

## REPORT

Meeting: **Roundtable with Commissioner Sinkevičius on 2024 Fishing Opportunities**

Parties: **Commissioner Sinkevičius,**

Date: **7 December 2023**

Location: **Berlaymont, Brussels**

Chair: **Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius**

Rapporteur: **Tamara Talevska**

### Introduction

This was the **second annual roundtable with the Commissioner** to discuss annual fishing opportunities with 11 Advisory Councils. Kenn Skau Fischer and Tamara Talevska attended on behalf of the NSAC.

Commissioner Sinkevičius started by saying that the work done in ACs is crucial for the Commission, including and especially during negotiations, and he was pleased that this important cooperation continues.

On EU-UK consultations for 2024, he noted that the EU must strive for all stocks to be exploited at a sustainable level and with a precautionary approach, where appropriate. He felt the **consultations this year were successful** with majority of them already concluded with a mutual beneficial agreement, which was signed in the week of the roundtable. **75 of shared TACs were covered**, including technical measures which were negotiated largely through Specialized Committee for Fisheries (SCF). **Enhanced technical measures** were agreed for cod and whiting in the Irish sea and the English Channel. A close cooperation in SCF contributed to the positive outcome. He felt that **overall package was favourable for the EU**, despite negative advice for the Celtic sea stocks. Nevertheless, he was pleased for the EU to have reached an agreement with the UK. There are still some challenges in the form of a 0 catch advice for some stocks, the adversary approach of UK to mixed fisheries and the opposition to some ICES advice.

**Coastal state consultations** reached TAC agreement for **mackerel, atlanto-scandian herring and blue whiting**. Sharing arrangement for herring is still taking place, while the herring and mackerel negotiations shall be concluded in January. DG MARE team is currently in London for the signing of **EU-NO agreement**, with herring, mackerel arrangements still problematic. Any modifications to sharing arrangements would be detrimental for the EU.

**EU-NO agreement** has been reached on mutual access in the Skagerrak waters, and the EU maintained access to Norwegian waters. The EU-NO negotiations still have to conclude following agreed record from the trilateral negotiations.

Multiannual TACs cover all stocks identified by MS as priority stocks (anglerfish, hake, sole and others).

On **European eel**, Sinkevičius noted that the states agreed to continue the approach to decrease mortality in both, marine and inland waters. Closure of commercial fisheries is to cover the main migration period. There are new measures proposed concerning glass eel in Mediterranean.

### NSAC intervention

**Kenn Skau Fischer** on behalf of the NSAC thanked Commissioner Sinkevičius for the opportunity to meet and discuss the fishing opportunities. He noted that this was highly important for the Advisory Councils.

He noted that overall, the stocks in the North Sea – with some exceptions – are seeing a **positive development**. He felt that the scientific advice for the North Sea is becoming increasingly aligned with fishers' field observations, which was positive. He ascribed this to the **improved stakeholder engagement** in almost all stages of ICES advice production. He added that according to the NSAC, it is important that all stages of advice production are thoroughly planned and executed, since the assumptions on which the requests are produced importantly shape the final advice.

He continued by saying that **the NSAC supports the ecosystem-based fisheries management (EBFM)** of our fisheries. The NSAC has been among “the fathers and mothers” to follow the **principle of MSY in TAC-setting** and underlined that the fisheries management must be based on **sound scientific advice**.

The NSAC members understand that science is not exact and that it merely constitutes an input into the policymaking with a **range of options and methods** based on the best available science. With this in mind, the industry calls on managers for a **more pragmatic and comprehensive approach** when setting the fishing opportunities, taking into account the socio-economic aspects in an **ecosystem-based management (EBM)** framework with a longer-term perspective than the current annual framework allows. Such approach would better reflect fisheries reality than does the annual single species advice. NSAC appeals to the managers to prepare its services to **further embrace EBFM** and manage fisheries with a **longer-term perspective**.

He continued by saying the understanding and application of the EBFM needs to improve, especially on **how to use the MSY-principle for different stocks**. Scientific assessments must improve for some stocks and the Commission should conduct **socio-economic impact assessment** on fisheries measures.

He also noted that there is a lot of concern in the industry about the **implications of the “5% rule”** in article 4(6) of Regulations (EU) 2016/1139 and (EU) 2018/973, as well as Article 4(7) of Regulation (EU) 2019/472. This rule states that ‘fishing opportunities shall in any event be

fixed in such a way as to ensure that there is less than a 5 % probability of the spawning stock biomass falling below Blim” and he sought Commission’s interpretation of this rule.

