



NSRAC Position Paper: August 2011

MSY and Fishing Opportunities

1. Context

- 1.1 This Position Paper relates to the letter of 31st of May 2011 from the Commission; which addressed some of the concerns that the NSRAC raised in its Position Paper of February 2011 'Development of a coherent and logical approach towards Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY)'.
- 1.2 The Executive Committee of the NSRAC had the opportunity to discuss the Commission's letter at its meeting in Paris on the 27th June. Members of the RAC stressed that the letter failed to address some of the core issues that the NSRAC Position Paper had raised. It was agreed that the NSRAC should write to the Commission again regarding these points.
- 1.3 In addition, at the Paris NSRAC meeting Kenneth Patterson from the Commission's DG Mare raised the issue of moving to MSY in 2012 for some stocks as part of the Commission's Fishing Opportunities initiative. This proposal caused considerable concern. Previously, emphasis by the Commission had been on meeting international commitments on MSY, which state clearly that we should aim to meet MSY objectives by 2015 'where possible'. The Commission appears now to have moved from that position to a completely new position of achieving MSY for some stocks by 2012.
- 1.4 This Position paper was drafted following the meeting of the NSRAC Executive Committee and presents the views expressed by Members. It has been agreed by written procedure.

2. Comments on the Commission's Letter of 31st May 2011

- 2.1 Firstly, the NSRAC reiterates its support for a move towards more sustainable fisheries. It accepts that there is an international commitment to reach Maximum Sustainable Yield for fisheries by 2015. However, we question the Commission's sudden wish to introduce MSY for some stocks on a very much shorter time scale. This change of plan appears to be predicated by deep pessimism about the state of North Sea fisheries. It is certainly the case that fewer fish are now being landed from

the North Sea. However, it is evident from the current scientific advice that some of the fish stocks in the North Sea, including plaice, haddock and sole, are in a stable state and even increasing. Other stocks, like the cod, are being rebuilt. We are witnessing improvement, not decline. This is to be expected as a result of major reductions in the size of the fishing fleets, restrictions in catches, effort curtailments, the introduction of real time and other closures, and other measures.

- 2.2 This is not to say that we cannot do better. However, most of the problems encountered in the North Sea – including the problem of excessive discards – have been the result of the management regime itself. Fish like the cod, haddock, whiting, plaice and sole are caught in mixed demersal fisheries where it is not easy to control the mix of species caught.
- 2.3 Now, at a time when progress has been made, albeit with a heavy impact upon the fishing fleets, the Commission wishes to move with great haste towards imposing additional restrictions on fishing in order to achieve MSY. Emphasis is placed upon arriving at a particular form of MSY even more quickly than the internationally agreed time scale, rather than meeting the main objective of managing the mixed fisheries of the North Sea in a more sustainable and effective manner.
- 2.4 In our original Position Paper we emphasised the importance of seeking sound scientific advice on MSY for stocks exploited in mixed fisheries, as most of the fish in the North Sea are caught in these fisheries. We also emphasised the need to move towards an ecosystem approach and the need to take multi-species interactions into account.
- 2.5 However, MSY has long been recognised by scientists and economists as a flawed concept. There is a need to redefine it more carefully, in fully operational terms, for fish caught in mixed fisheries. MSY was developed as a way of optimising harvesting rather than as a conservation tool.
- 2.6 The advice currently being provided by ICES and STECF is not based on mixed fisheries considerations, as we have said previously and as the Commission has acknowledged. It is still centred on single species MSY parameters. The Commission's letter mentions that it will take time to deal with mixed fisheries and that the Commission and its scientific advisers have not yet been able to develop a standard approach to mixed fisheries management.
- 2.7 The Commission's letter, in excusing the single species approach, mentions the inadequacy of the current science and the need to develop new approaches. In effect, while claiming to seek advice based on the 'best available' science, the Commission is admitting that it can only achieve its own kind of MSY objectives by ignoring mixed fisheries and ecosystem considerations. In our view that is not using the 'best available' science. Nor is it a 'precautionary' approach.
- 2.8 The NSRAC takes the view that a completely different approach to the management of mixed fisheries is necessary. This is a view shared by many ICES scientists. We do not need new 'predictive models of fishermen's adaptive behaviour'. That would only be the case if we remained with the current, single species MSY approach.

- 2.9 Managing mixed fisheries is not just an 'academic' problem. Rather, it is a problem that must be shared and resolved if we want to achieve more sustainable fisheries. We are all committed to achieving MSY, but without understanding and accommodating the nature of MSY for mixed and multispecies fisheries it will not be possible to deliver on that commitment. Indeed, with the present focus on the management of single stocks it will be possible only to deliver a flawed system of management by 2015; it is unlikely to provide "MSY" as most scientists currently understand the concept.
- 2.10 Scientists/managers/industry/NGOs should be discussing future options that might satisfy all parties, and that will meet the broader objective of achieving more sustainable fisheries. Management systems must be developed within the full spirit of the Johannesburg agreement. The solution may lie in the development of better, more comprehensive fishery management plans incorporating greater consideration of the mixed nature of the fisheries and taking full account of biologically interacting systems and their uncertainties. There may be no single, simple solution. Rather, it may be necessary to arrive at a series of sensible and pragmatic compromises.
- 2.11 With the Commission now wishing to arrive at more hurried solutions to the implementation of MSY objectives, based on single species models, we run the risk of obtaining inadequate solutions to the wrong problems. We are also likely to run out of time. If the Commission had searched for more holistic and appropriate solutions at an earlier stage we might now have some answers for the North Sea.

3. The way forward

- 3.1 We would like to make progress in developing better, more sustainable management systems for our mixed fisheries. And we would like to start this process now. We intend to arrange an international workshop on mixed fisheries and their management in the near future. We will be consulting the other RACs, and will be establishing a steering group to look at the scope of the workshop, the topics to be covered, and the scientific experts to be invited. We hope that the Commission will participate actively, and that it might consider providing some of the funding for the conference.
- 3.2 However, with regard to fishing opportunities for 2012, we are concerned that the Commission has already nailed its colours to the mast with respect to the implementing MSY through a single species approach. The approach adopted for 2012 is both flawed and unlikely to promote further progress in reaching a more acceptable management system. If the Commission continues to base its management advice on the single stock format then it will place an intolerable burden upon the Fisheries Council. The Council, when agreeing TACs will be obliged to make judgements based on mixed fisheries considerations, not least on the extent to which discards will be increased or decreased by the TAC changes.
- 3.3 The Commission, with help from scientists, fishermen and other interested parties, must seek a workable approach to the MSY concept. The Commission must embrace the need to manage the *fisheries* that exploit the stocks, looking at each fishery on a case-by-case basis, and developing strategic objectives for each of them.