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Resolving Data Deficiencies in North West Waters Fisheries: a discussion paper prepared for the NWWRAC

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Background

Data deficiencies are the principal reason why around 60% of ICES fish stock assessments cannot be granted the status of a full analytical assessment.

Data deficiencies seriously undermine the quality fish stock assessments, and therefore the design and implementation of management measures. Ministers will always look to scientific recommendations as the basis of their management decisions because the alternative is to rely on purely political decisions with all the additional uncertainty that that brings with it. Since 1995 the application of the precautionary approach has meant that where there is a large degree of uncertainty in the stock assessments TACs have been set at lower levels than would have been the case if better information was available.

Against this background, the North West Waters RAC has proposed the establishment of a *Regional Task Force* to tackle the serious problem of data deficiencies. The European Commission has acknowledged that:

“This initiative addresses an issue which is of great importance for improving the quality of advice for fisheries management decisions.”¹

Current Initiatives

The serious implications of data deficiencies for the fishing industry, the fish stocks and the design of effective exploitation and conservation strategies, have led to a number of initiatives:

1. The *Data Collection Framework Regulation* (EC 199/2008) which imposes legal obligations on member states to provide a range of information relevant to the monitoring and management of fisheries.

2. A Seminar organised by ICES in Galway in August 2010 on *Fisheries Dependent Information*.
3. A conference organised by the Belgium Presidency in November 2010 will focus on *Improved Fisheries and Science Partnerships as Policy Drivers*.
4. A European Commission study on *Joint Data Collection in the Western Waters* involving fisheries scientists and fishing industry partners from 7 member states.
5. Information that will be available during 2010 in response to recent data calls by STECF and ICES.
6. Projects such as JAKFISH and GAP offer opportunities for the fishing industry and other stakeholders to collaborate in scientific research.

Clearly the Task Force envisaged by the NWWRAC will want to avoid duplication with any of these projects and initiatives and will want to define its own distinctive contribution to resolving what has degenerated into a dire situation. Equally it will want to build on the information and insights generated by them.

A Distinctive Contribution: value added

If we could be assured that the initiatives listed above would deliver the comprehensive and relevant fisheries data necessary for managing the diverse fisheries in western waters, the NWWRAC could perhaps relax and focus its energies and resources elsewhere. There are however a number of considerations that suggest that this would not be wise.

1. The Common Fisheries Policy and ICES science is still largely applied on a top-down model. The CFP Reform Green Paper recognises the limitations of such an approach and therefore, it would be wise to assume that until the decision making processes (and information provision systems) within European fisheries management are radically decentralised, the initiatives above will continue to share the disappointing levels of achievement associated with the top-down model to date.

2. It may be that for some stocks data to fill the gaps already exists but for various reasons it is not being used. The data can sometimes be in an unsuitable format and sometimes raw data is not being “worked up” because of lack of resources at member state level etc. The Task Force would aim to identify ways of resolving these difficulties, stock by stock.
3. Fisheries scientists within ICES have repeatedly drawn attention to the *fisheries response* to management measures.

Fishermen’s reactions to a given management measure, often shaped by short term economic or practicality considerations, can be pivotal to the outcome of the measure concerned. To date this has been an under researched and consequently poorly understood but clearly significant aspect of fisheries management within the CFP.

4. The retrospective character of ICES assessments is an ingrained limitation, particularly with regard to the assessment of incoming year classes, that diminishes the value of scientific advice. Whilst building more stable stocks through long term management plans, will make this deficiency less critical, the exigencies of climate change will at the same time tend to undermine current understandings of ecosystem dynamics, often in unpredictable ways. Real time data will therefore become more, not less, relevant. *Fisheries science partnerships* using commercial fishing vessels have demonstrated them selves to be an effective means of providing real time fisheries data.
5. The development of *results based management* in which there is a *reversal in the burden of proof* will require participating vessels to demonstrate that they are complying with the terms of their project or sustainable fishing plan. Catch quotas are an example of this approach currently being trialled. This will be a rich source of information not currently available to fisheries science or fisheries managers.
6. *Annual Fisheries Reports* collated by port or regional fishing industry organisations have been piloted and found to provide an effective way to put fishermen’s knowledge and industry information on a systematic footing that can be used by the ICES system and by fisheries managers.

AFRs are particularly useful in identifying at an early stage changes in fishing technology, practice, and perceptions that can have a direct bearing on the success or otherwise of management measures.

7. The collection and analysis of socioeconomic data within the management of the CFP is very underdeveloped, yet is a prerequisite for effective decision making.

Against this background, the principle challenge facing the NWWRAC is to identify where and in what ways it can provide *added value* to the process of repairing the science and information base on which fisheries management measures are based.

Task Force

Annex 1 provides a draft Terms of Reference for the Data Task Force envisaged by the NWWRAC.

Annex 1

NWWRAC Data Task Force Terms of Reference

1. The Task Force shall be comprised of representatives of the NWWRAC, fisheries scientists from the relevant member states, representatives from the European Commission (DG Mare) and representative from the relevant member state management authorities.
2. The purpose of the Task Force will be to:
 - identify those ICES fish stock assessments in North Western waters suffering from serious data deficiencies
 - Identify the nature of those data deficiencies
 - Analyse whether those data deficiencies are likely to be resolved imminently by any current or envisaged initiatives
 - Select a limited number of stocks that appear to be suitable for intervention by the Task Force on a pilot basis
 - Identify means of rectifying the specific data deficiencies in those fisheries
 - Design a work programme that will deliver systematic improvements to the quality of the selected the assessments
3. The Task Force shall take account of:
 - The most recent ICES advice
 - The views of STECF
 - Any specific research relating to the stock/fishery concerned

- Information, reports and comments from the vessels participating in the selected fishery and their representative organisations

4. On the basis of the above:

- The Task Force shall make *recommendations* for improving the quality of specific fish stock assessments in North West Waters
 - Shall *initiate those remedial measures* that are within the RAC's power
 - Shall seek to coordinate and motivate remedial measures through various *partnership arrangements*, where the scope for the RAC's direct intervention is limited.
5. The Task Force shall take what steps it deems necessary steps to secure *funding*, directly or indirectly through partnership arrangements to be used to deliver its objectives
6. Governance: Decisions within the Task Force will be made on the basis of *consensus*
7. Review: The work of the task force should be reviewed periodically to determine whether it is making the kind of progress hoped.