



Whiting LTMP Development Group Edinburgh 19th January 2011

Rapporteur: Tony Hawkins

Draft

1. Introduction and apologies

- 1.1 Michael Park opened the meeting. Apologies had been received from Barrie Deas and Arnold Locker.
- 1.2 The purpose of the meeting was to develop a Long Term Management Plan for whiting. We had spent much time discussing whiting during 2010. We had started to deal with difficulties over the discarding of whiting as early in February, and by June had prepared a paper for the Commission. The subsequent reply from the Director General had raised a number of issues and we had replied in a carefully drafted letter. The sending of that letter had been delayed as a result of the internal changes within the NSRAC. It had eventually been sent in by the Secretariat in January of this year but had then been rejected by the Commission. The letter had pointed out that the quality of the scientific assessments for North Sea stocks had progressively deteriorated. Moreover, a small difference in the interpretation of the ICES advice could lead to an increase rather than the recommended decrease in the TAC for 2011. This issue had been raised at the EU/Norway bilateral meeting where advice had been presented which had subsequently led to an increase in the TAC for whiting.
- 1.3 Our letter to Lowri Evans had concluded that the most sensible solution to the problems with whiting was to develop a long-term management plan for those fisheries catching this species. By this we did not mean the kind of simple management plan that set a target fishing mortality and went no further. We were seeking a careful and considered approach to the development of a comprehensive plan, which looked at a wide range of measures for achieving sustainable fisheries for whiting. Interestingly, the EU/Norway talks had also endorsed the idea of a management plan for whiting. In the circumstances it was therefore appropriate to hold this meeting to take the preparation of a plan forward.
- 1.4 Peter Hopkins, in response to a question, said that the management plan being sought as a result of the EU/Norway discussions was relatively simple, and set a target for fishing mortality. There was no reason, however, why the EU should not approve a more comprehensive plan. Such a plan was really needed to deal with the complex

distribution of the whiting and the mixed and varied nature of the fisheries and to encompass all the management actions that would be necessary. Pim Visser added that the plan also needed to consider socio-economic issues, which the EU/Norway plan would not do. It was agreed that we needed a plan which would conform to the EU/Norway agreement, but which went further. However, there might be difficulties in gaining approval for such a plan. Currently the Council cannot approve any EU plan without the involvement of the European Parliament. That involvement might cause delays. Eamon Mangan pointed out that there were precedents for adopting the measures outlined in a plan even if it had not been approved – he drew attention to the management plan for horse mackerel drawn up by the Pelagic RAC.

