

Draft Report

Northern Fishing Alliance, Anglerfish Group Boulogne Sur Mer 23rd August 2023

1. Attendees

Ken Skau Fischer (chair), Simon Collins, Mike Park, Paul Macdonald, Elena Balestra, Michael Anderson, Gjert Endre Dingsør, Alfred Fisker Hansen, Bruno Le Duc, Solene Prevelat, David Anderson, Anne Birnie, Bill Mackenzie, Emiel Brouckaert, Gjert Meun, Kenny Coull, Paul Macdonald, Arnold Locker, Elena Balestra, Clause Hjørne Pederson, Arthur Yon, Dale Rodmell, Rufus Danby, Daniel Lawson.

2. Introduction

KSF welcomed everyone to the meeting thanking From Nord for providing the facilities and Euronor for providing an excellent spread the previous night.

3. Apologies

No apologies were provided.

4. Adoption of agenda

The agenda was adopted. In a general comment KSF referred to the paper on ling that had been distributed with the meeting papers.

5. Country specific reports

KSF referred to his understanding of the upcoming work by ICES on anglerfish and how it was helpful at this time.

SC mentioned that the perception of Shetland fishermen was that the stock seemed to be stable with catches this year the same as the previous year. There would seem to be little obvious change to catch patterns. There is the traditional decrease in catches now but that is a normal seasonal occurrence.

BMc Mentioned that the mainland fleet was seeing similar catch rates to those of the Shetland vessels especially the summer reduction in catches. He would expect catches of anglerfish to increase as we move into November.

AL informed that his vessels were seeing the same catch patters as mentioned by others.

GED concurred with the information expressed by others, the fishing by Norwegian vessels was good and like that witnessed in 2022.

AFH informed that Danish vessels had been seeing good catches of Anglers in the Norwegian zone of the North Sea and Skagerrak.

GM stated that Anglerfish is a bycatch species for his vessels. With a Quota of 260 tonnes a target fishery is not allowed. The skippers are seeing an increase in the uptake this year over last. By the 1st of August this year the uptake was 71 % whilst it was only 44% at the same point last year, this he thought pointed to an increase in the biomass.

EBr. Informed that his vessels were only starting some activity in the North Sea at this time. There are some management measures in place for Anglerfish given their small share of the TAC. First reports from skippers suggest that the quota will be difficult to manage this year. Those targeting flatfish are having difficulty with their bycatch of Anglers.

BLD said that Anglerfish is a bycatch in the saithe fishery and like others have mentioned the vessels are seeing more and more bycatch which means his company require more quota to help them out. French vessels fishing more locally would also seem to be having high bycatch of Anglers.

KSF. From the reports the stock seems to be stable which doesn't necessarily align to the reduction in quota for this year. The conclusions in the scientific advice would not seem to match with industry perceptions although there would seem to be no new information coming into the debate to change the position of managers.

MP mentioned that the survey results from this year would not seem to be very good although they were awaiting the Irish component of the survey, which may or may not improve the situation. This would suggest little grounds for a further push on Anglerfish for this year. The UK industry had liaised with the Fisheries Minister at the early part of the year asking that the issue be revisited although that was based on the hope the results would be better.

Ebr was surprised at the negative narrative he was hearing as the abundance of Anglerfish in the eastern North Sea would seem to be on the up. The TAC that doesn't seem to reflect that abundance, it's certainly not in line with the information from his skippers.

MP reiterated that the situation was difficult and that if the survey results were no worse than last year then there may well be a case to rehearse the same arguments with the managers. As mentioned previously, the UK did leave the message with the minister that they would be coming again to him if the survey output was positive.

It was recognised that the current paper remains valid albeit it would need to be updated.

DA mentioned that some of the static gear vessels in membership of his organisation were currently involved in an Anglerfish survey, although he was unsure how the output would be used. The trials were on-going with two trips concluded; it was a three-month trial.

PMc mentioned that the advice was biannual, and the survey results would only be known if we asked for them. RD said that he had been promised the data in the next month or two. RD would be involved in reviewing the update document.

