

Written Ministerial Statement by Minister McIlveen MLA
Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Outcome of the December Fisheries Council Meeting

EMBARGOED UNTIL 3.00PM, 21 DECEMBER 2016

1. This statement concerns the outcome of the negotiations at the Fisheries Council, which I attended in Brussels on 12 and 13 December and which determined fishing opportunities for 2017.
2. The scientific advice, for most of the fish stocks of interest to our fishing fleet, was published last June and the advice for our main stock, western waters Nephrops, was published at the end of October.
3. The Commission's initial proposals emerged on 27 November, but did not include proposals for Nephrops, haddock or cod. Prawn and haddock proposals were published on 16 November but cod proposals were not available until 8th December.
4. In spite of the staggered publication of the proposals, preparations continued in support of our interests. Prior to the Council I met with the EU Commissioner and I also met with the other devolved Ministers. My officials and Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) scientists also engaged with their counterparts at national and EU level.
5. At the end of November I met with fishing industry representatives to discuss the proposals. At that meeting it was clear that Nephrops should again be my top priority given its importance as the main species fished by our fleet with landings annually worth some £14 million. There was concern that the cod proposal would be for a zero Total Allowable Catch (TAC) and industry advised that a TAC was required.
6. There is no directed fishery for cod in the Irish Sea but it is caught as a by-catch in the prawn and haddock fisheries. The by-catch rate is low and is under 1.5% in the prawn fishery. This is thanks to the adoption of one of the most comprehensive suites of measures to reduce cod mortality in Europe. However a zero TAC would mean that any cod caught has to be discarded. I believe this would be a retrograde step and I agreed to push for a quota that would allow the industry to land incidental cod catch. This has no impact on cod mortality because the fish has to be discarded if no quota is set. Industry also highlighted that some further improvement on Irish Sea haddock might be possible given the strong scientific evidence of a healthy stock and that stability for the Irish Sea herring fishery should be sought.
7. Going into Council the initial proposals for our main stocks were, a 9% cut for western waters Nephrops, a zero TAC for cod, a 10% cut in Irish Sea herring, but a welcome 25% increase for Irish Sea haddock.

8. The initial proposal for a sizeable increase for Irish Sea haddock was unusual as the Commission normally follows the current scientific advice in its first proposal and a cut or a rollover was expected. There is good reason to believe that the proposal came as a result of the preparatory work that was carried out in advance of Council.
9. At last year's Council it was acknowledged that the current framework for providing advice on this stock was not responsive to rapid changes in fish recruitment and the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICES) was asked to review the assessment process during 2016. As this has not happened it is now scheduled for February 2017. Trends from surveys indicate a rapidly increasing stock biomass but the precautionary framework results in advice for TAC cuts. Given that there was no ICES review in 2016 my Department submitted strong scientific evidence to the Commission arguing for a substantial increase. Leading up to the Council I met with the EU Commissioner on two occasions to explain evidence supporting a significant increase in our Irish Sea haddock quota and it appears that the Commission took my points on board.
10. At Council, Member States' approach to the negotiations is guided by the following key principles: quotas should be determined by taking account of the most recent scientific data available, more stocks should be fished at maximum sustainable yield (MSY), and continued progress towards discard elimination should be supported.
11. For Northern Ireland, I wanted to see an 8.6% increase in the TAC for area VII Nephrops, matching the improvement in the scientific advice, a cod TAC to allow low incidental by-catches to be landed rather than discards, a further increase in the haddock TAC, and a rollover for the Irish Sea herring TAC.
12. Within the rest of the UK, England and Wales sought an appropriate balance of TACs for Celtic Sea white fish stocks, and in particular a lesser reduction in cod TAC, revision of catch limits and conservation measures for sea bass, and improved and simplified proposals for skates and rays. Scotland's major issue was inter-area flexibility for haddock and anglerfish between the West of Scotland and the North Sea.
13. The negotiations on the first day involved a plenary session followed by trilateral meetings between individual Member States, the Commissioner and the Slovakian EU presidency. It was clear at this early stage that the Commission's main priority was the Celtic Sea mixed fishery and moving Celtic Sea stocks, particularly cod towards Maximum Sustainable Yield targets. This fishery is of importance to several Member States, including the UK, Ireland and France. Difficulties around this issue had a large bearing on the way that this negotiation developed with the Commission reluctant to move on other issues until the Celtic Sea was resolved.
14. A first compromise was presented to Member States on Tuesday morning. There was some movement on Nephrops which went from a 9% decrease to a rollover. For Irish Sea cod a rollover was offered along with a condition that cod could only be caught as a by-catch. On Irish Sea haddock and herring there was no change in the TAC but the Commission agreed to issue a Council Statement committing it to

consider in-year changes to these TACs following a review of their stock assessments, which is scheduled to take place in February 2017.