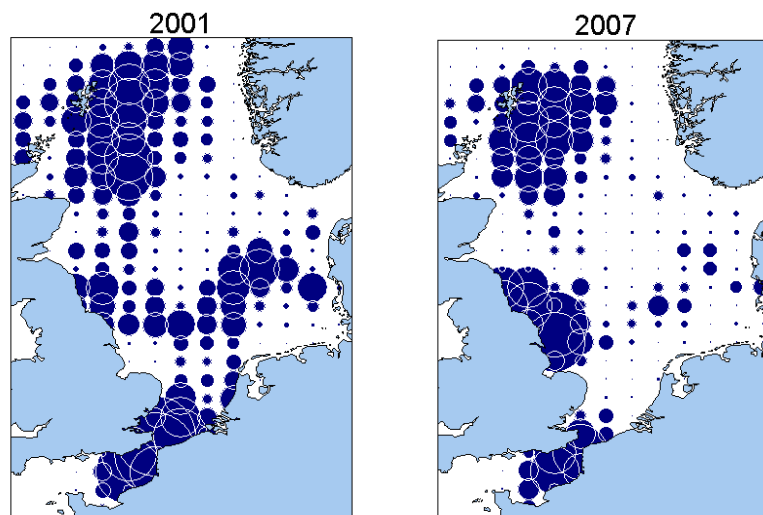
2 The features of a LTMP

- 2.1 The rapporteur drew attention to earlier discussions within the NSRAC over the preparation of LTMPs. It had been agreed that such a plan was needed for the long-term benefit of both whiting stocks and those fisheries that catch whiting. Its preparation would give fishers and others stakeholders a stronger role in management of the fisheries – in line with the proposed reforms to the Common Fisheries Policy. Such a plan might also prevent micro-management of the fishery by the Commission and Council by setting long-term objectives.
- 2.2 The main elements of a Long Term Management Plan involved the NSRAC taking a long and considered look at **where we are now**, and what problems we currently face in the whiting fisheries. We should consider carefully **where we want to be**, by setting our own objectives for the fisheries. We should then decide **how we are going to get there** by deciding on future actions.
- 2.3 In 2006 the NSRAC held a Workshop, with the participation of experts, which had defined the essential features of a long-term management plan. The workshop had recommended that:
 - Stakeholders must be involved in the formulation and agreement of management plans
 - Buy-in by fishers is necessary if the plan is to succeed
 - The objectives for any management plan must be clearly stated and achievable
 - The objectives must address bio-ecological, economic, social and institutional issues
 - The plan must specify the fisheries to which it will apply
 - The plan must take account of all the stocks taken by the fisheries
 - A range of instruments should be considered, not just TACs
 - The changes proposed must be gradual, evolutionary and adaptive
 - The need for business flexibility must be respected

- The plan must take account of uncertainty
- The plan must agree the actions which should be taken if a stock moves outside the safety zone
- Space must be allowed for review and revision

3. Stock information and spatial distribution

- 3.1 Colin Millar gave a presentation on stock information and spatial distribution for whiting in the North Sea. Maps of the distribution of commercial landings had shown major changes over the years, reflecting changes in the fisheries as well as changes in the whiting stocks. There were now (based on 2007 data) three major areas for landings:



The distribution of effort differed for the different fishing gears. Based on research vessel surveys there were a number of areas where young fish were concentrated. Whiting eggs were found at two main locations from surveys in 2004, in the vicinity of the Dogger Bank and to the east of Shetland. However, there is a lack of information on where whiting spawn.

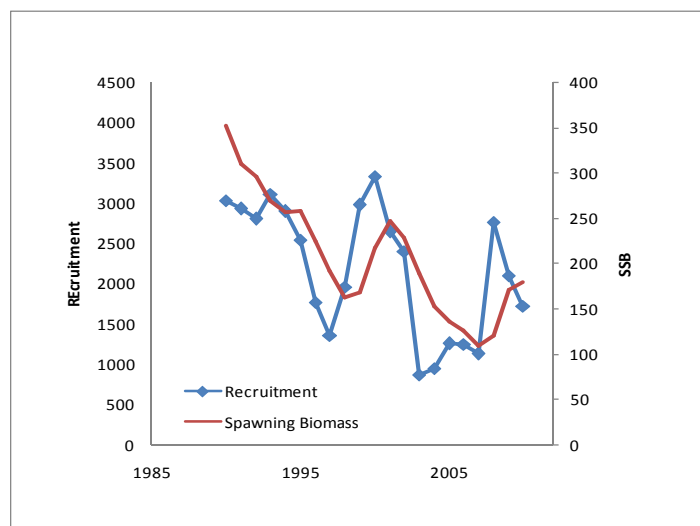
- 3.2 Michael Park asked whether there was any evidence of separate stocks of whiting. Colin replied that it had been difficult to find differences using genetic markers but there were differences in growth rate and size distribution of whiting in different areas, although these could be fishery induced and did not necessarily indicate separate stocks. Smaller mesh sizes were in use in the southern North Sea, and effort in the 80 mm fleet had increased greatly in 2004 as a result of the cod recovery plan, while in the northern North Sea the TR1 fleet dominated with large mesh sizes. Scientists were currently looking at the distribution of discards to gain information on the distribution of young fish and complement the survey data. We have to start with

the assumption that there is a single stock of whiting in the North Sea, as there is no scientific evidence for separate stocks.

- 3.3 Looking at the apportioning of catches between landings and discards it was evident that there had been a major problem with discards in the past, where discards had equalled and even exceeded landings. Discards were now reducing but it was said by fishers that in some areas large marketable fish were now being discarded whereas in the past it had been mainly small fish. There had been improvements in area VIId as well as in the North Sea. It was pointed out that it was now very difficult for vessels to increase their mesh size to reduce discards because of the penalties in terms of effort allocations in moving from, say TR2 to TR1 (where there was the penalty of a 5 times multiplier in effort).
- 3.4 In terms of the economics of the fishery it is evident that in all countries whiting is cheaper than cod or haddock, but the price rises when other species are in short supply. Whiting make a valuable contribution to fishers' incomes.
- 3.5 Recruitment of whiting had been poor in recent years but was now improving. Michael Park asked whether recruitment was related to the size of spawning stock. There was no evidence for this. However, it was evident that when there was good recruitment it often persisted for a few years and made a major contribution subsequently to spawning stock biomass. The best philosophy for keeping the whiting fisheries sustainable was to keep the rate of exploitation low and to keep an eye on recruitment.

