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Mission report – Madrid, 19th January 2012, participation as a RAC MED observer at the STECF meeting on assessment of Mediterranean stocks (EWG 11-20).

The STECF meeting was held in Madrid at the Instituto Espanol de Oceanografia from 16th to 20th January. The Chair was M. Cardinale and the focal point was F. Biagi.

The meeting was called with specific Terms of Reference (see annex 1) and was part of a cycle of meetings that have been regularly scheduled since 2008 (one preparatory meeting, one on assessment and one on forecasts for the future).

For the purpose of this and future reports, it is useful to start by underlining that the participation in STECF meetings as an observer, when approved, is governed by a code of procedure which establishes what the observer can and cannot do (see annex 2).

19 experts were invited by the EC (Joint Research Centre – Institute for the Protection and security of the Citizen – maritime affairs) to carry out calculations on the basis of input from the Member States (official production data: landings and sales) and therefore assessments including foreseeable scenarios as requested by the EC for each stock and each GSA.

On the basis of the various models and software used, which the Chair made significant efforts to standardize, each expert described the outcome of the scenarios (calculated according to the current situation) in the short and medium term, until 2020, with the variation of F (fish mortality) from the current value up to F_{msy} – and the patterns of the various parameters: recruitment, capture, SSB (spawning stock biomass).

The experts consulted for these meetings are therefore solely involved in the development of evaluations and forecasts on the basis of official data that are inserted into models of calculation and prediction – without formulating any kind of hypothesis or recommendation for management measures. In other words, on the basis of capture data on a particular species (provided by length class) in a specified GSA the STECF Working Group can calculate that, applying a certain model, to achieve F 0.1 (more pragmatic than F_{msy}) it is necessary to reduce current F by 40% by 2015, and that this will have “x” consequences on capture and “y” consequences on the reproducing stock (and different consequences if the same reduction is applied by 2020). The same group can forecast what would happen if F stays at current levels by applying the same model.



On the basis of these forecasts it is, however, the EC (and in particular the DG MARE service) and not the STECF, which will choose and recommend to the Parliament and Council, which management measures to apply to avoid a certain scenario and to achieve another (increase in mesh size, closure of fishing areas, reduction of TAQ and quotas, etc). The STECF does not produce management recommendations but only scenarios simulated on a numerical basis.

Another issue, which cannot be considered secondary, is that of the time frame in which the stock assessments, forecasts and subsequent management proposals are made. It is clear that the assessments carried out in 2011 are produced on the basis of the data provided by the Member States for 2010, and that the forecasts and therefore the proposals arising from them will emerge – all being well – in the second half of 2012, about two years after the period of observation and evaluation. This can lead to the often significant differences between the reality observed at sea day after day by fishers on the abundance (or lack of) certain stocks, and the situation described in the scientific findings which are based on official data from the Member States on sales of fisheries products.

Having said this, it is important to report that the results of the calculations relative to the various scenarios by stock and by GSA that were presented and discussed by the Working Group were all rather worrying and all require a more or less substantial reduction in fish mortality in the medium if not in the short term. According to the observers' protocol, it is not admissible to disclose or consider any data as definitive unless they have been adopted during a plenary session of the STECF and published on the website.

In conclusion, following the meeting and on the basis of a conversation with the Chair, M. Cardinale, in Madrid, it is appropriate that RAC MED be fully aware of and informed on the decision making process that leads to the regulation proposals regarding the Mediterranean, and relative the scientific consultation which inspires its motivations. This can also be useful in order to understand the basis and justifications for the various measures and the separate matter of the political choices that produce them, thus avoiding confusion, discussion and unbalanced perspectives both from the point of view of union representation and also on a scientific-conservationist level.

The STECF Mediterranean Working Group Chair would be willing to participate in a future RAC MED session (Working Group, Executive Committee or General Assembly) in order to explain the issues touched on in this report in greater detail.

RAC MED Vice-Chair Giampaolo Buonfiglio

