

Several of the important fish stocks still need protection and strong regulatory measures to come within safe biological limits in the near future. The demersal stocks are in general still in a worse state than the pelagic stocks. The spawning stock biomasses (SSB) of Coastal cod and North Sea cod are still well outside safe biological limits and the fishing mortality (F) is still too high. The declining trend in the SSB of Norwegian spring spawning herring will more or less halt in 2003 due to a relatively strong incoming 1998 year class. The North Sea herring stock is increasing slowly and the mackerel stock seems still to be high.

The Barents Sea

A minor increase in the SSB of Northeast Arctic cod has been observed. The increase is mainly a result of reduction in age at maturity, not an increase in number of fish older than 7 years. Both SSB and F are outside safe biological limits and hardly any improvement is expected in 2003. The recommended quota is 305,000 tonnes, the agreed quota is 395,000 tonnes (Table 1). The coastal cod stock is still declining and is at its lowest level ever. Catches above 5,000 tonnes will probably cause further reductions in the spawning stock, while the agreed quota was set at 40,000 tonnes.

The declining trend in the SSB of Northeast Arctic haddock seems now to have stopped, but the SSB is still outside the safe biological limits (Table 1). The strong year classes in 1999 and 2000 seem to dominate the stock and thereby it is possible to increase the catches by 20 % from 85,000 tonnes to 101,000 tonnes.

The SSB of saith north of 62°North has increased and is now within safe biological limits (Table 1). The new minimum legal size of fish landed and improved harvest regimes has had a positive effect of the stock and the ICES advice allows an increase in the catches of 10 %. If the recommended fishing levels are followed the future state of this stock looks good for the coming 4 to 5 years.

The Barents Sea capelin stock declined a little from 2000 to 2002 due to poor recruitment. 3 and 4 year olds will for the winter of 2003, dominate the mature part of the stock. ICES recommend a total catch of not more than 310,000 tonnes and that only the mature part of the stock should be fished in January to April (Table 1). The total quota is set at 310,000 tonnes, which is half the size of last year's quota. Of this Norway can fish 186,000 tonnes.

The state of the Northeast Arctic Greenland halibut is uncertain. Compared to earlier years the stock is at a low level, but the present harvesting rules seem to have resulted in a reduction in F and a slowly increasing trend in SSB is observed. ICES recommend to reduce the catches from 17,000 tonnes in 2002 to less than 11,000 tonnes in 2003.

The stock assessments of golden redfish and *Sebastes mentella* are uncertain, but the stock sizes and levels of recruitment are still rather low. It is recommended to stop the *S. mentella* fishery.

The shrimp stock in the Barents Sea and the Spitsbergen area has stabilised at a low level. This is due to some poor year classes, new and more efficient trawls and increased predation by juvenile cod.

The Norwegian Sea

The Norwegian spring spawning herring stock has not reached the same level of abundance as before the stock collapsed in the 1960s. However, the stock is within safe biological limits. Due to weak recruiting year classes the SSB has in later years been reduced. The 1998 and the 1999 year classes are probably strong enough to reduce the decreasing trend of the SSB in 2003 (Table 1).

The blue whiting stock is not within safe biological limits. Several strong year classes in the later years have enabled the blue whiting stock to sustain a rather intensive fishery far beyond the precautionary fishing level (Table 1). These rich year classes have been fished down before the stock and fishery might have benefited from their potential individual growth (Table 1). ICES recommend that F is reduced to a level corresponding to a catch of 600,000 tonnes.

The North Sea

The fisheries of adult and juvenile North Sea herring have been strongly regulated for a few years and a slow rebuilding of the stock has been observed. The stock is now within safe biological limits (Table 1). The 1998 and 2000 year classes are strong and the recommended catches in 2003 are 450,000 tonnes.

Mackerel from the three main spawning areas, the southern (outside Portugal and Spain), the western (Ireland and west of UK) and the North Sea areas are mixing during the second half of the year in the Norwegian Sea, North Sea and Skagerrak and are assessed as one stock (Northeast Atlantic mackerel). The present assessment is rather uncertain, but the stock is still rather high and F is just above F_{pa} (Table 1). ICES recommend a catch of 542,000 tonnes, which is 140,000 tonnes less than that recommended last year.

The Norwegian fishery for horse mackerel exploits the western stock. The SSB has declined from a maximum in 1988-1989 due to poor recruitment since the extremely rich 1982-yearclass. The stock is fished too hard and is strongly declining, and ICES recommends reducing the catch level significantly, to 113,000 tonnes. However, due to the uncertain assessment and the fact that no new strong year classes are observed, the Institute of Marine Research do not support to increase the fishery beyond last year's recommendation,

98,000 tonnes.

Both the F and SSB of North Sea saith are at present inside safe biological limits (Table 1). ICES recommend that F is kept below the precautionary level corresponding to catches less than 193,000 tonnes.

The North Sea cod has for many years been too heavily exploited. In 2001 the SSB was at a historically low level, about 1/3 of the precautionary level (Table 1). ICES recommends closing all fisheries for cod, both the direct fishery and those taking cod as by-catch.

The SSB of North Sea haddock has increased and is at present within safe biological limits but the F is too high (Table

1). The current harvesting regime will result in a SSB below the precautionary level within few years. The main problem for the stock is that even rich year classes recruit poorly to the SSB because they are fished heavily as immature fish and then discarded. In 2001 about 75 % of the haddock catch was discarded. Because haddock is mainly caught together with cod, the recommendation for cod will strongly influence the recommendation for haddock. This means the haddock fishery has to stop due to the common by-catch of cod.

The North Sea whiting stock is outside safe biological limits (Table 1) and due to poor recruitment no improvements is expected the next few years. ICES recommend a reduction in F of 40 % that means a catch of less than 26,000 tonnes in 2003.

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