4. ICES assessments for whiting

- 4.1 An assessment for North Sea whiting was adopted in May 2010 for advice on stock abundance; exploitation rate and future catch levels. Neither PA nor MSY reference points were defined – as the relative stock status was uncertain. After a series of the lowest recruitments observed, stronger year classes were estimated for 2008 and 2009. Fishing mortality had been stable over recent years at historic low levels (~0.3) enabling stock rebuilding to occur from the improved recruitment.



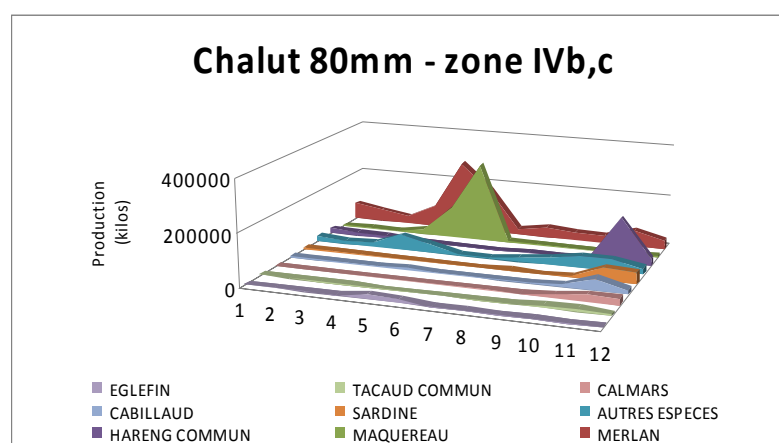
- 4.2 ICES short-term advice was to **maintain the spawning stock size stable** at the increased level expected at the beginning of 2010 and 2011 by a 26% reduction in TAC and a **50% reduction in fishing mortality** to 0.17 in 2011. The 50% figure had been tentative.
- 4.3 The ICES advice was revised in September 2010. The new advice considered that maintaining fishing mortality at its current level of $F=0.3$ would be consistent with long-term stability **if recruitment is not poor**. An $F=0.3$ for whiting was consistent with that of North Sea haddock where it had been adopted as a provisional proxy for F_{msy} .
- 4.4 The medium-term prediction was that with current recruitment levels and selection patterns (including discards) there was a low risk of the stock falling below the lowest observed value by fixing the fishing mortality at 0.3 and using the 15% TAC constraint. On average SSB would be expected to increase by 10% by 2015 relative to 2009, stabilising at that level, conditional on future recruitment. The projected average long-term catch would be around 37 kt.
- 4.5 Based on the outlook for 2011 in the ICES advice from June 2010, the long-term target $F=0.3$ corresponds to a 10% cut in fishing mortality and a 25% TAC increase for the catch (relative to 2010). Putting the management of whiting on a firmer basis would lead to a reduction in discarded whiting in 2011. Maintaining fishing mortality at its current level of $F=0.3$ would be consistent with long-term stability **if recruitment is not poor**.
- 4.6 Thus, in terms of a simple management plan maintaining an $F=0.3$ would be consistent with long-term stability of the whiting stock – and would provide a proxy for F_{msy} . However that figure is conditional upon recruitment not being poor. The EU/Norway talks accepted that advice and a management plan based on $F=0.3$ is now proposed. Three requests for advice have now been sent to ICES:
- Over how many years must recruitment be poor to trigger concern?
 - To what level should F be reduced in those circumstances?
 - How fast should be the rate of reduction of F to the lower level
- 4.7 Posing the three questions above broadens the scope of the management plan for whiting. A key question if a wider management plan is to be considered by the NSRAC is how do you fish the stock to provide optimum yield? The large mesh TR1 fishery is especially well matched to whiting as it only removes large fish. However, the smaller mesh fisheries also take whiting. If the mesh size in the 80 mm fishery could be raised then it would bring an increased yield of fish. Peter Hopkins thought that the management plan would also need to consider the industrial fisheries, where whiting are taken as a by-catch. Currently, 95% of the fish caught have to be Norway pout and if the by-catch limit is exceeded the fishery has to close. A 98% figure is

used for the sandeel fishery where the by-catch is smaller. Catches have to be sampled for by-catch.

