



sea
source

NEWS NET

ISSUE NO. 07

ANIFPO/ SEA SOURCE

OCT - DEC 2019

MAIN FEATURE:
**EU DECEMBER
FISHERIES COUNCIL
UPDATE**

028 417 62855 | www.seasource.com

Irish Sea 2020 TACs & Quotas

Having attended every EU December Fisheries Council for the past 27 years it might be easy to conclude we have seen it all before. Nevertheless, one lesson learned is that no two years are the same, a bit like fishing. Twelve months ago it was assumed in some quarters that the December 2018 Fisheries Council would be the last one the UK attended as full members of the EU. We knew we would be back, but we thought only as observers. We got it wrong. After last week's General Election this should be the last Council the UK attends as full members of the EU. Let's end 2019 on that optimistic note...



The Europa Building in Brussels is home to the European Council of Ministers and is where EU Councils, including the Fisheries Council are held. Behind doors that are closed to fishing industry representatives Ministers from all 28 EU Member States decide on annual fishing opportunities in the Irish Sea and other waters. The EU's December 2019 Fisheries Council should be the last time decisions are made in this format.

Irish Sea TACs	(Tonnes)				
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Stock					
Cod	146	146	695	807	257
Haddock	1654	2615	3207	3739	3156
Whiting	80	80	80	1246	721
Plaice	1098	1098	1793	3075	2790
Sole	40	40	40	414	457
Herring	4575	4127	7016	6896	8064
Nephrops	23348	25356	29091	19784	16815

Twelve months ago we saw important TAC increases for Irish Sea cod, haddock, whiting, plaice and sole, largely driven by the full introduction of the EU's Landing Obligation. For 2019 the Irish Sea herring quota was cut, as was Area 7 nephrops.

What goes up, does come down. This week we have seen significant cuts for Irish Sea cod, haddock and whiting, a smaller cut for plaice, and increases for sole and herring. The numbers for these stocks were known before we got to Brussels this week. It should be noted that with the exception of whiting, all Irish Sea quota stocks are managed according to the MSY principle. However, fisheries scientists have themselves described the scientific advice for Irish Sea cod as “not fit for purpose”, reflecting as it does recent catches, which in turn mirror the priority given to avoiding cod - like any computer model, rubbish in = rubbish out. Given the importance of prawns, the situation with the Area 7 nephrop TAC was the priority. The proposal for a 15% cut in this TAC, driven by negative science for those components of the stock in the Celtic Sea had to be resisted. Nevertheless, the 15% cut was confirmed, contributing to a 42% cut in the TAC over the past two years.

FU	ICES Advice (wanted catch)		Change
	2019	2020	
14	841	727	-13.56%
15	8959	8546	-4.61%
16	2645	2637	-0.30%
17	916	694	-24.24%
18 others	188	188	0.00%
19	130	636	389.23%
20 21	4325	935	-78.38%
22	1780	2452	37.75%
TAC	19784	16815	-15.01%

In respect of our issues DAERA officials advised that UK Fisheries Minister George Eustice MP took his responsibility for the Irish Sea and Northern Ireland seriously and made a good pitch on the Area 7 prawn quota. Against serious resistance from the European Commission, Minister Eustice was very specific that e.g. France continues not to use their share of the TAC in area 7. Given the cards he had been dealt with (science & Irish support for 15% cut in the TAC) we believe Mr. Eustice, together with officials from DAERA and DEFRA did all they could for UK commercial fisheries in the Irish Sea and Northern Ireland.

Nephrops:

PO members have reported it is hard to remember such a bumper prawn fishery as what was witnessed during 2019. The availability of the animals, combined with calm weather throughout the year until September and stable quayside prices for the first half of the year resulted in quota management challenges.

ICES' advice continued to note that catches in Area 7 are less than the TAC in recent years. The reason for this is well documented, with two of the four major TAC shareholders (France and Spain) consistently failing to take their share of the TAC.

The ICES catch advice pointed to a TAC in 2020 **15% lower** than in 2019. The TAC is compromised of several Functional Units (FUs) within Area 7. This table provides a breakdown of the advice by FU.

FU15 (western Irish Sea) remains the engine room of this TAC. Stock abundance remains above the magical MSY (Maximum Sustainable Yield - see below for a definition) target, whilst harvest rate remains below MSY. A reduction in the scientific advice for FU15 of nearly 5% because of "lower estimated stock abundance" is difficult to explain given the evidence witnessed from the fishery during this year.

The main driver for the negative advice in Area 7 is the the recorded situation in the Celtic Sea - FUs 20 and 21. These FUs combined form the second biggest component of the Area 7 TAC and ICES' advice was for a -78% reduction in the wanted catches in this area. Harvest rate remains below MSY. A very significant reduction in stock abundance has been recorded and the reduction in catch advice is attributed to this large decrease in observed stock abundance.

The advice for FUs 20 and 21 also records a change in the survey camera system and reviewing method in 2019, although following comparisons with the old method no significant difference in density estimates were recorded. ICES goes onto state that "Reasons for this abundance decrease are not known".

Nephrops is the most economically important stock for Northern Ireland fishermen and seafood processors. An Area 7 TAC in 2020 that is reduced by 15% compared to 2019 would clearly have significant socio-economic consequences for the industry.

We argued that any proposed TAC along these lines would clearly be out of step with conditions in the Irish Sea and would have an un-proportionate effect on the fishery there.

Whiting:

ICES advice for 7a whiting was unchanged - a zero TAC in 2020. A discard/by-catch TAC of 727 Tonnes was initially agreed for 2019 and was increased mid-year to 1,246 Tonnes. This was not utilised and the reasons for this were the subject of considerable debate between the UK and EU.

