

Faroe whitefish chasm creates huge difficulties

**Sudden loss of access compounds stringent
VIa quota cuts and impacts on
west coast and North Sea vessels**

The inability to fish in Faroese waters in 2011 is creating insurmountable problems for skippers who previously traditionally spent up to 40% of their year fishing in this area. Although around than 10 Scottish boats are directly affected, the inevitable displacement of effort and the loss of indirect quota swaps are already having far reaching consequences for a much larger number of North Sea whitefish vessels already faced with inadequate quotas. This situation is further compounded by recent quota cuts and stringent measures now in place in VIa, despite the fact that skippers report stock levels to be as good now as at any time in the last fifteen years. Together with rising fuel costs, these difficulties are creating what some skippers described as “perfect storm conditions” that unless addressed immediately, will result in bankrupt vessels and remote communities losing valuable employment and income that will never be replaced. David Linkie reports.

Displaced from Faroe - but nowhere to go

**Loss resonates through Scottish fleet
to create an unprecedented crisis**

Dating back over 50 years to the days of the Aberdeen side trawlers, skippers of Scottish whitefish boats have traditionally fished in Faroese waters. More than twenty years ago, this role was taken on by a new generation of forward looking skippers from the Moray Firth/Kinlochbervie, Orkney, Shetland and Peterhead, who since then have spent very significant amounts of money buying suitable quotas.

In recent years this has given skippers crucial flexibility, either by allowing them to fish at Faroe for 3/4 months a year (usually from August onwards) or as currency to swap for North Sea quota, some of which was perhaps subsequently leased out to other boats fishing in area IVa.

In recent years, Atlantic Challenge PD 197, Carina BF 803, Endeavour IV BF 515, Enterprise II, Russa Taign K 1102, Venture II BF 326 and Viking Monarch K 58 have comprised the powerful fleet of Scottish trawlers, some of which have spend up to 50% of their annual sea time fishing in Faroe waters.

Faced with further reductions in west coast TACs and fishing opportunities at the same time as not wanting to be displaced into the North Sea, some skippers have been proactive each year in acquiring additional Faroese quota, thereby enabling them to fish at Faroe for up to six months a year and to avoid increasing effort in IVa.

That the decision to prevent Scottish whitefish vessels from accessing Faroese waters was taken solely by Government Ministers for political reasons, which they are not part of, rather than any whitefish stock factors, has also angered skippers who as a direct result, now face a very uncertain short-term future.

One skipper said, “On first impression, a small number of boats are paying a very high price upfront. The reality of the situation is though, that this will be the catalyst for a large scale chain reaction that will undoubtedly impact negatively on most Scottish prawn and whitefish vessels. The time has come for skippers to finally say enough is enough, we can’t take any more. We are already beyond the red alert stage. Feelings are already running high, where this situation will end is extremely difficult to predict.”

Having become heavily dependant on fishing in Faroese waters, in some cases from May through to December, some skippers are now faced with the impossible task of trying to replace up to some 500t of fish from other areas as a result of being displaced from VB1/2 following the decision by the Faroe Islands Government not to allow suitably licensed Scottish whitefish vessels to fish in Faroese waters. With the acute shortage of quotas in VIa having necessitated increased dependence on Faroe in the first place, this decision inevitably means increasing the pressure on the North Sea, where fishing opportunities and quotas are already extremely restrictive.

This extremely difficult position is further compounded by the fact that whitefish vessels which in recent years have swapped their Faroese entitlement in order to secure additional North Sea quota, have also lost the means to access this opportunity. The end result is of course increased demand and inevitably higher leasing costs for North Sea quota, thereby adding to an already acute shortage.

In heavily distorting a previously well established pattern of relatively balanced fishing effort, displacing whitefish boats from Faroe, as well as pushing them away from deep waters and the west coast, threatens to undermine the benefits that have accrued in the North Sea in recent years as a result of a raft of technical measures, along with the decommissioning of some 200 Scottish boats.

Major concerns were also expressed at the sudden loss of top quality mixed whitefish catches from Faroe, for which buyers in north-west and north-east Scotland have worked hard in recent years to secure broader market demand in order to achieve premium quayside prices. Now faced with the almost impossible task of securing similar quality fish, processors are becoming increasingly concerned that previously secure markets could be lost, with the result that when the Scottish fleet are permitted to return to Faroe again, competitors might have filled the void which inevitably would mean reduced prices.