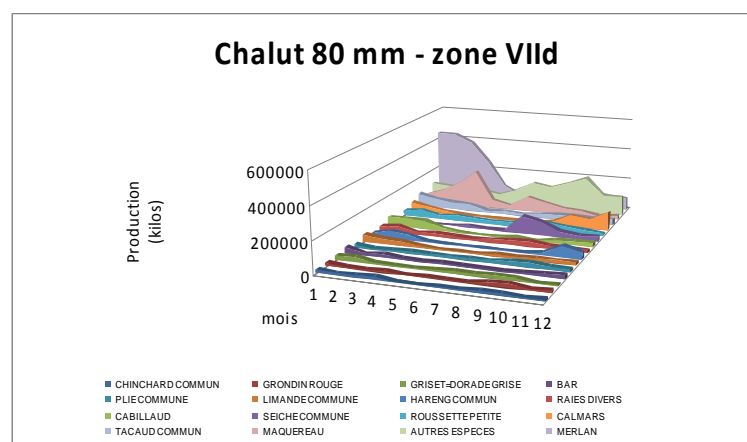
5. What is required in the NSRAC LTMP for whiting?

5.1 Michael Park remarked that the NSRAC plan is intended to have wider scope than the EU/Norway management plan. It must fit with the EU/Norway plan but it does not have to be agreed with Norway. The Commission prepares the EU cod recovery plan without input from Norway. Clearly we have to look at how whiting is fished in the different EU fisheries and suggest ways of maximising the yield, bearing in mind that these fisheries are mixed, and that there are other constraints. We will also need to gain scientific approval of our plan before it can be forwarded to the Commission. We would need to submit our plan to STECF for evaluation. The plan also needs to be international in scope, taking account of the role and importance of whiting in different countries. One starting point would be to look at the different fisheries catching whiting and to examine their particular features. There is a question over whether the plan should include the fishery in area VIId. However, many of the boats fishing in that area also fish in the North Sea.

5.2 Caroline Gamblin presented information from one of the French POs on the fisheries both in the North Sea and area VIId. The data showed a drastic reduction in the quota in both areas over the last 20 years. Quota swaps had been regularly realised and the quotas fully utilised (especially in the past two years). A typical artisanal trawler operating in IVb and c (North Sea) caught a high proportion of whiting (*merlan*) (41% of total landings), and these were caught mainly in the early part of the year.



5.3 Similar vessels caught a lower proportion of whiting in area VIId, but the species was still very important. Overall, in financial terms, whiting contributed 35% of the turnover for the PO and was the most important single species. However the analysis illustrates the wide range of species caught.



- 5.4 The Dutch fishery for whiting is in a state of transition as fishers are changing from beam trawling to other fishing methods. Whiting has become especially important in area VII. Both the Belgian fleet and the German fleet also catch whiting. However, the main country catching this species is the UK.
- 5.5 It was concluded that the Development Group would first need to focus its attention on obtaining data from the different national fisheries in areas IV (North Sea) and VIId. Much of this would be in the STECF database but we would need to seek from each member state, through NSRAC members, a breakdown of landings, catches and discards by gear type. We need information on the economic importance of whiting in the different fisheries, and information on the mix of species in the catch. We also needed information on effort by gear type. Ideally we require monthly information but it was recognised that this might not be possible for discards. Quarterly figures might suffice. There is recognition, however, that these fisheries are dynamic and that catches are changing, not least as a result of management measures imposed in recent years. One of the features of the discussions of the *Nephrops* management plan has been that fishers wish to retain flexibility within their fisheries.
- 5.6 Peter Hopkins thought it would be useful to match fishing opportunities (in terms of quotas) to landings and discards. Where is there mismatch between the two? It might be useful to look at international quota swaps and PO swaps across countries. We have to ask the question are discards occurring because quotas are insufficient in some areas where whiting are abundant. Where is there potential for quota swapping?
- 5.7 Michael Park thought we should try to assemble these data by the end of April. The Secretariat should write to key members now to ask them to do what they could to obtain the data from their member state officials.

- 5.8 The rapporteur pointed out that someone would be needed to pull these data together, analyse them and present them in an easily assimilated form for the Development Group to absorb. It was agreed that the Chairman should speak to Ewan Bell to see whether there were any resources within JAKFISH to fund the analysis and presentation of these data. The Secretariat should also write to the Commission, alerting them to the wish to assemble these data on the whiting fisheries and asking whether they could assist by funding the analysis. The rapporteur mentioned that the MYFISH project (formerly FISUMANI) which the NSRAC had agreed to participate in early in 2010 would have some resources available, and if funded might provide some scientific advice, especially on MSY issues.

