

Project on selectivity in the Baltic cod fishery

According to ICES, levels of discard are not a major problem in the Baltic cod fishery. Nevertheless, there is a political awareness of the discard and bycatch problem. Despite the fact that discards in the cod fishery in the Baltic are among the lowest in the European fisheries, a further improvement of this fortunate situation is possible.

The Baltic RAC is pleased to commit itself to initiatives that will lead to an even better exploitation pattern than the present one. However, the RAC is also dedicated to ensuring that this improvement will not be overly draconic for the industry, which is in a period of constant change, trying to adapt to new ways of exploiting the renewable natural resources. As a consequence, the fishing industry has sustained a lot of setbacks over the latest years. Some time must be allowed for the industry to benefit from the improved situation before it adapts to new measures.

It is also crucial for the successful implementation of new measures that they are in line with what is perceived as meaningful, rather than just being seen as an adoption to a momentary political whim. The importance of ensuring that new regulations are undertaken through a participatory process cannot be underestimated.

The Baltic RAC therefore proposes to initiate a project on selectivity in the cod fishery – so far named “PROSELECOD” [or REDICOB (REducing DIscards in the COd fishery in the Baltic) – there’s no end to the possibilities, but “reducing discards in the fishery of cod” might not be appropriate (REDIFOC!!!)]. The idea of the project is to get people with first-hand-knowledge about fishing operations and gear design to sit down with scientists and other interested parties and discuss in detail what the actual problems are – and what kind of solution – or solutions – can be imagined.

We strongly believe that this will provide a solid platform for any future decisions on technical regulations, and remove the impression (fair or unfair) that changes are made in a random way with no other impacts than the reduction of income to fishers.

A steering group with a chair from the scientific community, gear technologists and members of the Demersal Working Group of the RAC is established to administer the project and coordinate the work. The Steering Group will report to ExCom.

The project is expected to run for 2-3 years with three stages:

A. Describing the problem.

When focusing on discards, it is important to remember that the discards vary between areas, seasons, and indeed years. It should also be remembered that there are many different ways to perform the fishery in the Baltic – also within the cod fishery. Some fishermen have on a voluntary basis increased mesh size to 130 –140 mm at a particular time of the year in order to reduce bycatch of undersized cod. During other periods they use 120 mm mesh size, because the composition of sizes in the catch and in particular the shape of the individual cod has changed. When rumours of a high proportion of discards reach the coast and go to ministries and scientific institutions, they are quite often (but not always) – even when true – of a limited, local nature. Despite being a severe problem for the way people view the fishery (and therefore has to be dealt with – if for no other reason), such incidents have only limited impact on the status of the stocks. In order not to overreact – yet still not just to carry on as usual, it is very important that the problem is described and understood in the context of the whole fishery. For this purpose it is necessary to have a good description of the variation in discards over the year and the seasons. It is a fact that, despite the variance from year to year, there is also a high degree of consistency between years and areas.

WG-describe

To achieve a full and relevant picture of the discards situation in the Baltic cod fishery, a working group consisting of fishermen from all the cod fishing nations and scientists from relevant institutions is set up. WG-describe will be asked to deliver a report on discard in the cod fishery in the Baltic within a year of its foundation. The report shall describe the problem on a temporal as well as on a spatial scale and also – if possible – give an estimate of the actual level. Within the first six months the WG shall deliver an interim report providing the framework for WG-design, with an identification of the fishing activities with the highest discard rates.

B. Designing solutions.

There are other solutions to the discards problem than just increasing mesh sizes. Closure of areas with high abundance of young cod is one. Designing completely new fishing gears might be another. A more flexible technical regulation on mesh sizes might be another – allowing fishers to adapt to local conditions, rather than going into details on the fishing gear design.

WG-design

As was the case with the aforementioned stage – describing the problem – it is also important in this stage to benefit from the input from all kinds of knowledge. WG-design will be given the task to prepare a list of solutions to the problems identified by WG-describe. The WG will consist of

fishers, netmakers, scientists and stakeholders with an interest in finding innovative solutions to broad as well as narrow problems. The WG will start its work as soon as possible, but may not terminate its work until after the termination of the work in WG-describe. After delivering the first results, it will remain active and work side-by-side with the WG-investigate mentioned below.

C. Investigating the practical consequences

There is a need to investigate the effects that proposed changes will have on the fishery as a group – not just on individual vessels. The testing of new gear designs on commercial vessels and in different conditions is extremely important in order to know the effect on the fishery as a whole.

It is also important to know what effect different measures might have on the stocks, and investigations into this dimension will have to be undertaken.

WG-investigate

WG-investigate will – in close cooperation with WG-design and through contact with fishing vessels – test the different solutions in the practical fishery as well as the possible effects on the stocks. The WG will consist of fishers and scientists of different fields of expertise such as economics and social science.