

REPORT

Meeting: **Inter-AC on 2024 ICES Advice**

Parties: **Norman Graham (DG MARE), Erik Lindebo (DG MARE), AC Members, Chairs and Secretariats**

Date: **19 July 2023**

Location: **Webex**

Chair: **Norman Graham (DG MARE)**

Rapporteur: **Kateryna Urbanovych**

1. General Overview

Norman Graham (DG MARE) initiated the meeting by presenting the agenda of the meeting, which included a brief overview of the recently published 2024 ICES Advice (June 2023), followed by addressing any queries participants may have regarding the advice. He emphasized that the main purpose of the meeting was to gather the general opinions of ACs' members regarding the ICES advice ahead of the December Council. Additionally, the meeting aims to foster engagement between the Commission (hereafter COM) and the ACs, which was requested by several ACs in the past weeks. This engagement will help to guide effectively internal discussions on the advice. Currently, the COM is in the process of digesting the ICES Advice and preparation of the non-paper, which will be submitted to the European Council in early September. In the beginning of October another non-paper will be submitted covering the later advice on North Sea cod, elasmobranchs, and a few other relevant stocks. This with a view of having a formalized mandate for both bilateral and trilateral consultations by mid-October.

Graham then proceeded to deliver a concise summary of the published advice pertaining to demersal and certain pelagic stocks, focusing on specific areas such as North Sea, English Channel, Celtic sea, Irish sea, and area in West of Scotland. When discussing the **North Sea stocks**, he emphasized that most of them were exhibiting a reasonable trend. Notably, haddock and whiting showed no significant changes. However, there were exceptions to this positive trend, particularly with regards to **sole, lemon sole, and turbot**, all of which experienced considerable reductions in advice.

2 Queries from present parties

Following the presentation, Graham opened the floor to questions from the participants and Erik Lindebo (DG MARE) also joined the discussion. A number of queries were put forward to the COM's representatives. Below there is a summary of questions and answers relevant to the North Sea and the NSAC members.

Emiel Brouckaert (NWWAC) raised three questions. First, Brouckaert inquired about the assurance of **receiving feedback** on the advice that will be delivered by the end of August. Additionally, he sought clarification on **how stakeholders' quality assessment of the advice would impact the COM's decision-making process**. Furthermore, he asked whether the COM would consider **alternative options** apart from the top-line advice provided by ICES.

In response to the first question, Graham assured that there will be a response given to the advice submitted by stakeholders. Regarding the other questions, the COM representative acknowledged that during discussions with Member States, it is highly likely that various viewpoints will be expressed, not only concerning the headline scientific advice but also other potential alternatives. However, at this stage, he cannot provide a definitive response regarding which decisions will be made and if specific examples of alternative options will be considered.

Javier Lopez (Oceana), among other queries, inquired about the **potential adoption of multi-annual TACs for EU exclusive stocks**, as mentioned in the recent State of Play of the European Union Fisheries. Specifically, he asked whether such TACs would also be considered for shared stocks with **third countries**.

In response, Graham stated that, as of now, there were no intentions to adopt a multi-annual TAC with UK and Norway. He explained that the COM is currently working on addressing issues related to mixed fisheries, particularly concerning the underlying assumptions within this context. A collaborative project with ICES is actively addressing these matters. Future discussions regarding specific cases will be conducted through Specialized Committees or technical meetings involving the UK and/or Norway. However, at the moment, the primary focus remains on consultations and analysis of the ICES advice.

Kenn Skau Fischer (NSAC) thanked the COM for promptly arranging the meeting and for including the views exchange with ACs in the agenda, expressing the hope this becomes a tradition in the future. Fischer proceeded with a few remarks concerning the **state of the stocks in the North Sea** as seen by NSAC members. The state of sole is alarming for most members, while the issue with Lemon sole appears to be related to the splitting of the quotas, as the past practice involved combined quotas rather than specific TACs. Turbot and brill also have to be looked into. However, some of the most **critical stocks in the North Sea** fisheries are **cod, nephrops**, and the **angler fish**, for which ICES advice is still pending. While there have been positive signals regarding cod, a comprehensive understanding requires the input from ICES. Fischer then inquired about the **old management strategies**, discussed between EU and Norway and then between EU, Norway and the UK, which have not been implemented. He highlighted the importance of actively advancing the work on management strategies for the North Sea stocks. Rather than selecting strategies ad hoc, the focus should be on setting ambitious and long-term management plans for the region's fish. Fischer also expressed concern about the **ICES advice on mixed fisheries**, which suggests a uniform approach for the fleet. However, he highlighted that the fisheries' characteristics and gear usage vary significantly between different harbours, rendering a one-size-fits-all approach ineffective. He cited the example of **haddock** abundance becoming a concern in the Skagerrak and the Northern part of the North Sea due to the low level of TAC set. Fischer

mentioned ongoing discussions within the NSAC about the possibility of conducting an in-year review of the haddock situation.

Graham responded emphasizing that the COM has actively engaged with ICES on the subject of mixed fisheries, through also a collaboration carried out by way of a dedicated (before-mentioned) project. This project has been allocated substantial scientific funding and is set to end in September. Its primary focus has been on addressing the underlying assumptions of mixed fisheries management (e.g., lack of spatial elements in the model combined with a high level of aggregation in the fleet) and how sensitive the outputs are to the underlying assumptions. Therefore, the mixed fisheries concerns are being considered and closely inspected by the COM. Turning to the specific stocks of sole, lemon sole, turbot, and brill, there exists a commitment within the trade and cooperation agreement (TCA) to assess the alignment between the TACs and the distribution of the stocks.