6. Next steps

- 6.1 Chris Darby suggested that one of the main purposes of the plan would be to look at ways of reducing discards and improving yields from the fishery. Fishers will benefit if fish are moved from discards into landings. It was noted that the Scottish industry has arranged a meeting of fishers to see how discards might be reduced in the *Nephrops* fishery. Some fishers did appreciate that reducing discards, and demonstrating that a reduction had been achieved, could lead to increased landings and increased income. This was the basis of the catch quota initiative. Other fishers remained to be convinced, however, and in preparing the plan we will need to persuade fishers to adopt selective measures to prevent some species being caught and discarded.
- 6.2 The plan will also need to look at reducing the ecological impact of fishing: not just through reducing by-catches but also by reducing impact upon the seabed and avoiding the capture of protected species.
- 6.3 Peter Hopkins said that we now had a series of management plans under development for different species. Some of these plans only involved harvest control rules but as more plans were developed they would need to be integrated with one another. Currently the cod recovery plan was having an impact upon all fisheries and all species, making things quite complicated. Pim Visser agreed and was concerned that rules set for the least healthy fish stock will affect all the fish stocks being taken within the mixed fisheries and may actually generate discards. It was remarked that, in addition, the extant plans were all built around current levels of discarding. However, it was certainly the case that there were likely to be synergies between different management plans. Plans for sole and plaice; cod, whiting, *Nephrops*, and perhaps haddock were all either under development or in the process of revision.
- 6.4 Peter Hopkins reminded participants that reform of the CFP might bring a greater degree of regional management. That would make it sensible to consider the synergy between different plans, in a regional context. Eamon Mangan commented that the NWWRAC was seeking multispecies management for its mixed fisheries. Should we be doing the same? He mentioned that in return for an increase in the

whiting TAC in western waters there would have to be specific action to improve gear selectivity.

- 6.5 There was the wider question of how we could secure for fishers the wide range of species caught in the North Sea fisheries in the face of separate management plans for each of the different species. At some point it might be appropriate to consider new methods of management where fishers landed all that they caught. Catch quotas were going in that direction but had the problem that if you ran out of quota for one species you had to stop fishing – that is a severe deterrent. We might need to return to this topic in the future.
- 6.5 It was agreed that our main aim was to produce a mature plan for whiting, in the context of the mixed fisheries of the North Sea, which could complement the simpler EU/Norway plan for this species. We would need to look at ways of reducing whiting discards and come forward with proposals for evaluation by STECF. We would seek presentations on reducing whiting discards at the next meeting of the Whiting Development Group. France, England and Scotland were all carrying out research projects on this topic. We should communicate with the NWWRAC to see what they were planning in terms of improving gear selectivity for whiting. There was scope for Inter-RAC cooperation on this topic.

7. Date of next meeting

- 7.1 The next meeting of the Whiting LTMP Development group would take place between the middle and end of May

8. Action Points

1. The Development Group will wish to look at the different fisheries catching whiting in areas IV (North Sea) and VIId and examine their particular features (5.5). The data will be required by the end of April. Key members will be asked to obtain the data from their member state officials (5.7).	Secretariat
2. The Chairman will speak to Ewan Bell to see whether there are any resources within JAKFISH to fund the collation, analysis and presentation of data on whiting fisheries (5.8).	Michael Park
3. The Secretariat will write to the Commission, alerting them to the wish to assemble data on the whiting fisheries and asking whether they could assist by funding the analysis (5.8).	Secretariat
4. We will seek presentations on research aimed at reducing whiting discards at the next meeting of the	Members Secretariat

Whiting Development Group (6.5). The next meeting will be held in mid to late May	
5. The Secretariat will ask the NWWRAC whether they are taking forward any initiatives aimed at reducing whiting discards (6.5).	Secretariat

14. Attendance

Michael Park	Chairman	SFF
Tony Hawkins	Rapporteur	NSRAC
Chris Darby		CEFAS
Caroline Gamblin		CNPNEM
Eamon Mangan		French Ministry
Leslie Tait		SFF
Pim Visser		VisNed
Caro Cowan		Marine Scotland
Rory Campbell		SFF
Jane Sandell		SFO
Peter Hopkins		European Commission
Colin Millar		Marine Scotland Science