

REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIRST ANNUAL SCOTTISH FISHING CONFERENCE

More than 100 delegates, covering the entire spectrum of the fisheries industry, gathered at the University of St Andrews for the Fisheries Innovation Scotland conference reports **Kelvin Boot**.

Discussions took place on the theme of *Working with the Landing Obligation*, a key issue that will have wide implications for fisheries and those industries they support.

The unique gathering included working fishermen, processors, major retailers, fisheries scientists, regulators and government advisers, technical specialists and conservationists, indeed a *Who's who* of Scottish fishing, representing the entire supply chain.

This diversity was picked up by Richard Lochhead MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Food and the Environment (Scotland's fisheries Minister), in his opening remarks: "This really is a tremendous day for Scotland. It's fantastic to see so many different people who have an interest in the future of Scotland's fisheries in the same room at the same time, talking about the big picture issues and some of the more immediate challenges. That's what Fisheries Innovation Scotland is all about."

He began the business part of the conference with an overview of Scotland's fisheries and their importance to the Scottish economy and society.

He pointed out that Scotland's seas are the fourth largest of the core European waters and

Scotland is the fourth biggest 'shareholder' of European waters, also stating that four tonnes of fish are taken from each square nautical mile of Scottish waters, against the European average of just one tonne per square nautical mile.

Scotland's fishing industry generates £500million each year, providing 5,000 jobs in the country. These statistics set the scene for the remainder of the conference, with all speakers turning their attention to the landing obligations and the

discards. This ban could have major ramifications for both the fishermen working to strict quotas, and the shore-based industries that will be faced with landings of unfamiliar species they are not used to processing and passing on to consumers.

With Scotland's mixed fishery this is a particular challenge.

Unfamiliar fish
Ally Dingwall, Aquaculture and Fisheries Manager at Sainsbury's Supermarkets Ltd explained how

contributes less than one percent of sales. However, customers have strong buying habits, which is an important factor when facing the changes brought about by the landings obligation.

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Sainsbury's has a target for all the fish it sells to come from farms and fisheries that have been independently certified and thus in line with regulations, amongst other considerations, by the Marine Stewardship Council as sustainable by 2020.

So far 70% of fish sold by the supermarket chain has been certified.

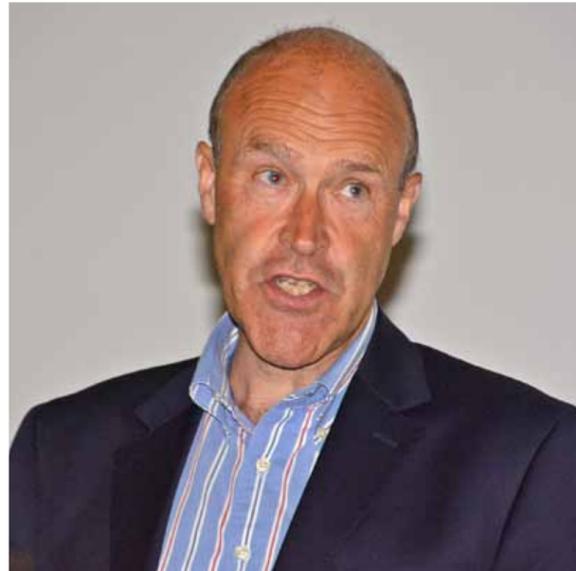
Sainsbury's is the UK's largest retailer of MSC-certified fish by a considerable margin, including all wild fish products whether pre-packed, canned, sandwiches or served up in its in-store cafes.

Mr Dingwall did point out that the 'big five' retail species, salmon, prawn, tune, cod and haddock make up 80% of sales, but, although still important to the business and customers, once outside the top 10 any single species

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John Goodlad, current Chair of FIS, claimed that to find the solution to the discard ban, the industry would have to think outside the box.

his customers. But what of those Scottish fish species that are less familiar to the general public?

How do you increase customer confidence to encourage them to buy fish they don't recognise or which are presented in a manner they are not used to; whole, or on-the-bone, for example – UK consumers don't generally like fish to look like fish.