We argued that confusion around the TAC and the rules concerning implementation of the Landing Obligation (LO) on 7a whiting had been somewhat responsible for the lack of quota uptake. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that for ANIFPO, as of early November average uptake of Area 7a whiting during the years 2016-18 was 5.5 Tonnes. In 2019 this has increased by 500% to nearly 50 Tonnes.

ANIFPO also argued that evidence from the fishery would suggest that the problem is NOT as pronounced as we have been led to believe. It is clear that the autumn 2018 DAERA/AFBI paper that recorded the changing nature of the whiting stock in the Irish Sea and argued that whiting there should be removed from the list of quota species needs to

be revisited, with a view to providing a solution specific to this stock and not one that is parachuted into the Irish Sea for the sake of political expediency in other fisheries.

This is not to say that more cannot be done and there is a continuing focus on gear modifications. In addition we argued that fishers are developing (and to some extent have implemented) a voluntary spatial management strategy, designed to avoid areas where there is an abundance of juvenile whiting. In the context of the confined waters of the Irish Sea this unique approach needs to be recognised.

Cod:

Twenty years ago, at the December 1999 Fisheries Council the EU launched cod recovery measures in the Irish Sea. Twenty years later management measures combined with strict industry compliance dictates we are doing everything to avoid catching cod in the Irish Sea. Following publication of the June 2019 ICES advice for 7a cod, which was described as being “not fit for purpose” the UK (AFBI) did draft and submit a paper to the EC which stated, **“Applying the precautionary approach to average catches that have been kept low due to the by-catch rule and stringent application of cod avoidance measures is not appropriate.”** In other words, Irish Sea fishermen should not be punished for avoiding cod, which in turn was being used as evidence to suggest there was little or no cod in the Irish Sea.

Clearly this argument was somewhat successful and resulted in the EC proposing a TAC that whilst cut by 68% should be sufficient to cover a by-catch only fishery.

Whilst evidence from the fishery suggested there was merit for a reduction in the 7a cod TAC, other evidence suggests that when cod are targeted in the Irish Sea the fish can be found. There is clearly a problem with the model used to simulate 7a cod and **‘the stock must be urgently benchmarked to address the problems with the model and a return to an analytical assessment and re-issue of the scientific advice.’**

MSY (Maximum Sustainable Yield)

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, in September 2002, the EU Member States signed up to limiting fishing to sustainable levels by maintaining or restoring stocks to levels that can produce the maximum sustainable yield. Fishing at MSY levels means catching the maximum proportion of a fish stock, that can safely be removed from the stock while, at the same time, maintaining its capacity to produce maximum sustainable returns, in the long term. With the exception of whiting, all quota stocks in the Irish Sea are managed according to the MSY principle.

Brexit

The election of a Conservative Government saw George Eustice MP continue in his role as UK Fisheries Minister, at least in the short-term and would seem to have put Brexit back on track. In Brussels this week the opportunity arose to remind Mr. Eustice that on the 12th May 2016 we stood alongside him at the Balmoral Show to support the Vote Leave campaign. Our support for the campaign was clear and forthright.



Today we remain of the opinion that the United Kingdom, operating as an independent coastal state will witness a revival in its fishing industry. We are under no illusion this will happen overnight and we have no doubt there will be a lot more debate along the way. However, we are relieved a United Kingdom Parliament has been elected that will get the job done.

Publication of the latest Withdrawal Agreement and the accompanying Northern Ireland Protocol has raised issues for us, which require urgent clarification.

As we understand it, as registered British fishing vessels, the Northern Ireland fishing fleet will be freed from the Common Fisheries Policy together with the fishing fleets in other parts of the United Kingdom. As we should do, following our departure from the EU and the CFP, Northern Ireland fishing vessels will continue to fish against British fishing quotas, operating largely in British waters.

Mr Eustice was asked to provide early confirmation, as the Prime Minister has already suggested and was stated in the Conservative Party's General Election Manifesto that in future when British fishing vessels operating from Northern Ireland make catches in British waters (or elsewhere), which are recorded against British quotas and trawler operators decide to land these catches into harbours in Northern Ireland, these landings when destined for our main markets in England, Scotland and Wales will not be subject to extra bureaucracy including the provision of catch certificates.

The Joint Implementation Committee envisaged under the Northern Ireland Protocol will, it seems, be busy clarifying many issues. As well as speaking with Mr. Eustice, the Minister was handed a letter that simply asked him and the Government in London to reassure us that the fishing industry in Northern Ireland will continue to have the current unhindered and unfettered access to its main market in GB in future, as it has today. Anything different would clearly be a travesty.

Brown Crab Management

ANIFPO has continued to encourage DAERA to agree and implement new management measures for the Brown Crab fishery in Northern Ireland waters. A paper including DAERA's synopsis of the responses it received to the consultation on management proposals for the Brown Crab fishery and the public interest test of introducing any new measures is due for consideration and a collective decision by its Senior Decision Making Forum (SDMF), prior to presentation to the DAERA Permanent Secretary.

This paper reflects what was presented to the Inshore Fisheries Partnership Group and acknowledges ANIFPO's subsequent correspondence to the Permanent Secretary reflecting on the consultation's key findings.

Notwithstanding the consideration by SDMF, it will be for the Permanent Secretary to make any decision to introduce any measures, if he considers it in the public interest to do so. It is anticipated that this paper will be tabled at the first SDMF meeting in the New Year on 9 January 2020. Let's hope that DAERA reflect the overwhelming support there was from fishermen and others for the introduction of new measures to sustain the local fishery for Brown Crabs.