MA mentioned that the TAC is 9891t in each of the two years 2023 and 2024 although they could alter the level of TAC for 2024 if the data showed a significant change in abundance.

6. Anglerfish Benchmark

EB mentioned the upcoming benchmark of Anglerfish and that RD had prepared one of several models that were being prepared. The timetable for the benchmark is quite standard and in relation to when individuals are available.

RD mentioned that the Data compilation workshop had been mentioned for some time in the last week in October or in November and a week in February for the benchmark meeting. This was to assess the availability of the attendees as EB had mentioned. The chair of the benchmark was yet unknown. The benchmark would deal with areas 6, 4 and 3 Anglerfish.

EBr informed that it was his understanding that sole in Bay of Biscay, 7a and North Sea would also be dealt with at the same benchmark meeting.

Discussion ensued on the merits of reaching out the chair of ACOM ahead of him stepping down. EB suggested that we also reach out to Sarah at ICES, who was very much instrumental in setting up the cod symposium.

MA suggested that a letter should be to the ACOM chair and not focussed on Mark Dickey-Colas, the current Chair.

DR suggested that the group should perhaps request a meeting with ICES on the mixed fisheries advice on an annual basis. it is as important as the single stock advise. MA said the commission were extremely reluctant to accept the information, Norman called it mixed fisheries considerations and not advice. EB informed that representatives had been involved in mixed fish workshops in the past as recent as this spring.

KSFA suggested that it would be useful to find out who is going to chair the benchmark on Anglerfish.

Actions: MP to prepare a letter to the chair of ACOM regarding the upcoming Anglerfish benchmark with a request for a symposium ahead of said meeting.

7. Anglerfish Modelling

RD presented his work on Anglerfish modelling, which was for the forthcoming benchmark exercise. Rufus said the presentation covered gear selectivity, survey coverage, biological inputs, and an age-based assessment model. The work was to help provide a stock assessment based on an age-based approach as opposed to a length based which others are compiling.

Anglers are currently covered by the ICES RFB rule given that its current viewed as data poor (category 3). It was surprising to Rufus that it was still classed as a data poor stock.

He had looked extensively at gear selectivity. Horizontal herding is deemed to be rather small and vertical escapement was studied using cameras; small anglerfish are escaping under the ground gear. This work was carried out using gear trials with sub-footrope collection bags where the fish ending up in the bags were considered as having escaped. The results of this work were published last year. This type of work is necessary for the swept area estimate which the survey produces, this is especially important when scaling up to the swept area. The output data plot shows that a high number of fish less than 20cm escape the net.

A big component of an absolute estimate is survey coverage. The anglerfish survey doesn't cover the whole stock area especially in the lower density areas in the southern part of the North Sea, although the IBTS survey does. The data can be used to model the relationship of the information converting IBTS hauls to anglerfish survey equivalents. The IBTS survey is less efficient at catching anglers hence a conversion rate is required. The Anglerfish survey is more effective at catching fish at larger sizes whereas the IBTS survey is more able at catching the smaller fish.

Rufus informed that four main data inputs were used, weight at age, maturity at age, natural mortality at age and abundance at age. There are several assumptions in the model regarding survey selectivity and fishing selectivity - estimated numbers at age etc.

In response to a question from MA on selectivity in fisheries such as gill net and nephrops, he said that numerous runs of models are used using a range of selectivity criteria, this provides one selectivity curve. The model will provide the usual estimates such as recruitment, fishing mortality and stock biomass. The robustness' of the model will always come under scrutiny, aging of the fish will be one area that is challenged as its recognised that aging monks is difficult to carry out. The sensitivity of the model is being assessed against several elements such as natural mortality, weights at age and retrospective analyses.

Benchmark preparation meetings had been held with Marine Directorate and the Marine Institute. Rufus mentioned that multiple models are being considered, so there is a high chance that some analytical model will come to the fore. Rufus believed there would be some element of morphing of the various models.

In summing up Rufus reiterated that the planning meeting with Marine Directorate Scotland is scheduled for late August, the wider data evaluation meeting is scheduled for late October early November and the benchmark meeting itself will be in February 2024.

