

The North Sea Regional Advisory Council



Flatfish Working Group Agreed record of meeting November 15th 2005, Brussels, Belgium

Chair: Gerard van Balsfoort
Rapporteur: Tony Hawkins

Agreed Record for ExCom

1. Apologies

- 1.1 Nathalie Steins was unable to chair the meeting and sent her apologies
- 1.2 In the initial absence of a representative of the Commission Ken Patterson was contacted and kindly agreed to attend from mid-day onwards

2. Report on the Meeting held in Glasgow on May 18th

- 2.1 Christien Absil asked whether there had been any response to the request made to EAPO following the Glasgow meeting on whether the contribution to conservation of plaice made by real-time area closures could be increased. Nathalie Steins had since written to EAPO on this issue, but no reply had yet been received, although it was known that the subject was being considered within EAPO. It was pointed out that the record of the meeting should be changed to show that it was a reduction in the exploitation of small fish that would be achieved by this measure, rather than a reduction in F. EAPO will be contacted again.

3. Evaluation of the Plaice Box

- 3.1 A Focus Group had met in the Netherlands on October 10th to identify a broad range of questions that might be answered by a series of experiments on the Plaice Box. The Group also considered criteria for evaluation of the results and prepared an initial design for the scheme. The meeting had been well supported by scientists from several Member States. The report had been tabled as Paper 3.1. It outlined a research programme, which was still being circulated for comment. The Focus Group was commended for its excellent work. The question the WG now had to consider was how this initiative should be taken forward. The project would require substantial funding. Was it for the Commission to decide

upon the programme, after receiving advice from the NSRAC, or should the RAC steer the initiative? Opinions from the WG differed. On the one hand there was a view that the Plaice Box was a Commission measure, and that work aimed at improving its efficacy was for the Commission to organise and fund. On the other hand, there was a view that the Commission could point out that many of the queries about the value of the box had been raised by the NSRAC. The responsibility might be bounced back to the RAC, with the risk that nothing would happen. It would also be necessary to determine how such a project might be funded. DG Fisheries had only limited funds at its disposal and although it could pay for very small scale studies the funding of major projects usually had to be done either through the large Framework Programmes, intended to fund research, or through Specific Support Action Programmes. Both these latter programmes were funded through DG Research and invited proposals from research organisations and consortia, to be judged against general criteria with a range of priorities set in advance.

- 3.2 There was a consensus view that a research programme was necessary to evaluate the Plaice Box, and in the long term improve its efficacy. It was agreed that the first step should be for the WG Chair to speak informally to the Commission about the various funding options in the light of the emerging proposals from the Focus Group. It would be premature for the NSRAC to develop the project further until we were clear which funding route would be necessary. It would be necessary when speaking to the Commission to draw a clear distinction between the limited funding which might be sought for a scoping study and full scale funding of the actual project. Following the informal meeting with the Commission, when we would have a clearer idea of the various funding options, the WG, assisted by the Focus Group, would formulate its own broad views on the research requirements and would forward these to the Commission for comment and dialogue. It would be necessary as part of this subsequent dialogue to consider whether such a large scale project was feasible and would receive the support of fishermen, bearing in mind that there might be difficulty in enforcing any experimental measures introduced. If it was agreed between the Commission and the NSRAC that the project was necessary and feasible, and if funding for a scoping study was available from the Commission, the WG could proceed to develop a full design specification appropriate to a particular Commission budget; this was in itself a major task which would have to involve cooperation between the Focus Group and the research institutes. It would be helpful if the Commission was represented at the next Focus Group meeting.

