The past year has seen no let-up in the challenges facing the fishing industry; new threats to the viability of fishing vessels, and indeed whole sectors of the fleet, have arisen as others have receded.

For the time being fuel costs do not pose the immediate threat that they have in the recent past but new challenges, such as the rush to introduce a network of marine protected areas and to build massive offshore wind-farms, have replaced fuel as the focus for the Federation’s fire-fighting work. At one end of the industry the under-10 metre fleet faces a serious quota crisis, whilst at the other end, Iceland’s irresponsible behaviour in international negotiations threatens the stability and the sustainability of the mackerel fishery; and we are still beleaguered by blunt and inappropriate cod recovery measures that are clearly not fit for purpose.

At the same time, the most significant reform of the Common Fisheries Policy in its history is underway, presenting a generational opportunity to shift things for the better; but also presenting new threats that have to be resisted and fought.

As usual, the Chairman’s report can only provide a flavour of the mass of work undertaken by the Federation on behalf of its members. In a nutshell, the NFFO is active on many different fronts of direct concern to the safety and viability of fishing vessels.

For example our Salmon Committee works tirelessly against stiff odds; and a vast amount of work is undertaken by our Safety and Training Officer through the Fishing Industry Safety Group. With such a range of issues to deal with, it is clear to see why the fishing industry needs a vigorous, active and dynamic Federation working day in and day out for its interests, both within the UK and within Europe. I can recommend the NFFO website at www.nffo.org.uk as a window into the Federation’s broad range of work.
Under-10m vessels

The difficult circumstances in which many under-10metre vessels find themselves in the wake of buyers and sellers registration, led Defra to establish the SAIF Group in the search for solutions.

Towards the end of last year the Federation produced an influential paper on the SAIF Group’s Proposition paper that emphasised the essentially arbitrary character of the dividing line at 10 metres and argued for the reintegration of the under 10s into the mainstream of the UK quota management system.

A further paper fleshing out how this might be achieved has now been produced and has been the focus of all-industry discussions on finding a way forward. Throughout, the NFFO has argued for the essential unity of the fishing industry and for lasting solutions that are fair to all parts of the fleet.

Pelagic fisheries

Until recently, the pelagic fisheries had become a by-word for stable, profitable and sustainable fisheries based on some of the largest vessels in the fleet. Iceland and Faeroes’ irresponsible approach to the Western mackerel stock and to international negotiations threatens that stability and the hard won sustainability on which it was based. The Federation has raised and will continue to raise this critically important issue at the highest levels within the UK Government and the Commission until a resolution is found.

Shellfish

In retrospect, the last 12 months may come to be seen as pivotal in the prospects for the valuable fisheries for crab and lobster. In the inshore fisheries the NFFO Shellfish Committee after long discussions and deliberations agreed a balanced and proportionate approach to the need to cap fishing effort that respects the regional diversity in this fishery. At the same time steps have been taken through a series of international meetings to which the NFFO has been an active party, to stabilise landings and avoid price collapse in the offshore brown crab fisheries.

Cod Recovery and effort control

Only around half of the fishing mortality of cod in the North Sea is attributable to landings of that species. The predictions of the industry and scientists alike that the present management measures would lead to obscene level of discards have been confirmed over the last two years. The desperate need to move to a more intelligent conservation regime rather than the old tried, tested and failed measures of cutting quotas and restricting days at sea is nowhere more obvious than to the crews forced to discard tonnes of valuable fish. NFFO vessels are at the forefront of the Catch Quota trials currently underway and the Federation has missed no opportunity – directly with the Commission, through the regional advisory councils and in discussions with the UK Minister to make the case for a better approach.

In the Irish Sea where the fleet reductions have been most dramatic but the recovery slower, and obscured by weak assessments, the futility of cutting miniscule quotas and tightening blunt days at sea restrictions is, if anything, more stark.

And in the Celtic Sea, the Federation has been at the forefront in emphasising that measures that are demonstrably failing within the cod recovery zone should not be extended to new areas.