DA asked what precisely made the stock data poor. In response, Rufus said that data is consistent up to a certain age but with older age fish (11-16 range) the data does become sparser, which from a modelling perspective is less than ideal, although it can be compensated for. MA mentioned there was also a data gap regarding the Skagerrak/Kattegat given the area isn't surveyed yet there are Anglerfish in the area. The point was made that the southern North Sea only accounts for 11% of catches which means it's not that significant in terms of the total stock.

MA mentioned that whatever the model chosen it should be used in the Anglers working group following the benchmark, which should lead to an analytical based TAC for 2025

It was noted that the EU and UK have 100% of the Anglerfish quota, Norway catch anglers and trade to the UK through quota transfers but are not limited by quota.

8. Ling

SC introduced the paper on Ling (*Molva molva*), which had been produced by Ian Napier of UHI. The industry is faced with a situation where the Ling quota is not good and flies in the face of what the fishermen are seeing on the ground. The message is to step back from applying the advice given that it makes no sense given the current CPUE and the drivers behind the catch of smaller ling and the bizarre output it creates.

The document would be something to stimulate the managers to move away from blindly following the advice. SC mentioned that they were not precious as to how the document was used, either individually or collectively from the NFA.

MP suggested that the data gaps for ling should be looked at, and that we should write to ICES prompting a benchmark of the stock. RD mentioned that significant data gaps do exist, and it would be more challenging to benchmark ling that it was with Anglers. Questions would certainly be raised regarding it being one stock or different stocks given that trends in stock index tend to differ according to the area.

DL UHI has been granted money to look at the data gaps and that a benchmark should be pushed for once that information was published, it was a two-year project.

GED said that the advice is too precautionary, mentioning the quota has almost been halved since 2017, which makes no sense. MA agreed, mentioning that it was stupidity for the managers to blindly follow the output of the RFB model.

EB said that we should have all the information at hand and the buy-in and support from a national science institute before pushing for a benchmark. She also said that SFF observers had been collecting data on ling for some time. In the short term she certainly thought we should be attacking the methodology.

DA said it was a good paper and whilst looking to the future it is important that we continue to focus on the here and now. It was noted that the approach (RFB model) does nothing to reach or deliver MSY.

SC said there were two pieces of work, the short term, sticking plaster paper as we did with cod, and then a longer strategic approach that goes into more depth. It will be important to define a strategy for the longer term. EB agreed.

EB will subscribe to join the ICES workshop (WKLIFE) making a request ahead of time to present highlighting the perverse outputs of the new model in relation to the known index on abundance; an increase in Biomass seems to produce a perverse reduction in opportunities. It would be good to present on two or three cases studies highlighting the perverse outcomes. She asked if several members of the group could assist her; MA and PMc offered their help.

MA informed that he has conducted the same analyses for whiting in area 3a; he will pass to EB once translated. It was noted that there were scientists within ICES that were dubious about the new approach. It may be useful to find out who they are, and to build alliances with them.

Actions: MP to circulate the draft ling paper for comment and to send to negotiators once final text is agreed.

EB to circulate the presentation for WKLIFE.

MA to translate his 3a whiting paper and send to EB.

9. Meeting format

MP asked those present if the format of the two days worked. MA thought we could benefit from returning to the dedicated, single-issue meetings; he disliked hybrid meetings where some attended virtually.

DA spoke in favour of hybrid meetings and the format over the two days, he also thought that a more central location would be better for all; he suggested Schiphol Airport.

EB thought a two-day format could be held at least once a year; she also thought the split of the meetings seemed slightly illogical because we spoke of anglers then expanded to data limited; it could be expanded under the umbrella of data limited, major species minor species in terms of assessment and dedicated groups if a particular matter comes up. Not a lover of hybrid meetings but should be used as a last resort if some are struggling to attend.

KSF said there was a degree of evolution of the NFA especially where we started and where we are now. Once a year large meeting could be used to take a more strategic, long-term approach.

The meeting closed.