Early Faroe return top priority

All skippers are united in agreeing that getting back to fish at Faroe remains the No. 1 priority.

When the possible loss of the Faroese fishing grounds was first discussed, Scottish whitefish skippers raised a number of points, including gaining access to other fishing opportunities and quota. Another option mentioned was the possibility of securing funding to tie boats adversely affected up for 60-100 days. To date little progress has been made on these initial thoughts, but this subject needs a revisit now more and imminent discussions need to take place now on this lost fishery.

As one skipper said with feeling, “Having built boats to move the Scottish industry forward, and invested in quota to fish, fishing is all we want to be able to do. Tying boats up is a short term measure that will only bring disadvantages associated with losing highly experienced

crewmembers, valuable markets etc. Politicians cannot talk about supporting a viable and flagship Scottish fishing industry if they cannot provide us with the opportunity to work and fish on an equal footing with neighbouring countries, which is all we ask to be able to do.”

“Worse crisis yet”

Asked what no Faroe fishing means to him, Endeavour IV Skipper Peter Lovie replied, “To me its worse than anything else I have ever faced in the industry. Drastic quota cuts and unrealistic catch composition regulations in VIa, this area is not a viable fallback alternative, but where else can I fish or acquire quota to do so. Having taken the conscious decision years ago to stay west and north, with no other option remaining, up to ten of Scotland’s largest whitefish vessels will now be forced into the North Sea using effort which hasn’t been needed before. Made in desperation to survive, this move will immediately push prawn and whitefish quota prices upwards, and already tight quotas will be exhausted long before the end of this year. We need immediate help to cross the chasm that has suddenly opened, otherwise there is no future.”

“The knock on effects without Faroes are immense. With skippers facing the prospect of having to tie their vessels up for months, job losses will range from crews to shore workers, including engineers, market staff, processors, netmakers, local shops, lorry drivers, etc. as without boats to service/fish to process/transport, there will be no work for them. This will increase unemployment in remote communities of Scotland where the number of people without jobs is already too high. The viabilities of vessels will deteriorate further, as even tied up; boats have substantial ongoing financial commitments to meet which will result in debts accumulating rapidly. One effect of this is that it will create a further lack of confidence in fishing for young men coming in to our industry. Banks will also loose confidence in future investment.

Kinlochbervie Fish Selling Company

Bill Mackenzie, Manager of the Kinlochbervie Fishselling Company, which is part of Don Fishing Ltd. said, “Over the course of 2010 vessels associated with Don Fishing took approx 1500 tonnes (some 75% of the total UK catch) from Faroe with a market value of near £3m

“For the five affected vessels this fishery represented on average a quarter of their annual gross and time spent at sea. Two of the five vessels affected spent 33% of their fishing year in Faroe so the knock on affects of the current situation are going to be extremely hard to bear in cases such as these.

“At a time when fuel costs are at or near an historical high, area VI quota has been cut to the bone and vessels still have to contend with the insane discard inducing west coast emergency by-catch measures, the outlook for 2011 is extremely depressing. It is not an over exaggeration to state that there will be some very negative knock on affects hitting both offshore and onshore, especially the port of Kinlochbervie which relies heavily on the vessels fishing in Faroe.

“Of course this would not be near so devastating if these vessels could fish in their own waters at a time when we are seeing across near all west coast stocks the best signs of stock health in the last ten years. Yet again though, no one in the EU commission believes this as they’ve been fed and accepted a diet of west coast disaster stories for the last ten years. The commission has absolutely devastated the west coast finally hitting top gear this year with a range of tiny quotas and measures designed to increase discards. This of course will be turned

against us and lead to more cuts in quota and effort whilst absolutely nothing will be done to improve the massive black hole in the west coast stock assessment science.”

