

The North Sea Regional Advisory Council



Flatfish Working Group (Draft) Report by WG Chair of a meeting with the Commission on the Plaice Box evaluation February 9th 2006, Brussels, Belgium

Draft record for FFWG

1. Evaluation of the Plaice Box

- 1.1 Nathalie Steins outlined the objective of the meeting. 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 Flatfish Working Group discussed the progress report at its December 2005 meeting. 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. Initially limited funding was required to carry out a scoping study, which also included an assessment of the feasibility of the a full scale study in terms of the European funding structure, fishermen's support for experiments, enforcement issues etc. On the basis of such a scoping study, 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 (assisted by scientists) could proceed to develop a full design specification appropriate to a particular Commission budget.
- 1.2 The Commission said that its communication on the evaluation of the access boxes had not yet been scheduled for a Council meeting. The Commission had followed the NSRAC advice on the access boxes and thus agreed that a thorough evaluation of the Plaice Box was needed. There were no reasons to believe that the Council would draw substantial different conclusions. The Commission thought that pending the discussion in the Council, preparatory work for an evaluation study should commence.

- 1.3 The Plaice Box differed substantially from the Shetland Box since the former is part of the technical measures regulation and the latter embedded in the basic regulation. A major recasting of the technical measures was coming up and the Commission now had to decide whether or not the Plaice Box should be excluded from this exercise pending the results of a full-fledged evaluation or perhaps a number of intermediate changes should be made to the access regime. The Commission invited NSRAC to give its advice in this matter.
- 1.4 The Commission's main argument for intermediate changes was that since its establishment many exemptions have been included under the technical measures paragraphs regarding the Plaice Box. This made control and enforcement difficult and undermined conservation objectives. It considered the Plaice Box almost as the ultimate test case for its simplification project. Some interim evaluation of the current Plaice Box regulations would at least be required in view of simplification of the measures. The question was if additional data to those used in the evaluation study by the expert group were available.
- 1.5 Nathalie Steins said that she could not speak for the FFWG on this idea. So far NSRAC had considered any modifications to the access regime – other than for temporary experiments under an evaluation study – to be a non-issue pending the results of an evaluation study. The Commission's idea of intermediate changes was new and had not yet been discussed. She would raise the matter in the FFWG meeting of 22nd February and report back the results of this first discussion.
- 1.6 The Commission welcomed any preliminary opinions on this question by NSRAC and in view of its second non-paper on the technical measures revision, which was planned for late March. It also welcomed future NSRAC advice on this paper.
- 1.7 Returning to the question of a full scale Plaice Box evaluation, the Commission gave some initial comments on the Focus Group's progress report. It noted that the report included criteria for evaluation of the results, the lack of which had been a major obstacle in the evaluation study by its own expert group. It was also pleased to note that the outline of the research framework drew heavily on the research recommendations by this expert group. The research outline needed further work, with particular reference to the feasibility of carrying out very demanding controlled fishing intensity experiments. Also the research would need to be carried out over a longer time period to yield results, which might cause difficulties in view of the much shorter time frame of the review of the technical measures.
- 1.8 Securing funding for a full-fledged evaluation seemed to be the most urgent obstacle. The Commission pointed out that its research budget was not designed to work in a way to attach a priori long-term funding to a specific (policy) project. It agreed that a scoping study which also addressed the issue of long term funding would be a sensible way forward. The Commission would investigate the possibilities of funding such a scoping study as part of a thorough examination of the Focus Group progress report and inform NSRAC late March.
- 1.9 The Commission was fairly optimistic that funding matters could be resolved. Key to the success of a full-fledged evaluation seemed the cooperation of the stakeholders. This was something the RAC could achieve.

2. Action Points

1. Discuss Commission's idea of intermediate changes to Plaice Box as part of simplification exercise / in view of enforcement issues and conservation benefits within FFWG	FFWG chair
2. Thorough examination of Focus Group Progress Report and addressing funding questions for scoping study by late March	Commission (P.Hopkins)
3. 2 nd non-paper on technical measures revision for consultation in relation to Plaice Box to NSRAC FFWG (exp. late March)	Commission

3. In attendance

Nathalie Steins
Ernesto Peñas Lados
Ken Patterson
Peter Hopkins
Miriam Garcia Ferrer

NSRAC FFWG chair
European Commission
European Commission
European Commission
European Commission