

## **Draft Report**

### **Northern Fishing Alliance, Cod Group Boulogne Sur Mer 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2023**

#### **1. Attendees**

Simoin Collins (Chair), Mike Park, Paul Macdonald, Elena Balestra, Jane Sandell, Michael Anderson, Gjert Endre Dingsør, Alfred Fisker Hansen, Bruno Le Duc, Solene Prevelat, David Anderson, Anne Birnie, Bill Mackenzie, Emiel Brouckaert, Gjert Meun, Ken Skau Fischer, Kenny Coull, Paul Macdonald, Arnold Locker, Elena Balestra, Parvaldur M Jonsson, Clause Hjerne Pederson, Arthur Yon, Dale Rodmell.

#### **2. Introduction**

Simon Collins welcomed everyone to the meeting, especially those attending for the first time. A formal round of introductions followed.

#### **3. Apologies**

No apologies were given.

#### **4. Adoption of agenda**

The agenda was adopted.

#### **5. Country specific reports**

SC commented that cod abundance around Shetland was still high although not the same abundance as previous years. There were less cod to the north of the islands but just as much to the west and south. There seems to be a very encouraging number of small cod in all areas.

AFH mentioned that his members were seeing the same levels of cod abundance in the North Sea with higher numbers south than in previous years. They were seeing a wide range of sizes. CHP said that higher abundances of cod are being seen in the Skagerrak/Kattegat, they are not seeing any decrease in abundance. He had talked to a gill netter who had been seeing good numbers of small cod in the nets.

GED mentioned that Norwegian vessels had been seeing high abundances of all sizes of cod.

DA informed that vessels had been seeing more cod south and to the west of Shetland on the shelf edge. The abundance seems to be increasing year on year. MP said that his vessels were seeing the status quo over recent years. Most were trying to avoid it. There were clear signs of cod moving more inshore and south now that had been seen for decades. He hoped that these signs would result in a significant increase in TAC.

AL told a similar story regarding the abundance, reinforcing the point that vessels were trying to avoid them notwithstanding the increase in the TAC in 2023. Cod seemed to be more abundant in more areas than before. DR reinforced what AL had mentioned.

BLD reinforced the comments of others mention that his vessels primarily catch saithe and don't have that many catches of the species given they must avoid it due to the small quota holding. French vessels are not seeing any cod in the eastern channel a situation that has been common now for two decades.

EBr mentioned that Belgian vessels were not seeing much bycatch cod in flatfish fisheries in the southern North Sea, English Channel or Irish and Celtic Seas. It was clear that events in the southern North Sea regarding cod is completely different to that happening in the North-western and Viking areas, except for east of Denmark where there is much more abundance. For eventual split management, this area should not be part of the Southern North Sea.

MA raised the issue of mixing that takes place between the different cod stocks, and we need to remind managers of that; it isn't as clear-cut in relation to the separate stocks as they seem to be making it.

GM mentioned that the Netherlands has an ITQ system in place and vessels that have cod quota mainly target it for three or four weeks in the summer months in Danish and Norwegian Waters. He mentioned that the squid vessels are seeing a by catch of cod which they hadn't see for several years. The cod seemed to be returning to their traditional grounds. His vessels are seeing similar signs with haddock.

## **6. Read out from Cod Symposiums**

SC mentioned that the fishermen that had attended from Shetland found the symposiums very useful getting more out of the events that they thought possible.

MP informed that he sent out only one symposium report with the meeting papers due to the second not yet being finalised. He found both symposiums to be useful with several recommendations being documented. The first of those was for ICES to meet with reps of the NFA ahead of the advice drafting groups. One of those had been held to date although it had focussed entirely on cod; the intention of ICES he believed was to move forward with the same approach covering all the key commercial species.

The second helpful recommendation was that similar processes should be used to cover other stocks as and when they are benchmarked with a specific mention of Anglerfish and Ling. The processes referred to is a pre-data call meeting with industry and a follow-up meeting like that with cod.

It was noted that much of the enthusiasm for the symposiums came from the chair of ACOM although it was understood that it was the members of ACOM that had committed

to the symposiums not just the chair although his comments on the matter were largely useful. MP said it was now on the NFA to ensure that the success is followed up with other species.

JS mentioned that Mark Dicky-Colas (MDC) is very industry oriented and focussed so he will have been pivotal on delivering the event. She did believe that some of the other scientist at the second symposium were less committed to the engagement than others. There must be a drive whilst Mark is still in the chair.

MA had a different opinion although he agreed that the second symposium was more engaged in the detail of what had to be done, which may have made it feel different.

The meeting agreed that the group should write to MDC whilst still in the seat. MA had heard that we shouldn't fear the next chair, which he thought meant his replacement would be equally industry friendly.

EBr believed that the key for succeeding going forward will be the report that comes from it; if the recommendations are reflected in the reports, then we use that as our launchpad for future engagement.

DR agreed that the events had acted as a new door opener and that we need to keep pushing to ensure future cooperation. It was noted that MDC successor would be announced during the ICES conference in September.

JS noted that there is a current plan within ICES for improved industry engagement, this was delivered during a recent event at ICES; she was sure the cod symposiums were mentioned in the report.

