

## **NSAC Advice Ref. 03-2021**

### **NSAC Advice on TAC setting for 2021 North Sea Cod**

*This advice paper was approved by the NSAC Executive Committee on 4 December 2020 via fast-track written procedure.*

Notwithstanding the disruption the Covid-19 pandemic has caused, the NSAC regrets that ICES decided not to reopen the cod advice as usually done in autumn to integrate the quarter three IBTS survey results. It is clearly disappointing for fishermen as the results of the campaign may have confirmed fishermen perception of improvements in recruitment. It might have delivered a further improvement in the prognosis of the stock.

NSAC wants to express again its concern regarding the framework for setting TACs and quotas and the lack of clarity and timetable regarding EU, UK and Norway negotiation.

Despite this unclarity, NSAC wants to propose a number of points to be considered when setting the TACs in the North Sea for next year:

- The recovery of cod stocks will be long-lasting, therefore a comprehensive plan should be discussed and implemented with incremental measures put in place, depending on the biomass level compared with reference points.
- The actions and measures should be discussed in the framework of the EU, Norway and UK negotiations and in collaboration with the stakeholders in order to avoid unilateral decision.
- Other factors than fishing influence cod recovery in the North Sea. The fishing industry representative in the NSAC note that these should be accounted for as much as possible when assessing the North Sea cod stock evolution and discussing management perspective. The OIG consider that these factors are taken into account adequately in the ICES advice.
- Setting the TAC for cod should not be disconnected from other TACs in the North Sea, such as for Haddock, Whiting, and Anglerfish, and should be taking into account the mixed characteristic of fisheries. The industry representatives consider that setting the TAC at levels too low will be counterproductive in terms of finding a balance between biological objectives of stock recovery and economic perspectives on maintaining fishing activities in the framework of the landing obligation and economic performance of the fleets. The OIG consider that the recovery of the cod stock to sustainable levels should be the main priority in setting the TAC for NS cod and in a mixed fisheries context that could mean setting the TACs of other stocks below maximum levels.
- Activities of fisheries with low impact on cod should be considered when discussing complementary measures. Measures should strike a balance between their impact on vessels with low levels of fishing activity on cod and the protection of cod.



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- Protection of the adults may help in the rebuilding of the stock, therefore seasonal closures to protect spawning aggregation as agreed for 2020 should be continued.
- Protection of juveniles is also important and an evaluation of the current real time closure (RTC) system and its implementation in 2020 should be conducted. We take note that Norway decided to implement juveniles area of protection in its jurisdiction, for which we recommend a result based review and amendment of area, period and affected métiers based on such review
- The various model scenarios proposed in the advice sheet of ICES show that many of them project an increase in the biomass for around 40%, which would lead to reaching Blim (107000t) in 2022.

Basis	Total catch (2021)	Projected landings (2021)	Projected discard (2021)	Ftotal (2021)	SSB 2022	%SSB change	%TAC change
MSY approach	14755	12632	2123	0.162	112758	44	-16.5
TAC (2020)	17679	15102	2577	0.197	109876	40	0
MSY lower	17794	15199	2595	0.198	109762	40	0.65
TAC(2020)+10%	19447	16601	2846	0.22	108059	38	+10%

- Even if the ICES advice meets the quality assurance standards, some increasing uncertainties can be noted in the ICES stock evaluation and has been discussed in July during the DWG. A pattern of retrospective bias with regards to total biomass is evolving within the North Sea stock assessments. Furthermore, as presented by ICES in July, there are conflicts in commercial data and surveys; scientific surveys are showing fewer older fish than commercial data indicate are present. Industry representatives believe that this may be caused by Northward migration of older cod. The benchmark planned for 2021 may change the stock perception.

Considering the different elements highlighted above, the industry representatives of the NSAC consider that a scenario much closer to the status quo should be considered for 2021. In that perspective, TAC should, as a minimum, not be set lower than the level corresponding to MSY lower meaning a TAC of 14814 tons in the North Sea, 2117 tons in the Skagerrak and 863 tons in the Channel. The complementary measures should also be continued, although they may need to be modified to account for problems experienced. These measures should remain in place as long as the stock remains below Blim. Closures of spawning grounds as implemented in 2020 can be kept in place until the stock is above MSY Btrigger.

The NSAC OIG position remains the same as it was when the NSAC issued advice on cod<sup>1</sup> in April 2020, which is that for rebuilding of the stock it is crucial that fishing mortality

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nsrac.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/08-1920-NSAC-Advice-on-North-Sea-cod-management.pdf>



is reduced to levels capable of producing MSY as is legal obligation through the CFP and the North Sea Multi Annual Plan.