

The North Sea Regional Advisory Council

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NSRAC

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North Sea RAC told cod levels are improving, but scientists express doubt over effectiveness of controls

At its Executive Committee meeting in Denmark this week, the North Sea Regional Advisory Council (NSRAC) heard from a top ICES scientist that Cod levels in the North Sea are improving.

Martin Pastoors, chairman of ICES' Advisory Committee on Fisheries Management, provided the RAC with the latest scientific advice on stocks.

He said that although cod is still below safe biological limits recent information is very positive, with good survival of the 2005 and 2006 year classes. Fishing mortality has reduced and future prospects for cod are good.

Representatives of the European fishing industry welcomed the new assessments for cod, which confirmed the findings of fishermen that cod are now more abundant in the northern North Sea and Skagerrak. They feel measures put in place to reduce exploitation of cod have been effective.

"Cod of all sizes are now being caught in many areas, and it's good that scientists have at last confirmed what fishermen have known for some time," said Fred Normandale, Chairman of the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations (NFFO).

Christine Absil, vice-chairwoman of the NSRAC and representative for Seas at Risk, said: "Representatives from environmental organizations supported the plea of the scientists to avoid fishing these good year classes now so that they can grow further and spawn at least once before they are caught."

This concern was also raised by fishing industry representatives at the meeting.

The annual Fishermen's Survey, where fishermen from member states around the North Sea comment on the state of stocks, has shown that cod are now widely distributed in the northern part of the North Sea.

The results of the survey were made available to ICES scientists, and were considered as part of the assessments.

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Martin Pastoors said: "I think it's useful to see this external validation of the trends we observe in the scientific surveys.

"We used the survey specifically to look at the recruitment of cod."

The recent ICES press release on the assessments drew attention to "unaccounted removals" as a result of discrepancies between the assessments and the recorded landings of cod.

Part of this was attributed to a lack of control over the fisheries.

Fishermen's representatives were concerned at apparent accusations that all fishermen in the region are not behaving responsibly.

Mike Park, chairman of the Scottish White Fish Producers' Association and vice-chairman of the NSRAC, asked Dr Pastoors where greater enforcement of the regulations should be applied and said the ICES advice seemed to suggest the whole fleet is engaged in illegal activity.

The NSRAC feels these discrepancies could equally have been attributed to changes in the distribution and behaviour of cod, or predation.

It has agreed that the RACs will hold a control compliance workshop in Aberdeenshire, Scotland in January, with a view to providing advice to the European Commission.

The NSRAC is the formal channel for stakeholders to provide suggestions and advice to the EC and the Council of Ministers on fishing in the North Sea.

The Regional Advisory Councils, of which there are six operational, are a key element of the 2002 reform of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP).

They aim for better engagement of the people the policy affects and for more regionally-focused fisheries management.

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Notes to editors:

Countries involved in the NSRAC are: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the UK.

These stakeholder-led forums give fishermen and other interested parties, including environmental organisations and consumer groups, a say in the way the CFP operates. They are the formal channel through which stakeholders can give suggestions and advice to the European Commission and the Council of Ministers.