Stress the importance of obtaining the active support and involvement of the fishing industry
- Remind the Commission and Norway of their commitment to the reduction/elimination of discards.
- Seek flexibility over quota transfers between the EU and Norway with respect to whiting, bearing in mind that the major issue is whether anything can be achieved in terms of quota transfer within the CFP without de-stabilising key principles like relative stability.

6. Action to be taken

- 6.1 This discussion paper will be submitted to the Demersal Working Group at its next meeting and if agreement is reached on the way forward a more focused paper will be prepared for submission to the Commission.

7. In attendance

Barrie Deas	Chairman
Tony Hawkins	Rapporteur
Robert Stevenson	NESFO Ltd
Paul Dolder	Defra
Leslie Tait	SFF
Michael Park	SFF
Pim Visser	Netherlands Fisheries
Michael Andersen	Danish Fishermen's Association
Jane Sandell	SFO
Giles Bartlett	WWF
Peter Hopkins	European Commission
Eamon Mangan	French Ministry
Caroline Gamblin	CNPMEM
Andy Revill	CEFAS
Chris Darby	CEFAS