Sainsbury's initiative to introduce different species to customers by giving free fish when one of the big five is purchased, and providing over the counter advice on how to prepare and cook unfamiliar species at point of sale, is just one way of bringing about behavioural change and it seems to be working.

The shift to these species has seen a rise from the 20% non-big five, to a third of fish sold, 33%. However, there is still a need to raise further awareness of the variety of fish available and this will become more of an imperative as the discard ban takes hold and a greater variety of species is likely to become available.

The onshore implications are unknown, which is a concern for retailers, as well as the front line fishermen, as Ally Dingwall highlighted at the end of his presentation, "From our perspective the onshore implications aren't fully apparent, especially at the retail level.

"Will it result in more fish of the desired specification being landed, or less; will it result in more smaller fish being landed, and if so, how much will be saleable; how many fish will be landed below the

minimum conservation reference size, and what will happen to those?

"All questions that, as far as I can see, are unanswered, and they need to be answered soon, because if we are going to develop products for these smaller fish, that is quite a slow process. Waiting for them to land on the quayside and expecting the market to absorb them in any sort of volume is very, very risky.

"But mitigating the impacts at fishery level is the most critical because they will have knock-on effects if vessels can't fish. Personally, even for a retailer the biggest concern is that of 'choke species'.

"I think we need, through this organisation (Fisheries Innovation Scotland), to prioritise improvements in selective fishing, whether that's through improved temporal or spatial management to avoid certain species or juveniles, or through more radical gear development or blue sky innovation, what I call lunatic thinking – looking at things we think are completely impossible."

Facing challenges head on

Thinking and doing the impossible became a recurring theme at the conference and was at the core of overcoming similar challenges in British Columbia (BC), Canada.

Wes Erikson is a working fourth generation commercial fisherman who has fished many species along the Canadian Pacific coast and has been involved in fisheries advisory processes for over 20

years. Could Scotland learn from BC?

Erikson was sure that while there are many differences between the two, BC and Scotland also have much in common and in an inspiring presentation, he was adamant that, "Involvement is the key to commitment."

"Everybody facing these changes needs to be involved in developing the fishery, in the decision-making process, and developing the rules to prosecute a profitable fishery".

But this has not always been easy in fisheries that have long traditions and well-established methods, and where distrust of others has been the backdrop for many decisions taken over the decades.

Another key thread that came through this conference was the need for behaviour change; did this happen in BC?

"We all wanted to fish like our fathers and grandfathers. We're happy to embrace changes that make us more profitable, like more powerful engines and better electronic equipment but, when it comes to management changes, we are afraid of the unknown.

"The present is like a safe prison, what we know is safe whether it's good or bad, at least we know what it is. The decision to move into something completely new is terrifying. That's where it's great to look at other jurisdictions and see that they've gone through these transitions and they are still fine on the other side.

"So change is possible; the fishing industry will survive, it's just going to look a little different. The catalyst for change is when the pain of the present eclipses the

fear of the future."

In common with many other areas, government-led regulation had never solved the problem. So the industry was given four years to come up with a working solution, and by working together that's what they did. An integrated approach across the entire fishery was arrived at, embracing scientific methods of recording catches, and above all, with fishermen breaking with tradition, putting the need for trust aside and cooperating as never before.

The result is a global example of fisheries management where participants now have a social licence as well as a fishing licence in a sustainable fishery.

The single message for Scottish

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fishermen? "Face those challenges head-on, get involved, demand to be involved with the process, be part of the dialogue. Demand to write your own contract with government and NGOs – be part of it."

Gambling on new methods

This first Annual Scottish Fishing Conference echoed the need to bring all parties together, including Armando Astudillo González from the European Commission who outlined timetables and the process for bringing in the 'obligation'.

In the face of a strict

timetable for introduction and implementation, the need for the industry to refine its future approaches was clear.

Picking up on points made by most speakers, as well as many delegates, that avoiding unwanted catches in the first place was the ideal strategy, Mike Montgomerie, Gear Technologist from Sea Fish Industry Authority, highlighted the need to think laterally about the types of gear that were being used – again moving away from the traditional.