4. Flatfish fisheries in relation to cod recovery

- 4.1 At the Demersal WG meeting it had been agreed that several proposals in relation to Annex IVa should be forwarded to the Commission for evaluation by STECF. There had been some confusion over the number of proposals, and some members emphasised that not all of them had gone forward in the way that had been agreed and that in particular they had not been circulated to WG members beforehand. This was not the way the NSRAC should proceed in the future. However, the secretariat had been careful to emphasise to STECF that these papers were not NSRAC papers but were being forwarded by the NSRAC as papers from industry on which advice was being sought. In the event three papers

had gone forward to STECF. Two of them concerned flatfish fisheries and were relevant to this WG. These were:

A paper from DFO regarding amendment of Annex IVa for fisheries with demersal trawls other than beam trawls

A paper from DFO regarding the position of beam trawlers in the cod recovery plan

- 4.2 The papers had been considered by STECF, but their full report was not yet available. Ken Patterson from the Commission outlined the comments that had been made. The STECF had welcomed these proposals from the industry to improve the efficacy of effort regulation and considered them to be a positive development. They especially welcomed suggestions of incentives for fishers to move away from fishing for cod. However, STECF had not had the information available to assess the impact of the current proposals or their utility. STECF had concluded that a comprehensive review of effort regulations was required, and that proposals such as those received from the industry should be considered in the light of that review. It had recommended that the Commission should convene a series of expert working groups to review the effort regulations.
- 4.3 Fishers were disappointed with this response, as there was a need to consider these questions now. For three years there had been efforts to make the rules more fair and appropriate. However, the Commission emphasised that the response underlined concern from STECF that if effort were to be increased then additional fishing mortality might be inflicted upon cod, especially if compliance was not adequately monitored or enforced. Effort regulation was particularly important as ICES had advised that TACs and quotas were not limiting fishing mortality.
- 4.4 Fenneke Brocken from the Dutch Fisheries Organisation summarised the non beam trawl paper. Dutch fishers considered it unfair that fisheries for plaice and sole had be included within Annex IVa, which is aimed at cod recovery. There was also a perverse incentive for vessels to use smaller mesh sizes. Instead, incentives were needed to move vessels towards larger mesh sizes. There were two elements to the Dutch proposal. The first was to restructure Annex IV for demersal trawls other than beam trawls into three categories, viz:

demersal trawls using meshes of 120mm or greater

demersal trawls using meshes of 70-99mm

demersal trawls using meshes of 100-119mm

The largest mesh trawls would fall within category 4a, with 9 days at sea. The 100-119mm mesh trawls should receive more days at sea than the 70-99mm mesh trawls to provide an incentive to move to this mesh size.

- 4.5 The second element was to make use of half days for fishing. Currently fishing for part of a day is counted as a full day. Such a half day provision would allow the fleet more flexibility and should not result in any increase in fishing effort.

- 4.6 There was general support from the WG for the proposal that there should be incentives to move to larger meshes. Environmental NGOs were concerned, however, that due to the high fuel prices a large number of the big beam trawlers might take up twin-rigging if more days at sea were available. They were assured that this was unlikely to happen as twin rigging had proven not to be viable for the larger beam trawlers. Whereas the smaller horse-power euro beamers were able to pursue a mixed fishery, including both beam trawling and twin rigging
- 4.7 Danish fishers believed that a major flaw in the proposal was that it dealt only with the Dutch fleet and paid no attention to others, including the Danish fleet. Danish fishers could not endorse the proposals as they stood. In particular they had a trawl fishery using 120mm and over meshes to catch *Nephrops*. This fishery would also benefit from more days at sea and it did not target cod. It should have been taken into account.
- 4.8 Scots fishers were concerned that new measures were being proposed for fisheries for which there were few supporting data. It was important to reduce fishing mortality upon cod and the mortality within a particular fishery depended upon the catch, not the landings. It was very important to have information on the catches, including especially the discards and this information was only available for some fleets, and not for those being discussed. For species for which there were data, like whiting, discard rates appeared to be high in these fisheries.
- 4.9 The proposal to allow fishing for half a day might also have an impact upon effort. It was possible to recalculate the effort baseline for the Dutch fleet, as data on hours fished were available. However, this was not so for all the fleets.
- 4.10 In relation to discards, Dutch fishers pointed out that the fleet categories within Annex IV had originally been decided on the basis of landings not catches. If we were now to change to definitions based on catches we would need to review all fisheries catching cod on this new definition.. Here, the Commission intervened to say it was a misconception to argue that Annex IV had been based only on landings. From the start there had been concern over discards. We now had more information than we had had earlier, confirming that discards were important. The definition using landings of less than 5% cod was essentially a practical solution that had to be found for the whole fleet. Other fishers agreed that we should not place too much emphasis on the historical decision to base the category on landings. We were now moving forward and should not be bound by past decisions.
- 4.11 The lack of discard information from the flatfish fisheries was discussed. RIVO pointed out that the Dutch discard data had not been forwarded to STECF as it was not of high quality. Very few cod had been caught and the discard sampling had not been representative of the whole fishery, as it was primarily directed at monitoring plaice discards. A memo to the STECF from RIVO had pointed out that raising the discard data to the level of the whole fleet would not have been reliable.
- 4.12 Dutch fishers would be looking again at their own internal programme for monitoring discards, and would be considering whether it should be extended to include cod. This programme was additional to the one conducted by RIVO to meet the requirements of the Data Collection Regulation. It met those