The continuing problems in the cod fishery and the blunt measures applied to address them have ramifications across many fleets for which cod is a very small by-catch. Because the present quota system crudely applied to mixed fisheries generates discards, some commentators, including the present Commissioner have concluded that effort control – restricting time at sea would be a more effective solution. That has not been the experience of the North Sea, where effort has been reduced, fishing mortality has remained high and discards have reached astronomical levels. The UK’s response to the CFP Reform Green Paper puts the point succinctly: “….both the economic theory and practical experience show that this system is unlikely to deliver benefits in the longer term, and results in an over-capitalised and inefficient industry with high monitoring and enforcement costs”.

The Federation has worked through the English Days at Sea Group to ensure that the effort allocations policy delivers a 12-month fishery; and has worked equally hard to develop an exit strategy from a regime that is as economically damaging as it is inept at achieving its central purpose – rebuilding the cod stocks.
TACs and technical regulations

Despite the progressive appearance of long term management plans, the December Council, and the annual fisheries agreement with Norway, remain key landmarks in the fishing year; the outcome of these talks have a direct bearing on the profitability of the fleets in the following year.

The Commission’s unnecessarily restrictive and ultimately counterproductive view of how to move towards maximum sustainable yield poses a major challenge for quotas in 2011. A more balanced approach focused on MSY as a range of catch options, rather than a specific number, especially within mixed fisheries, is more likely to produce a smoother transition to high yield fisheries without generating unnecessary discards.

The blunt reduction of TACs frequently has no effect on fishing mortality because its result is to transfer dead fish from the landed to the discarded column. There are specific problems in this area with North Sea whiting and with skate, ray and spurdog. All these fisheries cry out for tailored solutions and the Federation, often through the RACs, has been at the forefront in developing solutions – if the decision makers are willing to listen and work with the industry, solutions are available.

Without sound and credible fisheries science, effective management measures become a near impossibility. The EC and Ministers will always defer to the science because the alternative is to make purely political decisions, with all that that implies. It is these considerations that led the Federation in 2002 to press for Government to instigate the Fisheries Science Partnership programme, now recognised in scientific literature as a world-class example of successful participative fisheries research. It remains a fact however that around 60% of ICES assessments fail to achieve analytical status for one reason or another. The precautionary approach means that it is the fishing industry that suffers from this weakness through TACs that are set lower than they would be if there was robust science. It is for this reason that the NFFO has spearheaded an initiative to establish regional Task Forces of fishermen, scientists and fisheries managers to identify deficiencies in stock assessments, fishery by fishery, and to instigate steps to secure the necessary improvements.

The Commission’s misguided attempt to force through a dog’s breakfast of a new technical conservation regulation, to beat the Lisbon process and co-decision making with the European Parliament, was blocked by member states (who would have been left picking up the pieces). The Federation was active in coordinating opposition to this misconceived adventure and the much needed reform of the technical conservation regime will now take place within the context of CFP reform and hopefully a less febrile atmosphere.

The Federation was less successful in blocking the new Control Regulation agreed in Luxembourg, which was conceived in a hurry after criticisms by the European Court of Auditors, and is littered with pitfalls, confusions and sheer wrong-headedness. Hopefully, this Regulation will come to be seen as the last gasp of prescriptive micro-management before the CFP reform ushers in a more enlightened (and effective) regime.

In the meantime the NFFO is working hard with Defra officials and within the RACs to file off the more irrational and misconceived detail of the implementing rules.

CFP reform

The Federation recognises the current CFP reform as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to put the Common Fisheries Policy on a proper footing. A decade ago, along with the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation, the NFFO made the case for a radical decentralisation of the CFP and a break with the over-centralised, one-size-fits-all approach. Those ideas, considered radical at the time, are now in the mainstream about thinking on a reformed CFP. Over the last 18 months, the Federation has used its positions on the RACs, within Europepeche and the EU Advisory Committee for Fisheries and Aquaculture, and with the UK Fisheries Minister, to press for the devolution of responsibilities to regional management bodies and to the industry through sustainable fishing plans. The reform is not without risks and therefore, as the reform process moves from the consultative to the Proposal and decision stage, the Federation will be vigilant in its commitment to change in a positive direction.

