

Recommendation paper

Title: Review of Pelagic Fishery and TAC

Date: 10th November 2022

Report of: Fisheries Manager

1. Background:

- a. Commercial fishing for Southern Blue Whiting (SBW) started in the late 1970's when Polish factory trawlers discovered its aggregations and caught more than 2,000t in the south and northeast of the Falkland Islands.
- b. Further exploration to identify the best seasons and areas for fishing resulted in a rapid increase in catches during the following years peaking c.260,000t in 1983.
- c. The introduction of the 150nm fishing zone and licensing regime around the Falklands in 1987 decreased the effort and consequently the total catch to c. 50,000t per year.
- d. Polish and Bulgarian trawlers were then licensed by the Falkland Islands Government (FIG) and continued to exploit spawning and post spawning aggregations with a maximum annual catch of 72,000 tons in 1990 until it rapidly declined to c. 25,000t in 1996.
- e. At the same time, large factory trawlers in the southern part of the Argentine EEZ targeted SBW.
- f. Despite recommendations from the South Atlantic Fisheries Commission (SAFC) to establish a Total Allowable Catch (TAC) of 50,000t with equal proportions to the Falkland Islands and Argentina, these recommendations were not followed, mainly by the Argentinean fleets.
- g. Increased market demand in Spain for white fish products during 2005-2009 resulted in additional targeting of SBW and by 2009 the stock collapsed due to overfishing and disturbance of spawning aggregations.
- h. In 2012 the total catch of SBW in Falkland fisheries was 1,611 metric tonnes – the lowest in a decade. The species accounted for less than 1% of total fisheries catches in Falkland waters and only 1.3% of total catches by finfish trawlers.
- i. The TAC for SBW was lowered to 2000t in 2013 for the 2014 season, which was also the last year that a substantial amount (>1000t) was taken under S licence. The remainder was by-catch in other fisheries, including Loligo.
- j. The TAC of 2,000t has remained the same since 2014 and in 2021 catches of SBW were the lowest annual total on record for the fourth straight year at just 23 tonnes.

2. Research, Presentation and Consultation:

- a. In September 2022 a 10-day survey was undertaken to study the distribution, species composition and abundance of SBW and red cod and main bycatch species in the area. The survey was undertaken during their spawning period in the area that is normally closed to commercial fishing during September and October.
- b. Discussions have been held with the ITQ holder to agree the best way forward.
- c. About 25,000t of SBW was estimated to be on the spawning grounds during this survey. The abundance estimate is substantial, but it is also noted that:

- i) The nets used were demersal (opportunistically; according to the vessel's current fishing activity), rather than pelagic nets that would actually be used for S licence.
 - ii) The survey was designed to search for spawning aggregations, rather than designed for area coverage as a regular biomass survey.
 - iii) As a one-time survey in this period, potential variability of the stock is not accounted for.
- d. The sizes of SBW are close to commercial sizes observed during the abundant commercial fishery 20-25 years ago.
- e. More detailed information is available on the Fisheries section of the departmental website.

3. Recommendation:

A precautionary TAC of 2,000t has been set for 2023 in line with previous years. However, we will consider proposals from industry to conduct a fishery survey that will help to estimate the biomass of the species. Agreement to conduct this survey may result in an increase of the TAC up to 4,000t, but a detailed discussion of the survey design and areas is required prior to any such agreement.



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