The Quota Management Advisory Committee

The Quota Management Advisory Committee (QMAC) is a formal consultative committee, involving fishing industry representatives from the catching and processing sectors, which exists at the discretion of the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The QMAC (previously known as the Whitefish Advisory Committee) has been in place for over twenty years. It was initially made up of Producer Organisations and the Irish Fish Processors and Exporters Association only, but has evolved over the years. In the early years, the control representatives, and later the SFPA, had a more active role at the QMAC meetings in terms of advising from a control perspective. In later years, their role was qualified to the provision of data.

The Committee is currently composed of:

- Representatives from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (including a senior Departmental official acting as Chairperson);
- Representatives from the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority;
- One representative from each of the 4 Producer Organisations:
    - Killybegs Fishermen's Organisation,
    - Irish Fish Producers Organisation,
    - Irish South & East Fish Producers Organisation,
    - Irish South & West Fish Producers Organisation,
    - Irish Islands Marine Resource Organisation,
    - National Inshore Fishermen's Association;
- One representative from the Irish Fish Processors and Exporters Association;
- One representative from the National Inshore Fisheries Forum;
- One representative from the Co-Operative group.

The QMAC currently meets on a monthly basis. The purpose of these meetings is to make recommendations to the Minister on monthly/bi-monthly/quarterly regimes for particular stocks and, as far as possible, the Minister follows their recommendations for regimes for particular stocks, subject to the proper management and rational exploitation of our fisheries. Additional meetings are organised as required to discuss specific issues in particular fisheries that may arise.

The QMAC procedure for recommending quotas for the various (mainly demersal) fisheries is as follows:

- About one week prior to the QMAC meeting, the most recent quota uptake (for the year) and projection figures (for the fishery management period) are requested by the Department from the SFPA. The SFPA provide the Department with a live whitefish sheet with the requested figures.
- Using this live whitefish sheet and consulting FIDES (Fishery Data Exchange System) for the most up-to-date quotas and regimes, as adjusted (e.g. following swaps), the Department then updates a provisional master document which contains a Whitefish Summary Sheet, a Pelagic Summary Sheet, a Deep Sea Summary Sheet, an Effort Summary Sheet, and an individual sheet for each stock. The Department also details the catch limits for the previous fishery management period for ease of reference.
- This master document is again returned by the Department to the SFPA, along with details of swaps completed since the last meeting, for further updates of uptake and projections.
- The final up-to-date master document is sent back to the Department on the evening before the QMAC meeting is due to take place, for distribution to industry members.

- At the QMAC, whitefish regimes are discussed, followed by swap proposals so that the Committee has a complete picture of the amount of each stock available for distribution.
- The whitefish regimes are then discussed one-by-one. The QMAC operate by examining in detail the operation of each fishery, uptake patterns and available quota for the different metiers of fishing vessels, including inshore fishing vessels. There are detailed discussions on allocations, often taking account of the divergent situation of the fleet and of the market. The QMAC may also take account of the weather/sea conditions in the preceding quota period and the impact this may have had on the industry during that period, particularly in respect of the smaller vessels. It also has the possibility of recommending additional catch limits to incentivise the introduction of environmentally friendly fishing gear in particular fisheries or for particular types of vessels.
- Following this discussion, each industry representative is asked for his or her recommendation for each of the whitefish stocks, plus a recommendation on the under 18 metre Polyvalent Mackerel fishery and, where relevant, the Under 15 metre Mackerel Hook & Line fishery, the under 20 metre Celtic Sea Herring fishery and the under 20 metre North West Herring fishery. There is generally consensus between industry members, however where there is no consensus the divergent views of the group are brought to the Minister to inform his or her decision.
- Pelagic issues, effort issues and deep sea issues, where relevant are also discussed and recommendations brought to the Minister to inform his or her decision.

The Minister introduces statutory provisions, taking into account the advice of the QMAC, which give legal effect to the catch limits for the fishery for the specified period.

The fish quota management system is designed to ensure, having regard to fishing patterns and market conditions, the best possible spread both between fishing vessel operators and in terms of take up of quota during the year. The arrangements have been set and developed over many years since the commencement of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) and the introduction of quotas. Any amendments or changes to the overarching policy on management arrangements are determined by the Minister following detailed analysis and full consultation with stakeholders, in particular the fishing industry.

A key objective of whitefish quota management is the avoidance of very early closure of fisheries through rapid exhaustion of quota. This is important because our whitefish fisheries are mixed and the exhaustion of a single stock could lead to the closure of all fisheries in an area. This is a very significant concern because the landing obligation (discards ban) is now in place. In Ireland, quota is a public resource and is managed to ensure that property rights are not granted to individual operators. This is seen as a critical policy in order to ensure that quotas are not concentrated into the hands of large fishing companies whose owners have the financial resources to buy up such rights. In Ireland, any movement towards privatisation and concentration of rights into the hands of large companies would seriously risk fishing vessels losing an economic link with Ireland's coastal communities and undermining the socio-economic importance of the fishing industry in the coastal communities dependent on fishing. The result of this long standing policy is that the Irish fishing fleet involves a balanced spread of sizes and types of fishing vessels who have retained a strong economic link with our coastal communities and have delivered economic activity including vital employment in these communities, where there are very limited alternative economic activities.