EBr mentioned that we can no longer depend on people to do things if indeed they don't want to, or don't want to be overly helpful although this may only be relevant to Scotland. DR recounted a similar situation in the wider UK.

MA mentioned the two roles of ICES, the scientific element, and the political element regarding the management of its own functions and people. Regarding the advice on stocks, he related that ICES could very well ask the question around how Much fish could be removed without compromising the positive stock development. That would be significantly different to the way they currently provide advice.

**Action: letter to MDC thanking him for his leadership as Chair of ACOM. A second letter should be prepared to send to the new chair of ACOM when they take the seat.**

## **7. DNA sampling on cod**

After some discussion, where EB informed on the genetic sampling that was started before covid, the meeting came to the decision that it was a good initiative although the timing was wrong given the uncertainty that currently existed around the new, three stock cod advice. The aim of the sampling was to provide some early life stage information on the stock.

MA was especially strong that it could confuse matters more in the short term; others supported that position although he stated that genetic work was already going on in the Denmark for Skagerrak, Kattegat, and Baltic stocks.

The meeting agreed that any genetic sampling programme and protocol would have to be agreed internationally when the correct time arrives. DR suggested that we continue to explore the issue especially once any change becomes clear although he appreciated the sensitivity of the issue. AL mentioned that we need to be very cautious.

EB suggested a gap analysis at some point in the future, that would highlight what additional information was required.

#### **8. Shetland inshore sampling programme**

SC commented that the NFA had been very successful in putting across a collective position on cod, work that started in 2019 as an industry response to a particular problem on cod at that time. That work had now broadened with the alliance preparing papers on monkfish in 2022 and hopefully ling this year. It was important he believed to continue that work as the fishermen themselves see the returns as worthwhile especially the success on cod in year one. It is very useful for managers to hear a collective industry viewpoint ahead of the negotiations.

Dr Shaun Fraser, Senior Fisheries Scientist at UHI Shetland presented on the Shetland Inshore Fish Survey. He informed there were a numerous benefits from surveys such as his which were capable of sampling nearshore for monitoring local temporal and spatial trends. He felt it was a more cost-effective way of gathering information relative to the larger ships that perform the offshore surveys. The early intention of the fish survey, which began in 2011 was to develop the capability to respond to, evaluate, and contextualise anecdotal information from local fishermen. The hope was to build up long-term indices and data series.

The objective is to provide independent information on the relative abundance, population structure, and spatial distribution of fish species in local waters. It targets fish out to 12 miles from the shore in a depth range 50-100metres. The net is a four-panel box trawl modified for their purposes (20mm mesh), which is operated from the research vessel MFV Atlantia II during August and September. The catch is sorted by species and the lengths take for the commercially important species. He informed that the analyses look at the trends through time investigated using the catch rate (CPUE), changes in population structure looking at length distribution results as well as the identification of nursery areas. More recently they had used baited remote underwater video landers on the rougher bottom that the mobile gear can't get access to.

The trends show that haddock catches are relatively in 2022 following the record levels observed in 2021. Cod and whiting abundance are relatively low this year compared to previous years, except for cod in shallower waters, and the mean catch rate for squid this year were the highest recorded in the survey time series. With cod there seemed to be a high variability in size composition through time and a decline in CPUE related to reduced catches of marketable sizes; high numbers of juveniles (age=0) observed only on shallow ground. With haddock there seemed to be strong intermittent recruitment apparent with strong year-classes visible over successive years. There were high abundances in 2022

associated with haddock coming into marketable size. The information does allow them to plot distribution by age.

Of note was the lack of any correlation between the Shetland survey and the ICES biomass data from the North Sea although there was a close correlation with the anecdotal perceptions of the local fishermen. The larger surveys are missing the small cod that the Shetland survey catch.

EB informed that the information had been provided as part of the data-call for the cod benchmark although the work was seen to be too localised to be of any use.

#### **9. Cod advice for 2024**

It was noted that the advice on NS cod will be published on the 19<sup>th</sup> of Sept with a meeting of ADG on the 30<sup>th</sup> of Sept. MA informed that the spring advice had now been validated and it is now a question of making the advice formal. There would be no discussion in that meeting in relation. To the elephant in the room regarding sharing etc.

MA mentioned that the total advice across the three cod stocks was circa 37,000t. It was noted that managers may react to the poor state of the cod stock south with the possibility that there could be an "of-which quota south, although that will not form part of the advice. There may be some comment in the advice about protecting the southern stock, although this was pure conjecture at this point.

MA mentioned that in a stepwise approach the managers should agree a quantity/percentage to allocate to 6a and share the remainder between the other areas (3a,4 and 7d) on current shares. He believed there is not the time to invent a completely new approach at this time. MA suggested that flexibility between areas would be good given it was the same stock.

The first round of the EU trilateral was starting on the 7<sup>th</sup> of November with a second round two weeks after that. It was noted that a technical meeting of the same parties would be held in the first week of October, there is an expectation that cod will be discussed at that meeting.

The window for NFA to produce advice to managers would be the period between 19<sup>th</sup> September and the first week of November.

**Action: MP to arrange a meeting date for a cod focus group**

#### **10. Date of next meeting**

A doodle poll issued after the meeting fixed a date of the next meeting to be held virtually for Friday 8<sup>th</sup> September 8am-11am (UK time).