Westray skipper warns of vessel bankruptcies to come

Skipper Tom Marcus of the Orkney stern trawler Russa Taign which in recent years has fished at Faroe for 70/75 days said, “Unless this situation is addressed immediately, family businesses are hurtling towards bankruptcy faster than the industry has know before. It is totally unbelievable that a country with such a distinguished fishing heritage a Scotland is not able to find the means to enable a small number of boats to operate with financial viability. Even though boats are constantly monitored by 3 FPVs, 2 planes, are subject to VMS every 2 hrs and are required to send in E-logs daily, at the same time as skippers have embraced the use of big mesh trawls to support the Cod Recovery Programme, together with seasonal and real time closures, this is now being ignored at a time when we are expected to pay a high and probably terminal price for a problem that is not of our making. Even though cod, haddock and whiting is plentiful on the west coast grounds, the lack of quota means that it is impossible to fill in for the lost Faroe quota. Although we would rather be able to keep on fishing to provide income for our local communities and therefore we don’t want to go down that route, decommissioning would appear to be the only possible solution.”

Impose port landing sanctions on all Faroese vessels

Peterhead Skipper John Buchan, whose trawler Atlantic Challenge has lost more than 25% of its fishing opportunities in 2011 by the loss of access to Faroe waters, said there was no way to replace fish that has ‘gone up in smoke.’ In an attempt to restore fishing opportunities in Va/b for 2012, John Buchan called for “immediate lobbying to gain support for voluntary sanctions to be implemented by all Scottish ports to prevent Faroese vessels landing into Scotland. Following the initial squeeze, which other sectors of the catching fleet were successful in applying, the application of sanctions can become formalised to promote full compliance.”

Faroe access crucial for Scottish prawn and whitefish fleets

Sandy West (Carina) questioned “Why at a time when Scottish vessels with quotas are denied access to Faroe Waters, are Faroese vessels are still landing thousands of tons of fish into Scottish ports - mainly Scrabster and Lochinver? No one seems to be doing or saying anything about this which is really rubbing salt in the wounds of an industry already under enormous pressure.

Sandy West continued “Access to Faroe Waters for the vessels who have a licence to do so is crucial if the Scottish White Fish and Prawn fleets are to survive a full year. With the west coast waters virtually closed due to the way quotas have been cut and with by-catches regulations for cod/whiting, this will displace effort from west to east and the uptake of North Sea quota will increase drastically affecting both the North Sea white fish and prawn fleets, which state that they cannot survive on prawns alone.

Less than 12 months ago Marine Scotland implemented the Licence Parking Scheme’ to allow skippers to operate their vessels with greater economic efficiency and viability, yet now much of this potential benefit is being lost because of the Faroese situation, even though it has nothing to do with them.

Fishing opportunities bear no resemblance to stock levels in area IVa

Regardless of location, whether it is north-east England, the Norwegian Sector, Shetland, Fair Isle or the west coast, writing articles covering the markedly growing imbalance between stock levels and quota allocations, accounts for an increasing amount of my workload for Fishing News. Whatever the reason for this, the phone calls, texts and emails from skippers expressing similar views continues to gather pace, which suggests that the point continues to be at best glossed over or in the worst case scenario conveniently missed by national and international fisheries administrators alike.

Given the massive reductions in fleet capacity and effort the Scottish fleet has endured in less than 10 years, the increase in the level of whitefish stocks should surprise nobody, yet for whatever reason, this expected outcome, which by definition was one of the primary aims of decommissioning, does not appear to have been factored in to any future stock assessments.

Carvida, Challenge II, Crystal River, Fairway, Harvest Reaper, Just Reward, Kinnaird, Solstice, Steadfast, Radiant, Resplendent, Victory and Westro are some of the trawlers that were custom built in the last 15 years to fish primarily west of Scotland that are no longer fishing. These boats represent a reduction of over 75% in the deepwater fleet, far above the 10% effort reduction advocated at the time by the EU.

“Sold down the river” was one skipper’s succinct view of the west coast whitefish fleet.

Another said “Given the direction the industry is heading in at present, personally I cannot see a future, but if there was a change in management measures, there could be a great future, such are the level of stocks at present.

The same skipper continued, “In years gone by, with the amount of fish on the grounds there are now, we wouldn’t have thought twice about reinvesting in the industry by renewing our boat for the benefit of the next generation. But with the stupid rules/unworkable quotas and catch restrictions now in place, doing so is unthinkable. Instead we are slowly going to go out of business.”

