



In-year Review of the Cod Recovery Plan

This document presents mid-term comments from the NSRAC on the Cod Recovery Plan.

1. Practical Difficulties in reconciling the effort and TAC regimes

- 1.1 Problems have been encountered in applying the effort regime in 2009, despite the aim of simplification. In most countries around the North Sea, effort in terms of days at sea is now running out before quotas are taken up. As the purpose of effort control is to underpin TACs rather than to replace them the NSRAC considers that the Commission should give early consideration to granting additional effort where this requested by member states.
- 1.2 In most countries there have been long and complex discussions with Ministers on how to manage the kW-days allocated to the fleet. In some cases discussions are still taking place, and final effort allocations for the year have not yet been determined. In other countries fishers will not know whether they have sufficient effort until November or December. Even those in the sector and member states who were in favour of a move to a KW-days system have been wrong-footed by the scale of the effort reductions required under the new Cod Recovery Plan. The 25% reduction in effort along with the misalignment between the availability of cod on the grounds and the TAC set has set up perverse incentives that may have undermined the principle objective of reducing fishing mortality on cod.
- 1.3 The effort restrictions themselves have been problematical for many fishers, as they apply to all fisheries which catch cod. The restrictions are preventing the capture of other species, including monkfish, megrim and saithe.
- 1.4 Many fishers are reporting that marketable size cod are abundant in their areas. The effort measures have become disproportionate and have prevented fishing for cod and other species. The fishing sector does not consider the increased TAC for cod has provided adequate compensation for loss of effort by the fishing sector.

2. Exemptions

- 2.1 The Cod Recovery Plan makes provision for exemptions for gears which catch less than 1.5% cod. However, in practice the terms of reference for STECF who

act as gatekeepers in this regard have been tightened, blocking a number of fleets seeking exemption of their fleets from restrictions on days at sea. There have been requests for more information and decisions have been delayed. Additional information on landings, VMS data, and information from observers on board has been provided in some cases, but without result. The NSRAC appreciates that there is a need to present comprehensive information to enable the Commission to take decisions on exemptions. However, even when that information has been provided the Commission has been slow to respond. In the meantime, effort has been allocated to these fisheries but is now running out. It appears to us that the political will of the Council of Ministers is being thwarted by the Commission in this regard. It is important to have a statement from the Commission on the slow progress in approving exemptions.

- 2.2 In some cases there have been unforeseen aspects to the effort allocation system; for example the use of reference years to determine the allocation of effort has prevented of a move from beam trawling to twin rigging. Vessels converting to twin otter trawling have received too few days at sea and this will prevent more vessels converting to twin trawling. NSRAC suggests that where it can be demonstrated that a switch from beam to twin-rig trawling does not lead to a significant increase in cod mortality, then provision should be made to allow such a transition. A condition of this could be that these vessels have to incorporate either video surveillance technology or carry an observer so that the relative cod mortality can be verified.

3. Real Time Closures

- 3.1 Within the North Sea the initial voluntary proposals from fishers for real time area closures to protect juvenile and spawning cod have now developed into a full RTC programme, with procedures agreed between member states. Those closures have worked well by and large, with over 90 RTCs being declared this year at the last count. It is anticipated that these measures, together with other measures developed with the cooperation of fishers, will have significantly reduced discards of cod in the North Sea in 2009 compared with previous years.
- 3.2 However, fishers in some areas have found the RTC arrangements difficult to live with. Fishers catching high levels of large cod are being moved on to new areas as a result of RTCs; only to encounter still more large cod. In the Channel, off the east coast of the Great Britain, and off the Shetland Islands cod are especially abundant, leading to severe difficulties with the current RTC regime. There is widespread support for RTCs for the protection of juveniles and spawning cod but there is strong resistance to RTCs simply founded on high cod densities.
- 3.3 The EU has now agreed with Norway a new basis for implementing RTCs, not only for cod but also for haddock, whiting and saithe. This will come into force in September. It is not yet clear how that regime will fit in with the current system of RTCs as there has been minimal involvement of stakeholders in developing the new arrangements. The NSRAC is concerned that in agreeing a new scheme without NSRAC involvement the Commission may have missed an opportunity. It is not yet clear whether the new arrangements will be the most appropriate for the fisheries of the North Sea. To be effective, a system of RTCs needs the support of

fishers. Fishers may have problems with the broad brush approach adopted in the agreement with Norway.

4. Cod Avoidance Measures

- 4.1 Work is under way in a number of countries on selective gears and other measures to reduce discards and avoid the capture of cod
- 4.2 Trials are being carried out with wide mesh otter trawls and 'eliminator' trawls and results should be available later this year. The intention is to develop gears which catch important species, like monks and megrims, without catching cod. Considerable progress is being made and that should result in a fall in the discarding of cod. The NSRAC places considerable importance on sharing knowledge and research results arising from these projects. However we recognise that the trials must evolve into general commercial use if they are to realise the necessary reductions in cod mortality which are required under the plan. We see this as the most effective way of reducing cod mortality.

5. Market Issues

- 5.1 There is now a perception by consumers that North Sea cod fishery is unsustainable and that North Sea cod, even where it is legitimately landed, should be avoided. The price of cod is now very low and has been made worse by the importation of large quantities of Norwegian and Icelandic cod and other species. There are few buyers for North Sea cod at the moment. It is important that the Commission should counter those public statements about the state of North Sea cod stocks which have led to a decline in markets.

6. Future cod recovery arrangements

- 6.1 The cod recovery plan was evaluated by ICES in March. North Sea cod is the only cod stock which passed the test of conforming to the precautionary approach. In the North Sea F had come down at a faster rate than in other areas. However, ICES has expressed concerns over the level of discards in 2008.
- 6.2 The NSRAC recognises that if the North Sea cod stock is to be rebuilt then F must be kept down and discarding avoided. That is why the North Sea fleets have been engaging in cod avoidance measures during 2009.
- 6.3 The NSRAC maintains that there is a case for concentrating on discard reduction as the most effective way of further reducing F in 2010. If a further reduction in effort as prescribed by the cod recovery plan leads to perverse incentives such as discarding it cannot be justified. A more effective approach would concentrate on building on the measures taken during 2009 to avoid cod and reduce discarding.
- 6.4 The NSRAC is concerned that many of the small cod recruiting to the North Sea are not being seen by research vessel surveys. There is currently an abundance

of cod in the Channel and southern part of the North Sea, derived from the 2006 year class. Many small cod are being seen in Shetland, but are not being picked up in research vessel surveys. ICES surveys were late in picking up the 2005 year class. There is considerable doubt on the part of fishers whether ICES surveys are able to pick up increases in cod recruitment at an early stage. There is a need for scientists to work with the fishing sector to improve the assessment of cod recruitment.

- 6.5 The NSRAC wishes to remind the Commission that it is Norway's interests to keep the TAC for North Sea cod down, and to extract a price from the Commission for increasing the TAC.

7. Abstention

- 7.1 The European Anglers Alliance would like to abstain from supporting the cod recovery letter to be sent to the Commission. The EAA feel it would be more appropriate for the comments and statements expressed in the letter to be sent directly to the Commission by those organisations which made them.