Fischer shared that the NSAC looks forward to the **evaluation of the long-term management plan for demersal stocks** in the North Sea, adding that substantial variability in advice provides no stability for the industry.

Next, he addressed the relationship between the EU and Norway, which is very important for the North Sea fisheries. He noted that agreements are about to be reached for 2024 and the **NSAC was pleased about the developments**. It is important for the fishers that they can continue fishing on day one of 2024. However, he implored the Commission to continue work on **management strategies for major stocks** like cod, hake and saithe agreed between the three parties, as it has been more or less 10 years since these have been in stalemate.

A **balanced cooperation with Norway** needs to continue and the fact that the bilateral agreement with Norway has to be renegotiated is an opportunity in that respect. He stressed: ‘We cannot continue to accept that Norway squeezes the EU fisheries.’

Finally, on **REM and CCTV-control** that are to come with the new fisheries control regulation he noted that at the moment, Denmark is running a CCTV-project in the Kattegat, which includes 77 trawlers. This is the largest CCTV-project in the EU – if not the world. However, this project will come to an end and will create even more critique and conflicting positions on the use of CCTV in fisheries, if the request of a **de minimis exemption for haddock** for the participating vessels is not approved. The workload of handling haddock is too excessive, as was shown by the camera footage, and fishers will leave the project if this problem is not solved immediately.

**Other ACs** raised the following issues:

- Many commended the roundtable initiative as an important recognition of ACs;
- The need to conduct socio-economic impact assessment of management measures;
- Transparency in ICES request formulation;
- Joint Special group was deemed a positive developed, and some asked for clarification on how the ACs can play more efficient role in this forum;
- Workshop on ET was perceived positively, but questions raised on how this work is going to be taken into account in policymaking in terms of flexibility of EMFAF legal framework;
- Special effort on European eel was appreciated;
- Pleas for more direct involvement of DG MARE in ACs;
- Clear objective for AGRIFISH council was commended, with more fishing opportunities in line with science;
- OIGS were pleased with the proposal for 9 Multiannual TACs for 2-3 years and they expressed understanding for the need for predictability for the industry, but underlined the need to ensure that for these TACs the scientific advice is respected. They queried if there are any plans to adopt safeguard measures if stocks show regression.
- Better and more recent economic data should be included in the setting of fishing opportunities.

## Conclusion

**Commissioner concluded** with the remark that the ICES advice request development is already transparent to some degree as it is consulted with stakeholders. However, there is still scope for improvement and the Commission is working on that.

Commissioner expressed **regret about Norway and Faroes unilateral measures** and quotas on mackerel, which was raised in a meeting with the Norwegian Ministry of foreign affairs as well as Faroese authorities. All these issues started since the breakup of 2014 sharing arrangements after Brexit.

The EU continues and will **continue to set responsible quotas**, through **agreement in the long-term remains a priority**. What is needed is a constructive cooperation on all sides. What is currently happening is a typical **recipe for overfishing and non-agreement** in the long term. Norway has slightly lowered its quotas and transferred some of its quota to UK, which is a stumbling block in the ongoing coastal states negotiations. The EU had sent letter to the UK Minister on that matter in September. **The EU stands firm on defending its fishing interests**. He also emphasized that **sharing arrangements are urgent**, and these consultations will continue in January. The EU position is clear: comprehensive and fair sharing agreement.

On multiannual TAC and lack of scientific studies, the main objective is to have the **MSY advice for most of the stocks**. We need timely, good and accurate database. A lot of effort is put in communication, and STECF and ICES work to obtain the most accurate data. He also underlined that **ACs work is particularly significant in securing this data**.

In addition, socio-economic data is considered in every measure, and the Commission strives to always **choose the least damaging/adverse ones for the industry**. The socio-economic data used is indeed from 2021, however the Commission works with MS to obtain the most recent trends to inform the negotiations. He also noted that **selectivity measures** take 4-5 years to show stock recovery, therefore longer-term perspective needs to be kept in mind.

Finally, he underlined that **ACs work and feedback remains extremely important** for the Commission, expressing understanding of **the pressure that the fleets are facing**. The final objective for the Commission is to be able to **exploit all stocks sustainably** with view to keep businesses alive in the long term. **The Commission will continue to work to defend the interest of EU fleets**.