Lindebo picked up from Graham to cover the remaining queries raised by Fischer. Considering mixed fisheries, Lindebo accentuated that a crucial starting point for this issue will be the publication of the cod advice by ICES, which is scheduled for the 19th of September, since the discussions around haddock and whiting are interlinked with the development in the North Sea cod stock. Once the cod advice becomes available, trilateral discussions will be initiated. Lindebo informed Fischer that a meeting is planned for the beginning of October with Norway and the UK to delve into the technical aspects of the cod advice. The aim is to determine how to proceed with the annual consultations and the TAC for cod, as well as the advice for haddock and whiting. Lindebo extended an invitation to Fischer to provide specific advice after the cod advice is officially published. Additionally, Lindebo remarked that this year's consultations with Norway and the UK will likely result in high pressure on cod and herring stocks. Consequently, the consideration of old management strategies and the need for improvements, particularly regarding other stocks in terms of Long-Term Management Strategies (LTMS), will be addressed, but the implementation of any changes is expected to take place later in 2024, after the negotiations are concluded. Lindebo reiterated the invitation for Fischer to directly send any possible advice on this topic straight to him.

Ivan Lopez van der Veen (LDAC) expressed his concern about the **increasingly worrisome situation in the north-east Atlantic**. He acknowledged the value of engaging in discussions during the current meeting but emphasized the importance of considering the broader context when addressing these issues. Lopez invited the COM to keep this in mind, especially as they approach the September updates. He stressed the need for the COM to ensure that it is evident that the pressure affecting the region affects all parties involved, rather than being solely placed on the EU. The burden should be shared equally among all stakeholders. Lopez also offered to move discussions on the management of North-East Atlantic stocks, bar their TACs, to LDAC dedicated working group, noting that LDAC has the necessary expertise on political dealing with third countries.

In response, Graham assured Lopez that the COM is fully aware of the interlinkages and motivations between all partners, and are committed to taking all aspects into account while making decisions and formulating strategies.

Jean-Cristophe Vandeveld (Pew) voiced support for the **need to establish long-term management strategies**, echoing other participants' interventions. He emphasized the significance of discussing long-term management for stocks showing positive trends, like the **North Sea herring**, based on ICES advice. Vandeveld highlighted that last year, a request from the three parties was made to ICES for a management strategy evaluation. A more recent request has also been made to investigate the intermixing with Baltic Sea and Western Baltic herring stocks. However, Vandeveld noted that the recent request missed an opportunity to **incorporate ecosystem-focused considerations and objectives**, impeding progress towards ecosystem-based fisheries management. In the coming period of negotiations, it is crucial to start incorporating climate considerations in the long-term management plans of fish stocks. He stated that the EU especially should continue to push in this direction.

In response, Lindebo assured that discussions regarding the ecosystem dimension have been ongoing, albeit not yet fully embracing ecosystem-based approaches. Considering the herring discussions this year, the COM was disappointed that the UK and Norway sought a "simple" harvest control rule leading to a single TAC without considering the comprehensive work done by the Herring Working Group to enhance stock management. Lindebo emphasized that the COM will push for a broader ecosystem-based approach during the autumn negotiations, particularly for a healthy and improving stock like herring. Graham also endorsed what was stated by Lindebo, emphasizing the need to understand the ecological significance of the species and the impact of climate change on its productivity and distribution. He confirmed that a request has been made to ICES to consider these crucial aspects in their evaluations.

David Vertegaal (European Anglers Alliance) queried the COM regarding consistent **shortfall** in **actual fish landings compared to the TACs** for several years, particularly concerning Sole. As these fisheries hold significant economic importance, Vertegaal stressed the need for utmost accuracy in setting the TACs. He called for a **comprehensive evaluation** of the **TACs** and the **underlying model**, including the consideration of catch per unit of effort (CPUE) in the advice formulation.

In response, Graham informed that there is a plan for another benchmark assessment for North Sea sole later in the year. He clarified that the specific questions raised by Vertegaal should be directed more towards ICES rather than the COM, as they are responsible for conducting the scientific assessments and providing advice regarding fisheries management.

Fischer shared some final remarks concerning the points previously mentioned by Brouckaert, particularly regarding **how to interpret ICES advice**. He highlighted the specific **assumption** in the COM's request to ICES regarding the **MSY** state for various stocks. Fischer pointed out that the general assumption that all stocks should return to MSY within one year might not be suitable for some North Sea stocks. This approach leads to significant **fluctuations in TACs** from one year to another, which does not effectively address the underlying issues. He advocated for **more stability** in fisheries management and a more in-depth discussion on how to effectively implement the MSY method for North Sea stocks. Extending the TAC adoption period to allow for greater stability could be a first step towards achieving a more efficient fisheries management and ensuring the sustainability of the sector. Finally, Fischer responded

to the comments made by Ivan Lopez, and stressed that **all issues regarding the North Sea stocks should be dealt with within the NSAC.**

In response, Graham acknowledged that stability has always been a desired aspect of long-term management strategies, as large changes in advice can disrupt planning. He mentioned that the 12-month rule is an ICES construct under the MSY precautionary framework. He suggested that further discussions on this matter could be pursued in the new year, after the ongoing negotiations have concluded.