requirements and had been used by ICES. Others emphasised that it was important for discard data to be validated, and that there is an issue over whether the minimal programme required under the Regulation is sufficient to provide full understanding of the scientific position.

- 4.13 The environmental NGOs wished the discussion to focus on the main question of whether certain fisheries should be exempted to a greater degree from the cod recovery measures. In the past these fisheries had caught cod. The fact that they were not now discarding cod was not material. Fishers pointed out, however, that cod could sometimes be caught and discarded by all fisheries especially in areas when they were very abundant. On that argument all fisheries in the North Sea should be closed. It was the magnitude of the total cod catch in the different fisheries that was important. The Dutch were not arguing for more days at sea for the more than 120mm mesh fishery because it had in the past targeted cod. They were arguing that the 100-119mm fishery should receive more days because it was primarily directed at plaice, and because there was currently an incentive for fishers to reduce their mesh size to below 100mm.
- 4.14 Environmental NGOs accepted that it was the total numbers of cod caught in a fishery that should determine whether it should be subject to the cod recovery measures. However, they were sceptical of the argument that gears below 120mm were unlikely to catch cod. They were also concerned that the paper did not put forward any proposals for improving the selectivity of flatfish gears.
- 4.15 The WG Chair concluded that support for the Dutch paper on demersal trawls was limited. The majority of the WG considered the proposals in the paper premature, because there was insufficient knowledge of these fisheries and their impact upon cod. The discard data needed to be improved and compared for all the demersal fisheries. Indeed if the arguments for more days for certain segments of the demersal fleet was to be continued we would need more data on the catching performance of all segments. There was, however, wide support within the WG for the principle of dissuading fishers from moving to smaller mesh nets. That suggested that the WG should continue to consider ways of achieving this. A wider paper, which considered all demersal non-beam-trawls would be more appropriate. This suggestion was supported by Danish fishers who remarked that they had repeatedly queried the separation of the flatfish and demersal working groups and would like to see all the demersal gears considered together. The WG should be trying to find a solution to the current perverse position. There was a strong argument for exempting any 'clean' large mesh demersal fisheries from severe treatment under Annex IV and the WGs should continue to discuss this issue.
- 4.16 Fenneke Brocken introduced the second Dutch paper, which was concerned with the position of beam trawlers under the cod recovery plan. Again, measures for cod recovery were currently being applied what was essentially a fishery for plaice and sole. The paper was querying the inclusion of the beam trawl fleet in the cod recovery arrangements. Dutch fishers did not believe it was fair that their fleet was being targeted by two sets of measures, one imposed under the cod recovery plan and the other under the plaice management plan. Moreover, beam trawlers should not be viewed as a single segment under Annex IVa. Exemption from the restriction in days at sea regime had been made for fisheries with less than 5% of

cod in their landings prior to 2002. Some components of the beam trawl fleet had been wrongly categorized under this rule. The paper argued that the beam trawler fleet could be divided into three types, viz:

Those fishing with V nets (using a normal tickler chain rather than a chain mat) using meshes of 80-90mm

Those fishing with V nets using meshes of 100mm or greater

Those fishing with chain mats

The vessels using V nets had been landing less than 5% cod, but had been included in Annex IVa as part of a wider beam trawl category.

