

Testimonies about the development of fisheries catches in the southern North Sea

**REPORT:
TESTIMONIES ABOUT THE DEVELOPMENT OF
FISHERIES CATCHES IN THE SOUTHERN NORTH SEA**

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List of participants

Bart Schiltz (B) chairman LIFSN, board member netviswerk (NL)

Kris Vandecasteele (B)

council member on fisheries, Nieuwpoort municipality, board member LIFSN

Marc Dezutter (B) penningmeester LIFSN, fixed gillnet fisherman, Nieuwpoort

Patrick Van Hellemont

(B) board member LIFSN, rod&line fisherman, Nieuwpoort

Raynal Laurent (B) board member LIFSN, rod&line fisherman, Nieuwpoort

Jan De Jonghe (B) secretary LIFSN

Ger de Ruiter (NL) LIFE EU-NL, rod&line fisherman, Nieuwpoort

Niels Hogestein (B) rod&line fisherman, Nieuwpoort

Peter Dezutter (B) fixed gillnet fisherman, Nieuwpoort

Koen De Bièvre (B)

board member recreational angling club Deltavissers - Zeeland (NL)

Job Schot (NL) board member charter centre – beam trawler

Thomas Verleye (B) Vliz scientist

Sofie Nimmegeers (B) Ilvo scientist

Sander Meyns (B) Charter centre

Jan Desaeveer (B) fixed gillnet fisherman, Nieuwpoort

Gilbert Desaeveer (B) fixed gillnet fisherman, Nieuwpoort

Diederik Jacobs (B) shrimp fisherman, Nieuwpoort

Gregory Arnoys (B) shrimp fisherman, Nieuwpoort

Rudy Beuckels (B) shrimp fisherman, Nieuwpoort

Steve Deramoudt (B) charter boat for recreational angling, Nieuwpoort

Frank Laleman (B) recreational angler, Nieuwpoort

Brian O’Riordan (IRL) deputy director LIFE EU

Claudia Orlandini (I) communication officer LIFE EU

Roger Cooper (UK) fisherman Ramsgate/Whitstable

Thierry Boulanger (F) fisherman, Dunkirk

Philippe Mahieu (B) charter boat for recreational angling, Nieuwpoort

Mario Debuck (B) rod&line fisherman, Nieuwpoort

Testimonies about the development of fisheries catches in the southern North Sea

Welcome by Kris Vandecasteele, council member of the city of Nieuwpoort

The decline of fish stocks allowed the LIFSN board to take an initiative to bring together everyone who is making a livelihood of the fish in the southern North Sea. All these stakeholders are either recreational fishermen, professional fishermen or charter companies and employ various fishing techniques.

Purpose of this meeting by Bart Schiltz, Chairman LIFSN

The gathering of testimonies of what is happening in the southern North Sea and in particular, the spectacular catch reduction of various types of fish. This has not been witnessed before. The testimonies will be noted and transferred to various institutions, such as advisors from scientific and government agencies. It is then up to these institutions to investigate whether this can be linked to wind farms, pulse fishing, climate change, sand extraction or other possible explanations.

The background behind this meeting by Jan De Jonghe, Secretary LIFSN

There is a decline in catches in the southern North Sea, not witnessed on other fishing grounds. This meeting is a response to the many reports that have surfaced of late about the excellent condition of the fish stocks in the North Sea. This in sharp contrast to the experience of many fishermen in the Southern North Sea. For a broad perspective, delegations were invited from Belgium, the Netherlands, France and the United Kingdom. These are the countries that border the Southern North Sea.

4. Testimonies

Only the testimonies of fishermen were included in this report.

Marc Dezutter (Belgium – Fixed gillnets fishery - Dutch Professional License KW3)
No sole catches in recent years. A few years ago, in Stellendam (NL), he got acquainted with pulse fishermen. Then it was said that electric fishing and fly-hooting are the final fishing techniques, so efficient and deadly that all stocks will be affected until only a wasteland is left. The smaller soles are also taken away.

Frank Laleman (Belgium - recreational rod & line fisherman)
Observes a negative evolution in fish stocks, especially since the introduction of the pulse technique on our fishing grounds. Thinks that local overfishing by pulse is the main cause. Where 6 years ago it was not a problem to catch 15kg of cod, this has fallen back to 0 kg in recent years. Certainly the last 2 years, nothing was caught anymore. The same is true for sole catches. 6 years ago it was not a problem to catch 20 tons a day per man. In recent years, no more is caught. This also applies to mackerel, plaice, ...

Rudy Beuckels (Belgium - Shrimp Fisher - Belgian Professional License N86)
Until about 5 years ago there were no real problems. Now there is overfishing on our part of the North Sea. This year he saw the lowest sole stock since he started fishing 20 years ago. In the middle season he tried to switch to sole fishing for one month, but there was not enough to be caught. During the shrimp fishery he used to find small sole larvae as a bycatch. This year, these larvae are completely missing, including at the Small bank, 6 miles off the coast. He also thinks that the pulse affects the shrimps and that they break. The O82 has in the meanwhile stopped his pilot project with the shrimp pulse. Pulse fishing is possible wherever you want, also on grounds that were previously not fished at. The effect of this is that fish stocks can't find a safe place anymore on our small coastal strip. Also, the fishing grounds get ever smaller due to the introduction of wind farms, sand extraction, etc. There too, the fish stock is being disrupted. More vessels operate on smaller fishing grounds, which significantly reduces local fish stocks.
After pulse fishermen pass beyond the 3 mile point, only dead fish with burns, dead sole and broken cod are caught. He has already reported this to the ILVO in the past, but there was no interest.