Another skipper added, “The present west coast difficulties, which stem from the imbalance between stock levels and quotas is a simple one to solve. All that needs to be done is for administrators to increase the TACs back to the levels they were at only a few years ago. Since then effort has reduced considerably and will never increase from that which is now at today. This solution would immediately give those boats that remain viable quotas to fish, thereby avoiding the transfer of effort back into the North Sea.

Although Scottish trawlers have no quota for tusk, when towing down to 250 fathoms along the deepwater edge for monkfish, they often have to work around Norwegian liners targeting tusk. While speaking to his Norwegian counterparts on the VHF, they could believe it when one Kinlochberrie based skipper told them that Scottish boats couldn’t even land 1 kg of tusk. There incredulous reply was “what a crazy system you have to work under, how do you manage to keep your vessels viable.”

Skippers are also disillusioned by the fact that having started to use a single net to catch clean haddocks as economically as possible after their deepwater quotas were drastically reduced in 2002, after a few years the haddock quota was also slashed repeatedly.

As an alternative, some boats were able to make a few trips fishing black halibut north of Shetland, as well as in Faroe waters, but now this alternative fishery has also been lost for this year.

One skipper commented, “Here we go again. Even though we stayed away from North Sea cod, by not hit now for not fishing in home waters, we are being penalised once again. But at the same time through the CQMS, some boats are being rewarded for targeting North Sea cod in previous years by being allocated unlimited days as well as received 20-30% of last years landings free. Yet boats that have altered fishing gear, moved to new areas and changed fishing methods - all to avoid cod - are the ones that appear to have been penalised again and again.

New by-catch rules work against future TAC increases

Skippers are unanimous that the emergency conservation regulations introduced for the west coast of Scotland, which effective include a by-catch component with catch composition rules, will have an immediate negative effect on the North Sea fleet because all west coast effort will be pushed east for one simple reason, discards.

The new by-catch rules only allow vessels inside or outside the west coast Cod Recovery Zone to keep 2% each of cod and whiting. As a result boats can only land 2 boxes of each of these species out of every 100 caught.

Inside the west coast CRZ vessels are only allowed to keep onboard catches consisting of up to 30% of haddock, whiting and cod, while also adhering to the 2% ruling on cod and whiting. At a time when skippers are reporting some good haddock fishing, this ruling effectively closes the haddock fishery because there is very little else to keep but haddock apart from 2% cod/whiting.

Unable to land the fish that are there to be caught, skippers say that the by-catch ruling means that they will never get the TAC increase that they need west, because the landing figures are always going to look poor if boats are not allowed to land catches representative of stocks on the grounds.

One lifelong west coast skipper cited the example of if he wanted to go west and catch around 150 boxes of monkfish; he might have to land upwards of 1000 boxes of which 750 may be marketable discards that would be counted against his quota. As a consequence, after one trip regardless of how much west coast monk quota he had left, he would be left with no option other than to fish in the North Sea simply because he would have no quota left for any other species west.

Acutely aware that the present regime isn't working and that by placing all fishing opportunities on quota holdings, skippers believe that unless changes are made to stop this from happening, some how or other a way has to be found to get the value off quota, otherwise they say it will all end up in the hands of 3-4 companies very shortly, which will only serve to further disadvantage the majority.

‘Its not just Bad, its Mad’

Venture II Skipper Alan Addison said that the phrase ‘Its not just Bad its Mad’ used by celebrity chef Hugh Fearnly-Whittingstall to describe discards, equally applies to the west coast of Scotland situation on TACs and associated science.

Skipper Addison added, “As a young naive skipper during the successive decommissioning schemes of 2002/3, I foolishly thought that the long term future for those who stuck it out would be very good, as fewer boats (1) would mean the stocks got a better chance to repopulate the ground and that quota (2) held by said decommissioned vessels would go back into the system meaning more opportunities for the remaining fleet.

“On point 1 the result is exactly as we thought would happen. Stocks across all species have returned in abundance which isn’t surprising given the number of vessels we encounter west during a typical voyage can be counted on one hand. In hindsight, failure to realise that the subsequent systematic reduction of West TACs across the board makes point 2 look a foolish pipedream.