- 4.17 English fishers supported the idea that management measures should be tailored to different fleet segments. However, they had the same reservations for the beam trawlers as those expressed earlier for non-beam-trawlers. The information on discarding by the beam trawl fleet was poor. Scots fishers also had reservations and believed that adoption of the proposals could lead to major control problems. This had been recognised by the paper itself. It was also disingenuous to provide a plot of fishing effort by the beam trawl sector which did not take account of the under-declared power problem that had been acknowledged as a problem within the Dutch beam trawl fleet. Dutch fishers argued to the contrary, that any reductions in the declared power would be additional to those shown by the official figures.
- 4.18 Dutch fishers made it clear that their main concern was that the pre-2002 figures showed that the V net trawlers had less than 5% cod in their landings. It was unfair therefore to include them with vessels landing more than 5% cod.
- 4.19 The Commission pointed out that its intention had not been to base derogations only on the 5% cod landings figure. Some fleet sectors had been given derogations based on a range of criteria, which could include the landings figures but also took account of other considerations.
- 4.20 The environmental NGOs asked whether the fishing effort data provided in figure 1 of the paper included all the Dutch owned beam trawl fleets. Could some of the effort reduction be attributed to a switch of vessels to the flags of other Member States? It was pointed out that although the data were only plotted for Dutch vessels, data were available for the beam trawl fleets of other Member States.
- 4.21 The WG Chair posed two questions to the WG:
- 1) Was the Dutch proposal to distinguish between different beam trawlers, removing V nets from Annex IV and applying to them only measures under the flatfish management plan, acceptable?
 - 2) Should measures under both the cod recovery plan and the flatfish management plan be applied simultaneously to the beam trawl fleet?

- 4.22 Some members of the WG wished to see the overall evidence before answering the first question. They again emphasised that there were gaps in the data, especially with regard to discards by the beam trawl fleet.
- 4.23 On the second question, fishers did not like to see management plans superimposed upon one another. One plan might already contribute to the objectives of the other. Environmental NGOs also believed that if the beam trawl fleet complied with the terms of the flatfish management plan they would already be achieving the broad objectives of the cod recovery plan.
- 4.24 The WG Chair introduced a third question. Was fishing effort properly distributed in a spatial sense? With restricted days at sea many vessels were now fishing closer to shore. Was there any way of getting them back to the offshore grounds? It was pointed out that one of the options in the flatfish management plan proposals was intended to deal with the problem of displacement of effort to new areas caused by the days at sea restrictions.
- 4.25 Danish fishers pointed out that being forced to fish in inappropriate areas was also a problem for other demersal trawlers. For example, to operate north of 56° it was necessary to use a net with a mesh size greater than 120mm. Some vessels therefore stayed south of 56° where they were able to use smaller mesh nets. These vessels tended also to stay close to the Dutch coast.
- 4.26 It was suggested that the solution to providing more fishing days on the offshore grounds might be to make an allowance for transit time while imposing strong conditions on the fishing licence for any breach of the arrangements. It might also be possible to use vms data to confirm any breaches by examining whether vessels were fishing or not.
- 4.27 It was proposed that the resolution of these questions could be referred to STECF. There had been a positive response from the STECF to the three papers from the industry. It had welcomed proposals to improve the efficiency of effort regulation. STECF had also recommended that expert working groups be established to review effort regulations and they were prepared to consider amendments which might improve the effectiveness of the regulations. However, if the WG were to give further attention to the Dutch proposals it would need more information to come forward, and for the data to be evaluated by STECF. In addition to information on catches and discards within different fleet segments it might also be useful to assemble data on the spatial distribution of effort within the fleets.
- 4.28 It was concluded that there was a lack of comprehensive data on catches and discards for the different classes of beam trawler. The WG could not take the Dutch proposals forward without these data. It was accepted that the simultaneous application of the cod recovery plan and the flatfish management plan posed a challenge for the beam trawl fleet. The WG was especially concerned at the pressure upon vessels to fish closer inshore as a result of the limitations on days at sea. Additional information was required on the fishing patterns of such vessels. In general, the onus was on Member States seeking derogations to come forward with the data to support their arguments.

