

The North Sea Regional Advisory Council



NSRAC

The 2009 Fishery for Cod in the North Sea: Opportunities to reduce Discards – a Position Paper prepared by the North Sea Regional Advisory Council

Background

There is currently a misalignment between the TAC for North Sea cod and the availability of cod on the fishing grounds. The cod stock is recovering strongly on the basis of incoming recruitment and significant reductions in fishing mortality¹. The current fisheries management challenge is to ensure that this opportunity to rebuild the spawning stock biomass is not squandered through inadequate measures. This includes a TAC that has recently been set at a level that results in high levels of discards.

The consequence of the mismatch between the 2007 and 2008 quotas and cod on the grounds during the course of the year has been widespread discarding of marketable cod². This is not an unexpected or unpredicted situation but it:

- is a waste of a valuable resource estimated at around €30 million
- retards the recovery of the North Sea cod stock, as discarded cod will not contribute to the rebuilding of the spawning stock biomass
- seriously undermines the reputation of the fishing industry, fisheries science and of the Common Fisheries Policy

Against this background, the North Sea RAC, as a matter of urgency, has examined a number of options for avoiding a repetition of cod discarding on this scale, or worse, in 2009.

Options

Dutch Proposal:

A proposal from the Dutch fishing industry was found to have considerable merit but could not easily translate to the conditions found in other member states. This was the idea that vessels should

- land all cod caught
- all cod landed be carefully recorded to provide precision scientific data
- all over-quota cod be sold, with the vessel receiving 20% of the proceeds from the vessel's producer organisation and the balance going into a scientific fund to improve knowledge of the cod stocks

Scottish Proposal

A Scottish proposal was also considered; it focused on ways to transfer catches from discards to landings, through an increase in the human consumption TAC, balanced by additional measures in the fishery to ensure that total fishing mortality would fall to a greater extent than a low TAC with associated discards. The elements of this approach would be:

- a substantial increase in the TAC through which cod, currently discarded, could be landed legally
- this would be accompanied by additional measures such as a reduction in days at sea, and cod avoidance measures such as real time closures and cod avoidance plans and technical measures, that would make a significant contribution to the reduction of cod mortality.

The central idea in the Scottish proposal – a trade off between a substantial increase in the TAC and the extension and deepening of cod avoidance strategies – was regarded as the way forward but there was no support for using a reduction in days-at-sea as currency in the trade off for a range of operational and economic reasons.

WWF By-catch Limits

A WWF suggestion that formal by-catch limits could have a role to play was also discussed. Whilst the concept of setting limits to which the industry would be left to adapt to in its own way has some attractions, there was doubt whether by-catch limits could be employed in the current context of North Sea cod without serious economic dislocation.

The Way Forward

Taking all of the above considerations into account, the NSRAC believes that the following features should govern the management of the North Sea cod fishery in 2009:

- recognition that the TAC for cod in 2008 has been out of line with the availability of marketable fish on the fishing grounds, resulting in widespread discarding
- all parties³ should be committed to eliminating the discarding of marketable cod in 2009
- on the basis of ICES projections, discarding of cod will be at a higher level in 2009 than this year, if a similar TAC setting rule (15% increase) is applied because the stock is recovering at a faster rate.
- if a substantially higher TAC for North Sea cod is set for 2009 it will be incumbent upon the fishing industry and member states to ensure that an increased TAC is accompanied by extensive measures to eliminate discards of marketable cod
- a reduction in days-at-sea would not address the problem of discarding to any significant degree as restricting time at sea does not directly affect the level of discarding when the vessels are at sea
- the widespread implementation of “cod avoidance” measures to accompany an increased TAC should, all other things being equal, result in a lower fishing mortality for cod than would be the case if there is a low TAC, high discarding and minimal cod avoidance activities.

Cod Avoidance

The intensification of cod avoidance activity in 2009, as a direct trade off for an increased TAC of cod in the region of 45000 tonnes, would build on the start made on cod avoidance in 2008. This includes:

- Conservation Credits/Real Time Closures to protect aggregations of juvenile and spawning cod: the successful real time closure programme introduced for the Scottish, English and Danish demersal fleets during 2008 which has secured demonstrable operational changes in line with the objectives of cod recovery
- Individual Vessel Cod Avoidance Plans: A pilot project in the English fleet testing the efficacy of cod avoidance plans in ensuring that vessels operate to restrict catches of cod to their quota allocations, through spatial, temporal and gear adaptations.
- Technical Measures such as the eliminator trawl, which allows effective fishing for haddock and whiting whilst eliminating cod from the catch, and semi-pelagic fishing that similarly has very low discard rates

Validation and Monitoring

The validity of cod avoidance measures rests to a high degree on the extent to which they can be monitored and evaluated. To address this question the NSRAC supports the following:

- on-board observers, subject to availability and cost
- the voluntary use of on-board CC TV cameras that show promise in demonstrating compliance
- on-board self-sampling
- the use of reference fleets to check the performance of larger groups of vessels
- checks on landing patterns from landings declarations

Contingency

We are convinced that a substantial increase in the TAC for cod, accompanied by the extensive deployment of cod avoidance measures will deliver:

- a dramatic reduction in discards
- a commitment from the member states and the fishing industry to cod avoidance and discard reduction measures on very significant scale
- a reduction in fishing mortality on the basis of the survival of cod that would otherwise have been discarded

We recognise that the successful implementation of the approach outlined above is contingent on the various fleets and the member states meeting their obligations to implement effective cod avoidance measures. In the event of a failure to deliver, and evidence of continuing discarding, we would acknowledge the necessity to revert to customary restrictions.

¹ICES ACOM May 2008

²ICES North Sea and Skagerrak Demersal WG report May 2008

³EU, Norway, member states and their respective fishing industries

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