Regional Advisory Councils

It is hard to do justice to the contribution played by the RACs in providing a strong voice on issues of central concern to the fishing industry at EU level. The oldest RAC is now six years old and over that period RACs have established themselves as adept in producing coherent, evidence-based, advice on a bewildering range of fisheries issues. For the most part this advice is produced on a consensus basis, demonstrating the industry’s ability and will to work with fishermen from other member states, as well as other stakeholders. Through their effective advice RACs have established not only the relevance of a regional focus to the CFP but the validity of finding ways of involving the fishing industry in the governance of their fisheries.

For all the latest news check our website www.nffo.org.uk
The MPA Fishing Coalition, of which the NFFO is a core member, has continued its important role of holding Government and its statutory advisors, Natural England and JNCC, to account. At a recent meeting in London, the Coalition raised key issues relating to the process of establishing a network of marine protected areas in UK waters.

The Coalition’s interventions have established one very important point of principle: at the meeting, NE announced that it will play no role in the design, implementation or enforcement of the management measures that will apply within marine conservation zones or the European Special Areas of Conservation once they have been designated. That will be left to the relevant authorities: Defra, Marine Management Organisation and Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities. Although the distinction between advisors to government and fisheries managers might seem obvious, NE’s public statements and attitudes during its expansionist phase, often gave the opposite impression; so this clarification is important. The Coalition has regularly criticised confusion in the way that NE has defined its role: sometimes advisor to government, sometimes sounding and behaving like an environmental NGO, and often assuming to it the mantle of management decisions. Those criticisms are now shown to have been effective.

The Coalition also raised the damage done to NE’s credibility as dispassionate, impartial and rigorous advisors to government by the revelations in the press, following a Freedom of Information request, by Terri Portman of Scott Trawlers. The information obtained under the FOI request suggested a less than transparent process at the time that the Lyme Bay closure was introduced. There is no doubting the seriousness of the charge, nor NE’s determination to repair the damage. Having committed itself to an open, evidence-based process in the establishment of marine conservation zones, the suggestion that NE suppressed crucial, but for them uncomfortable science regarding the scarcity of pink sea fans couldn’t be more embarrassing.

From the outset, the Coalition has been critical about the artificial and unrealistic timetable set by ministers for the establishment of a network of MPAs, which is wholly inconsistent with gathering an adequate evidence base, or for a process in which stakeholders have a genuine influence. The Coalition was frankly scornful when both NE and Defra claimed that there was “no evidence that the timetable could not be met”. The quality of the evidence base and the degree to which the four regional projects are genuine stakeholder led processes, or manipulative box ticking exercises, are issues that have yet to be settled.

The whole question of the quality of the ecological science and information on patterns of fishing is an area of major concern for the Coalition to which to date, NE assurances seem hollow. An exercise in gauging the sensitivity of different offshore activities to marine conservation zones has been abandoned as inadequate, after criticisms from participants, and whilst this recognition and response is to be welcomed it does increase the sense of making it up as we go along in a hurry and of a forced process.

NE confirmed that the changing science base is the main reason why it is re-consulting on a number of the European SACs previously notified, including Eddystone, Lune Deep, and Studland to Portland, and once complete this will complete the SACs in English inshore waters, amounting to 19% of the 0-12 zone. Domestic MCZs under the Marine and Coastal Access Act may overlap European SACs or may be additional to them.

At present, NE is committed to making final recommendations on the designation of a network of marine conservation zones by June 2011.

The main reason for the establishment of the Coalition was the potential for the marine conservation zones and special areas of conservation to displace fishermen from their customary fishing grounds. The Coalition has repeatedly made the point that inadequate attention was being given to the potentially disruptive consequences of displacement, not only for the vessels directly affected, but for adjacent or even distant areas into which fishing effort is displaced. Again the Coalition seems to have made progress in this area insofar as Defra have now agreed to set up a working group to study both the ecological implications of displacement and the consequences and options for the fishing vessels affected.

The Coalition will continue to hold Natural England to account through direct meetings with senior officials; the next meeting will be in November after the publication of the second iteration by the regional projects. In the meantime, a meeting between the Coalition and the Minister, who will ultimately be responsible for all MPA decisions, will be held; and the Coalition will be meeting with Defra on the displacement issue.