5. Flatfish management

5.1 The Commission's response to the NSRAC advice on management measures for North Sea plaice was summarised. The Commission had welcomed and agreed with the RAC's evaluations that:

- there is a need for long-term management
- plaice assessments are uncertain
- discarding levels are high
- plaice mortality is too high and due mostly to discarding
- a new strategy for flatfish fisheries should be developed
- that strategy should include harvest control rules, definition of targets and the management of fishing effort

The Commission was raising three items for further discussion and would be presenting draft papers on these. These were:

1. A communication on Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY)
2. Proposals for flatfish management
3. Compliance with the Data Collection regulation and the adequacy of those regulations for their purpose

In the meantime, the Commission did not believe that uncertainties should postpone action. In framing a flatfish management plan the Commission would wish to concentrate upon sole, as fishing mortality was much higher than the level which would give maximum yield per recruit. In the Commission's view a more profitable fishery could be pursued at a lower fishing effort to give higher yields of both sole and plaice.

- 5.2 On management objectives, the Commission's thinking was that fishing mortality and spawning stock biomass were linked. Both are uncertain, but in terms of changes over time the biomass is more variable because of changes in recruitment. Fishing mortality is linked to the activity of the fleet, and if F could be sorted out then the biomass would look after itself. The objective should be to progressively reduce F, monitoring as we go.
- 5.3 The Commission believed that effort reduction was important but that it could not be dealt with through national plans. If the member States developed their own approaches it would present difficulties in terms of equitable application of conservation measures. The Commission preferred the Annex IV approach, which allowed substantial scope for fleet structure, fleet activity, and seasonal closures to be managed by Member States within a framework that guarantees an equitable treatment.
- 5.4 The NSRAC advice had been to reduce effort by 15% in a single step and then to see what happened. Such a measure would not address the problem of the high F for sole. The Commission would prefer a more gradual and progressive movement towards a lower F, which could be achieved by reducing effort by a smaller amount, 10% was suggested, applied *per annum* until the objectives of the plan were achieved (a minimum of 50% of the existing F).

- 5.5 On mesh sizes, one idea from the Commission is an exchange of days at sea to promote a move towards larger mesh nets. For beam trawlers 80mm days might be given up in return for more 100mm days.
- 5.6 The Commission agreed that stability of TACs should be sought, but the imposition of rigid rules might put sustainability at risk. Confining TAC changes to less than 15% might be a way forward.
- 5.7 These proposals could be put together within a long term management plan for plaice and sole. The plan might be revised every three years to ensure that it was on track. In terms of targets the aim would be to ensure that F was below 0.3 for plaice and 0.2 for sole. These values had been derived from the ICES long term advice and advice provided from an EC-Norway scientific study. The proposals will be developed further and presented later this year to the Council and Parliament.
- 5.8 Fishers said that similar proposals for the Baltic had been well received. However, the actual targets for F were the nub of the problem for them. They would favour the setting of a less ambitious target in the first instance – perhaps 0.4. They also believed that the automatic reductions in F should be decoupled from the TAC reductions.
- 5.9 It was noted that the Commission regretted the absence of socio-economic evaluations concerning long-term management of flatfish. The fishing industry would like to keep TACs stable and to maintain income despite a falling F. It was argued that the problems would occur on the shore side, where reductions in process-able material would cause severe problems. The Commission believed that the quantities landed would not reduce proportionately with F and that the price per kilo would show a rise. Fishery economists pointed out that the Data Collection Regulation required social and economic data to be collected, and that the RACs should play an important role in the assembly of those data. It was also pointed out to the Commission that prices and markets are related in a complex way and policy making on the basis of simple assumptions may be easy but is very dangerous!
- 5.10 Environmental NGOs welcomed the Commission's approach. Until now, the NSRAC advice had focused on recovery rather than long term management. However, there had been elements in the original NSRAC proposals which the WG had hoped might bring us closer to the Johannesburg target.
- 5.11 Fishers sought further information on the new approach. Would the precautionary biomass be dispensed with as a target? How would the assessments work? The Commission stated that a long term plan aimed at B_{PA} was not useful as the value of B_{PA} was uncertain, as ICES had pointed out. A more stable target and approach was required. We did not want to dance on the edge of the latest stock assessment. We needed greater stability. Some fishers were concerned that F was uncertain too and that it would be difficult to use F as a guide for the whole management plan. Other fishers thought that there were benefits in these proposals. It is not the precise target for F but the direction of movement towards it that is important in a long term plan. We should not regard the estimated F as a hard and fast figure but just an indicator of where we were in relation to where we wanted to go.