15. The proposal for Nephrops was still well short of the figure that was justified by the improved scientific advice. The advice was 8.6% better than last year and this should have meant an increase in the TAC of 8.6%. However the Commission and Presidency indicated that until they had settled the Celtic Sea mixed fishery, no progress would be made on other issues.
16. It was clear to the UK delegation that not all our objectives could be achieved and that we needed to focus on those that were most important. We decided that the proposed 25% increase in Irish Haddock was already a good result, and with the commitment by the Commission to review the TAC after February's scientific "benchmarking", there was little to be gained by pushing for an even higher TAC now.
17. For Irish Sea herring the 10% TAC cut was in line with the scientific advice and compliant with the policy of fishing stocks at Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY). The Commission was adamant that without any new scientific evidence the TAC would have to be set at MSY. This position was accepted on the grounds that the February scientific benchmarking exercise may provide the evidence needed for an in-year adjustment which would be in time for the fishery starting in the autumn.
18. This left our main objectives as the increase in Nephrops TAC in line with the improvement in the scientific advice, and trying to get a higher cod TAC to allow incidental by-catches to be landed rather than discarded.
19. Negotiations continued throughout the second day of the Council and we pressed hard for the Nephrops increase and some more movement on the cod TAC. A final compromise was eventually proposed and agreed by Member States early in the morning of the 14th December.
20. The final result was positive for our fishing industry. The original Commission proposal for Nephrops was a 9% cut but I eventually achieved my objective and as a consequence our local fleet will benefit from an 8.6% uplift on the 2016 quota which is worth an additional £1.43m to the UK fleet. I was able to assure the Commission that this posed no risk to the sustainability of the fishery and our arguments were supported by robust scientific work provided by AFBI.
21. Nephrops is hugely important to our main offshore fishing fleet based in the County Down ports of Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel. It supports a fishery involving around 100 vessels and this outcome means that their share of the UK quota will be approximately 7,200 tonnes which is worth £15m. Local fish processors will have an increased supply of raw material for their range of scampi products that are marketed throughout the UK.

22. The 25% increase in the haddock TAC is worth an additional £220,000 and there is commitment from the Commission, through a formal statement, to revisit this TAC and that for Irish Sea herring following the review of fisheries science which will happen in February.
23. With regard to Irish Sea cod, it was helpful that this Council did not need to haggle over the number of days that fishing boats could spend fishing and also had freedom not to cut the cod TAC. This was thanks to amendments to the Cod Recovery Plan that were successfully negotiated by Diane Dodds MEP earlier this year.
24. Nevertheless, in spite of the removal of the mechanism that resulted in automatic TAC cuts the Commission made an initial proposal for a zero cod catch. This was because the stock is still just below the lower biological spawning stock limit of 6000t. If a stock is below this limit it triggers scientific advice for a zero catch. I was able to convince the Commission that it needed to set a TAC that acknowledged the unavoidable catches of cod in the prawn fishery and I welcome the agreement to maintain the total allowable catch for cod at 2016 levels. This is the first time for more than a decade that this stock has not experienced a cut. There is a condition that the quota may only be taken as a by-catch but this simply reflects what is already happening as there is no targeted fishery for cod in the Irish Sea.
25. There will be no change in the TACs for Irish Sea, plaice, sole and whiting. A summary of the TAC changes is provided at Annex A to this statement and has been placed in the Assembly Library.

EMBARGOED UNTIL 3.00PM, 21 DECEMBER 2016

Fishing Opportunities 2017

- 1 Change in UK TAC for Irish Sea (Area VIIa) stocks and Western Waters (Area VII) Nephrops agreed at the Fisheries Council held on 12-13 December 2016.**
(TACs are provisional and will be confirmed on publication of the "TAC and Quota Regulation" – expected January 2017)

Common Name	TAC Sea Area	UK TAC 2016 (tonnes)	UK TAC 2017 (tonnes)	% Change on 2016	Estd value (£m)
Herring	VIIa	3384	3053	-10%	-0.099
Cod	VIIa	42	42	0	0
Haddock	VIIa	792	993	+20%	+0.220
Whiting	VIIa	80	80	0	0
Norway lobster	VII	7659	8318	+8.6%	1.430
Plaice	VIIa	281	281	0	0
Common sole	VIIa	10	10	0	0

- 2 Landings by NI Producer Organisations (POs) of Area VIIa and Area VII Nephrops quotas in 2015 (listed in order of landings).**

	Landings 2015 (t)	Landings Value (£m)
Nephrops VII	6506	13.5
Herring VIIa	4839	1.5
Haddock VIIa	632	0.7
Cod VIIa	47	0.08
Plaice VIIa	43	0.02
Whiting VIIa	8	0.007
Sole VIIa	5	0.02

3 Stock Assessment Areas