"Gears and gear selectivity is just one of the tools in the toolbox, it can make a big difference. This is going to be a challenge and the industry is going to have to try something new."

But why should some fishermen gamble with new methods while others do not?

"It is a gamble but in the long term they will be better off. The buyers will go to him because they know they will be getting responsibly-caught fish and he is minimising

discards."

Sea Fish has just produced a gear database that can provide much information about what is available and how it can be used, and encourage fishermen to be innovative in how they use and combine techniques to minimise unwanted catch at sea.

One call from the conference was the need for better information about stocks, distributions and the general state of the various Scottish fisheries.

Paul Fernandes, of Aberdeen University and convener of the Marine Alliance for Science and Technology for Scotland, provided some background including data that shows that many stocks in Scotland are in good shape, although there was little information about some stocks, especially low value species.

However there are still many knowledge gaps. Better information means more efficient management and up-to-date quotas. One example, northern hake, has increased dramatically in the past decade or so.

With a UK quota for the North Sea of 350 tonnes, and a currently estimated population of around 60,000 tonnes, hake easily becomes a choke species, where the quota is rapidly attained, causing the fishery to close down.

Choke species are a main fear of the Scottish fishery, so getting these numbers right is essential for fair management.

Having accurate and adjustable quotas and avoidance of capture in the first place were important messages from the conference, and FIS will be continue to support research in these areas in future.

A particular challenge for Scotland

The Scottish fishing industry is already taking a leaf from British



Wes Erikson - an active fisherman from British Columbia, Canada.

Columbia's book and, through this conference, has brought together a diverse and influential group of stakeholders, keen to work together to face the challenges ahead.

However, the landing obligation is imminent and as far as Mike Park, CEO of the Scottish White Fish Producers Association is concerned, despite the industry's efforts, this presents a particular challenge for Scotland.

"We face real challenges with bad legislation, the landings obligation, and it has to be eyes wide open. We will have more difficulty in implementing this than any other state around Europe because we have a more diverse fishery.

"If it comes to the point where that is obvious, and other member states are happy with it, we will need to elevate that up to the political level in Brussels.

"The ministers will have to say this is hurting us dramatically, that it doesn't fit with Article Two, which is about economic fleets and vibrant communities, and we need to put a halt to this. This industry is trying to do as much as it can but it will be hindered by officials."

Conference Chairmen John Goodlad, a Shetlander current Chair of FIS was delighted with the results of the conference: "It's been a huge success, it's our first year and we weren't sure how it was going to go. We've had some wonderful speakers and most importantly we've been given some good ideas on the work FIS should be doing in its research programme to help the industry with the introduction of the discard ban.

"One highlight was the exchange with fishermen from other countries to learn how they had worked to eliminate discards

from their catches. After this conference everyone understands the issues better.

"I would like to say that I can't see an easy solution. There remains the problem of the 'choke species', the few fisheries where Scotland has a tiny quota but there are huge quantities of fish out there – as soon as that very small quota is reached the entire fishery is closed down.

"We haven't solved that challenge yet, but what we have achieved today is to find research programmes that will get us closer to a solution. Throughout the day we had people thinking the unthinkable – thinking outside-of-the-box.

"We had everything coming back, from the good, the bad and the ugly. But it was all a great example of everybody engaging in thinking beyond their comfort zone. I believe if there is a solution to the discard ban, that's how we'll find it.

"The conference exceeded my expectations and a great start has been made. We will definitely be back next year, but in the meantime I know that Fisheries Innovation Scotland and the whole industry will work more closely together than ever before.

"If fisheries challenges can be solved anywhere, it will be in Scotland which has a proven track record of innovation." ■

Further information about Fisheries Innovation Scotland, its research programmes and future events can be found at: www.fiscot.org, where short interviews with some of the key speakers can also be accessed.

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Left to right: Richard Slaski Exec Director of Fisheries Innovation Scotland, Richard Lochhead, Mike Montgomerie - a gear technologist with Sea Fish Industry Authority, Armando Astudillo Gonzalez - a fisheries advisor with the EC and an expert in fisheries quotas.