- 5.12 The WG Chair pointed out that the reduction of F to half its current value was to be achieved through reductions in days at sea, decommissioning, and possibly closed areas. Was this acceptable to the NSRAC? Others pointed out that the economic impact of the progressive reduction in F would be significant. The fishery economists indicated that if effort is reduced by cutting days at sea then the result would be a very inefficient fleet.
- 5.13 Some fishers were concerned that the Commission was now applying a common approach to all fisheries. A more tailored approach had merit, with specific solutions for particular problems. They would prefer to see the outcome of the Dutch decommissioning programme assessed before a new plan was endorsed. Concern was also expressed that we could not have every species exploited for MSY. There was also a risk that fishing effort might be matched to the stock in the poorest state. Strong measures might be called for by the Commission even though the majority of stocks were healthy. Currently, measures had been dominated by the wish to protect cod, although there was considerable doubt whether cod could be restored to past levels in the foreseeable future.
- 5.14 In reply, the Commission stated that the NSRAC advice on flatfish had lacked a strategic vision on how far we should go and how quickly. Annex IV offered a number of options for reducing effort and provided flexibility. We needed to start moving in the right direction and it was not essential to decide the end point at this stage. The target fishing mortality could be adapted at a later stage once more information is obtained about the new biological and ecological conditions that pertain at lower fishing mortalities. However, additional measures might be necessary to protect cod.
- 5.15 Fishers thought that it would be difficult to explain the Commission's reasoning to fishers. The approach would be to progressively reduce F , usually by reducing days at sea or decommissioning vessels. Yet we could never be sure whether the F target had actually been achieved. It really was necessary to be able to evaluate the effects of the measures taken.
- 5.16 The Commission emphasised that with progressive reductions in F there would eventually be a positive effect. Taking North Sea herring as an example, when F was reduced the yield became both stable and higher and the outcome had been very favourable for fishers. Pim Visser said that this was not a fair comparison. Indeed it was a gross over-simplification. The reduction in fishing effort on herring had resulted in the loss of a large number of small boats and their replacement by a few large vessels operated by those with a large amount of capital. Moreover, after three years of poor recruitment there was still a possibility that herring stocks might decline.
- 5.17 Clarification was sought on why the Commission was proposing a 10% reduction in effort. It was agreed by the Commission that this was an arbitrary figure. The reduction should be small enough to be accommodated by the fishing fleets, but if it was too small it might be overwhelmed by technology creep, which could increase effort by as much as 5% *per annum*. Fishers thought that this was an exaggeration of the current rate of increase.

- 5.18 Fishery economists stressed that if economic indicators from the industry were monitored alongside any reductions in effort, then these would show whether the management plan was working. A good economic performance should be sought alongside biological sustainability.
- 5.19 The WG Chair summarised by saying that our own plans for flatfish had been for immediate action. The Commission's response had been to put forward a longer term plan for managing the flatfish fisheries. Should we revise our immediate proposals? It was suggested that fishers had not really had time to think about long term plans for flatfish. Our focus had been on immediate measures and a decommissioning programme and other measures such as real time area closures had been suggested and were now in place. We should evaluate the effects of these measures before taking any further decisions. The NSRAC intended to look more closely at long term management plans in the future and a project proposal was being prepared to draw together all the background information and then formulate a more definite approach for the NSRAC at a workshop to be held in the Spring of 2006. It was agreed that it would be useful for that project to use the mixed fishery for flatfish in the North Sea as a worked example for the closer examination of the objectives of long term management plans.
- 5.20 The WG Chair concluded that a majority of the WG wished to adhere this year to our current advice on immediate measures. We would like the consequences of the measures already taken to be monitored before going any further. The issue of long term advice would be taken up as part of the WG's programme for next year, and that would include the examination of the flatfish fishery as a worked example. Indeed, the WG would start by opening up ideas on long term management and would wish to maintain a dialogue with the Commission on the development of appropriate long term objectives. The outcome of the EU/Norway discussions had called for measures which were weaker than those the NSRAC had already agreed and which were already being pursued. As the long term plans for flatfish management would not be put before the Council and Parliament until December, and would require lengthy consultation, that would give the WG time to develop long term proposals of its own.
- 5.21 On TACs and quotas, members of the WG had had the opportunity to examine the ACFM advice on plaice and sole and had no further comments. The issue of whether reductions in the TAC for plaice would be recommended in December was not yet resolved and is to be discussed further with Norway. Some fishers wished to see the TAC for plaice increased in view of the better outlook for the plaice stock.