Philippe Mahieu (Belgium - charter fishery)
He has had to divert to the English coast to areas where the pulse is not in use, in order to catch any fish. There is still fish there. The areas that he used to fish and that have been hit go as far as the 52th latitude. Everywhere where the pulse is used, fish disappears. He thinks the prospects for his work are finite. His target species are pollak, sole and cod.

Steve Deramoudt (Belgium - charter fishery)

He concurs with the testimony of Philippe Mahieu

Raynal Laurent (Belgium - Rod and line Fisherman

Dutch Professional License BR73)

His target is sea bass. He found 2 years ago in a zone near the Westhinder that cod and whiting had died or were dying. The seagulls ate small, round fish floating on the surface. This was in a zone of about 1.5 miles long after a pulse fisher from Arnemuiden had passed. He did this observation at 3 other moments.

Patrick van Hellemont (Belgium – Rod & line fisherman

Dutch Professional License BR99)

His target is sea bass. He fishes from Nieuwpoort to 35 miles off the coast. His sea bass catches have reduced in recent years by 60% less. As far as cod is concerned, the reduction is up to 95%. He has noticed that if a pulse has been fishing up to 1 mile from his fishing spot, he can't catch any fish in that area.

Mario de Buck (Belgium - Rod & line fisherman - Dutch Professional License Br3)

Catches much less fish, especially sea bass. Cod catches have been reduced to 0 this year.

Peter Dezutter (Belgium – fixed gillnets – Dutch professional license KW3)

He used to fish on a large beam trawler. Before, there were more Dutch vessels fishing (without pulse) than nowadays. There was still enough sole for everyone. Fishing in the North Sea for sole was carried out between December and February. Then sole was suddenly fished year-round, and with the introduction of pulse fishing, the fish stocks of sole have almost disappeared.

Koen De Bièvre (Belgium - recreational fisherman

board member Dutch "Deltavissers" boat angling club)

He has been fishing since ever since he was 6 and is now 53 years old. Koen endorses the previous speakers so will not repeat them. Membership of his association has fallen in recent years from over 1,600, to less than 1,000 members now. This is largely due to the lack of fish. Fish have all kinds of electromagnetic sensitive organs to help them navigate, hunt and avoid collisions in the dark. It is virtually impossible for the fish not to be affected by the electricity in the water and therefore they move to other places. An important exception to this catastrophe are the Elasmobranchs (sharks and rays). Their situation continues to improve in our waters. There is a report on a test with lesser spotted dogfish in an aquarium where some of the animals even appeared to be attracted to the pulse, while another part remained indifferent and one fish avoided the pulse. Koen has noted lesser

spotted dogfish have been caught regularly for the last 2 years at the beginning of the season, where this never happened before. The main question is now whether the disappeared fish has just disappeared, or is chased off to other waters. It is his firm belief that the 2nd is the case.

Roger Cooper (Great Britain – Commercial fisherman,
Chairman of Thanet Fishermen Organization)

3 to 4 years ago, pulse fishing came to the English coasts (up till 12 miles). They kept coming and now on both hard and soft grounds. There is no area safe for the fish. 2016 was the worst sole year ever (-60%). In 2017 things are the same. 2 bad years in a row has never before occurred. Due to the milder winters, the sole did not go deep into the sea, which meant that they could be caught in winter too. There was also a lot of dredging in the spawning areas of the sole. He also complains about the Dutch presence in the British fleet. Roger observes that there is a lot of thornback ray.

Ger de Ruiter (Netherlands - fishing tackle - Dutch commercial license, WSW1)
The pulse fishing trials have all been carried out in laboratories, not in the sea. Is this realistic and are there not more effects to be expected in the open sea? He asks for more research into the effects of pulse fishing on the open sea. He too made the observation of seagulls picking up fish behind flyshooters and pulse fishermen.

Bart Schiltz (Belgium - Chairman LIFSN)

There is no sole left in the 'Sole Pit' and the 'Small Silver Pit'. This was observed by Bart's son. Son Rudi is ship owner of Z59 Raquel. They fish up to 54 degrees north. Beam fishing was carried out for 50 years without seriously threatening the stocks. Now the pulse fishing is evaluated after 3 years and there are stocks in danger in the Southern North Sea. It is a financial and political problem. It should also be borne in mind that there is no social massacre with Dutch fishermen if the pulse technique were to be scrapped and banned. Certain fish species are much closer to the coast than before. An example is sea bass, against the breakers and fences. Can more practical research be done on pulse fishing on the open sea? If the pulse fishery adheres to the quota, why are there still stock problems?

Jan Desaever (Belgium – gillnet fisher - Belgian Professional License N93)

Danish fishermen and Belgian fishermen in Danish waters catch more sole, since the pulse is active in our area. The French from Dunkirk must fish south of Boulogne to find sole – there is no pulse fishing there. This indicates that the sole stock seem to move out of the areas where pulse fishing is active. He also experiences a very low catch of sole for the last 3 years on the 'Buitenratelbank'. Previously, the N95 fished there without a problem and brought in enough sole and other fish from this area to do well. The N95 was lost three years ago by fire.

Brian O’Riordan (Irish - Vice President LIFE EU with office in Brussels)

He puts forward some findings: There is no control on the ship how much voltage is set for fishing. The pulse beam is much lighter than the classic beam, so a lot more areas can be accessed for fishing. Over 80 exemptions were issued in the transition from the middle sized fleet of traditional beam trawling to pulse trawling. This now is much more than 5% of the fleet active with pulse gear, as was first permitted by Europe. Half of those pulse exemptions will be withdrawn in 2019 if Europe does not generally approve the technique before that time. The Dutch lobby to greenlight pulse is very strong, including the European Commission and the EP.

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