“The west (area VIa) situation isn’t serious anymore. Rather it is now critical and with the proposed future cuts for next year impending upon us IT could quite simply be the end of commercial white fish trawling in this area. If this is the case, our forefathers must be turning in their graves. The science and the attached TACs are now so out of kilter with the available stock that skippers and crews fishing the west coast are dumbfounded by what is happening.

“The Scottish fleet has embraced technical measures along with self proposed/imposed restrictions i.e. RTCs along with the disgraceful ‘WINDSOCK’ - a knee jerk restriction which shows no sign of ever being lifted A former FRS scientist told me off the record that because no surveys were done before the ‘windsock’ was put in place the good it is now doing is therefore impossible to ascertain as there is no data attached to the area pre-closure.

“The 30% rule for cod/haddock/whiting makes working inside the CRZ nigh impossible, and with the French Line being moved further westward the CRZ is increasing in size!

“This year more than ever because of the ongoing Faroese dispute and the resulting closure of demersal fishing in the Faroes zone to Scottish vessels have only compounded the west coast TAC weakness even more. During the past 5 or 6 years we have been spending more and more time at Faroes because of the lack of TAC in area VIa at the same time as investing heavily in quota for Faroes to complete a full year’s fishery. Without this alternative opportunity and the strangulating quotas available for VIa, the North Sea is our only option left and that won’t be good news for anybody.

“The fear is that in these times of austerity the future of any further surveys is in jeopardy because of a lack of funding. Already we have seen the deepwater survey charters cancelled and this is an area which desperately needs more science. Major ‘presumptions’ appear to have been made in the reproductive/growth cycle of many of the deepwater stock which now it transpires is a fallacy. A TAC that reflected the available deepwater stock would surely help the struggling operators of this fishery.

“The west coast TACs need to be increased realistically in line with the stocks on the grounds, if anything this would help our kindred spirit Hugh Fearnly-Whittingstal achieve his goal of zero discards.

**Skippers’ immediate response
highlights scale of problems faced**

That the level of response received from skippers who generally fish the west coast of Scotland and Faroe waters far outweighed anything experienced in the previous 20+ years of writing features for Fishing News highlights the depth of feeling and worries held by the skippers concerned.

Even though they were fishing as far offshore as Rockall where they were contending with severe gales, skippers found the time to put their thoughts into word before sending emails via their vessel's satellite system.

Although the buy-out of salmon drift netting in north-east England, whitefish tie-ups; the lead up to the convoy of 170 boats that steamed under the Forth rail and road bridges; successive decommissioning schemes, the growth of wind farms on prime fishing grounds and the ongoing Faroe/Iceland mackerel situation understandably generated high levels of responses from skippers, for concerted effort, the level of industry generated support that was received in a 72 hour period over the recent Easter weekend has not been matched to date.

This depth of feeling suggests that after showing a high degree of patience for considerably longer than should be expected of anyone simply trying to legally pursue their chosen career path, skippers feel that having run out of all options despite numerous attempts to engage in meaningful dialogue, they have reached the point of no return, whereby they need to fight for their futures, as if they don't voice their concerns now, tomorrow might be too late.

PHOTOGRAPH CAPTIONS

- 1) Genesis landing at Kinlochbervie- the combination of unrealistic quotas and catch composition regulations in VIa pose a severe threat to west coast ports and the North Sea prawn and whitefish fleets as a result of previously stable fishing effort being displaced east
- 2) Hauling the gear..
- 3) ..on the stern trawler Endeavour IV which previously fished at Faroe for up to 6 months a year until being denied access this year. Skipper Peter Lovie said the present crisis is the 'worst he has experienced'
- 4) The Macduff owned Carina landing whitefish caught in Faroese waters at Kinlochbervie last year
- 5) Viking Monarch is one of the trawlers that has traditionally spend most of the year either fishing at Faroe or in VIa
- 6) The Orkney trawler Russa Tain heads into Scrabster to land from the Faroe grounds in 2010
- 7) Atlantic Challenge leaves Peterhead - Skipper John Buchan called for "immediate lobbying to gain support for voluntary sanctions to be implemented by all Scottish ports to prevent Faroese vessels landing into Scotland"