6. Any other competent business

- 6.1 French fishers were concerned over their limited quota allocation for sole in the southern part of the North Sea. French gill netters fishing in this area are able to catch sole effectively in the spring fishery, but had only a very small share of the TAC. They were also concerned that the stock they were fishing was separate from the other North Sea stocks. The WG Chair stressed the sensitivity of relative stability issues and suggested that French fishers should present a paper to the WG outlining their concerns.

- 6.2 A letter had been received from Peter Caunter expressing doubts over the ability of fishers to conform with the ICES advice that targeted fisheries for thornback rays should not be permitted. As the letter had not been circulated in advance and dealt with a sensitive issue it could not be considered in detail by the WG and discussion was deferred to the next meeting of the WG.

7. Action Points

<p>1. EAPO to be contacted again to ascertain whether the reduction in the exploitation of small fish to be achieved through real-time area closures can be increased (2.1).</p>	<p>FWG Chair</p>
<p>2. Informal discussion to take place with the Commission about various funding options for a Plaice Box experiment before the next Focus Group meeting. The possibility of the Commission funding a scoping study for the large project to be raised. Subsequently the WG with the help of the Focus Group to prepare an outline Plaice Box programme proposal for further dialogue with the Commission. A scoping study might then follow (3.2).</p>	<p>FWG Chair</p>
<p>3. There is a strong argument for exempting 'clean' large mesh demersal fisheries from severe treatment under Annex IV and the WG should continue to discuss this issue. However, if arguments for more days for certain segments of the demersal fleet are to be pursued then more data should be provided on their catching and discarding performance. Proposals brought forward should consider all demersal non-beam-trawls (4.15).</p>	<p>Fishers & Member States</p>
<p>4. The WG will not take the Dutch beam trawler proposals forward as they stand without additional comprehensive data on catches and discards for the different classes of vessel. New information will need to be compiled if a further proposal is to go forward for evaluation by STECF and consideration by the Commission (4.22, 4.28).</p>	<p>Fishers & Member States to consider.</p>
<p>5. The WG is concerned at the pressure upon vessels to fish closer inshore as a result of limitations on days at sea. Additional information is required on the fishing patterns of such vessels (4.28).</p>	<p>Fishers & Member States to consider</p>
<p>6. In formulating advice from the NSRAC for the December Council the WG will stand by its original advice. However, the WG will begin the task of developing a long term management plan for the mixed flatfish fishery. The first step will be to conduct research on long term management options, and to use the flatfish fishery as an example for consideration (5.20).</p>	<p>WG Chair & Secretariat</p>
<p>7. French fishers will consider whether to present a paper to the next meeting of the WG outlining their concerns over sole catches in the southern North Sea by French gill netters (6.1).</p>	<p>French fishers</p>
<p>8. Discussion of Peter Caunter's letter on skates and rays will be deferred until the next meeting of the WG (6.2).</p>	<p>WG Chair</p>

8. In attendance

Rob Grift	RIVO
Michael Andersen	DF
Flemming Kristensen	DF
Peter Breckling	VDKK
Pim Visser	EAFPA
Tony Hawkins	NSRAC Rapporteur
Doug Beveridge	NFFO
Derk Jan Berends	DFO
Xavier Harley	CME/CNPM
Christien Absil	SAR/NSF
Nigel Proctor	EAA
Gerard van Balsfoort	DFO Chairman
Erik Lindebo	DG Fish/EAFE
Jos Smit	LEI
Arjo Rothuis	Min LNV
Michael Park	SFF
Fenneke Brocken	DFO
Ken Patterson	DG Fish