2.7. HALIBUT Hippoglossus hippoglossus

2.7.1. Landings and effort

On January 1, 2012 the halibut fishery in Icelandic waters was closed and fishermen were ordered to release all halibut bycatch that could survive being released. Landings of halibut decreased dramatically. Recorded landings in 2012 were about 35 tonnes, of which 30 tonnes were caught in bottom trawls. Lobster trawlers landed 2.6 tonnes and longlines about one ton. From 1996–2011 halibut landings in Icelandic waters were less than 1 000 tonnes.

Total halibut landings are shown on figure 2.7.1 and in table 3.7.1. Data on halibut landings is available dating back to 1905 and they show that landings have never been as small as in the aforementioned period, with the exception of the duration of WWII.

Annual bottom trawl landings decreased steadily from about 1 000 tonnes in 1985 and 1986 to about 200 tonnes in 1998 and were thereafter between 110–220 tonnes until 2011 when landings totalled only about 80 tonnes. Longline landings were about 1 100 tonnes in 1991 but decreased quickly to about 200 tonnes in 1997. Landings remained at about 200 tonnes until 2008 when they increased because of direct targeting with halibut lines (halibut-directed longlines with larger hooks) which landed about 400 tonnes in 2011. In the last years before the closure, about 70–90% of total Icelandic landings were caught with these two gears.

2.7.2. Stock status

Halibut biomass indices based on SMB data in 1985–2013 show similar trends to CPUE from Danish seine fishing. The biomass index decreased rapidly early in this period and has been at a minimum since 1992 (figure 2.7.2). These results confirm that halibut stocks declined in the period 1985–1992 and that they are at an historical low.

Halibut caught in the SMB are predominately by age 3-5 immature fish. These year classes have been at a minimum for two decades which certifies that the stock has experienced recruitment failure. This condition is such that the stock will remain at a minimum for years to come.

2.7.3. Advice for quota year 2013/2014

Due to the poor condition of the halibut stock, the Fisheries Minister created a work group tasked with finding ways to protect the stock. This work group returned the recommendation in January, 2011 that the most productive solution was a closure of the fishery. In continuation of these results, the MRI reviewed all data regarding other ways to conserve the halibut stock. Furthermore, seasoned captains
were consulted to create a discourse on various ways to help the stock recover. The conclusion was that the best thing to add to the closure was that any live halibut caught as bycatch would be released, considering that they are hardy fish thought to be able to survive some handling. Following the recommendation from MRI, the Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture adopted the previously described regulations.

MRI recommends a continued effort to find other solutions to aid the recovery of halibut stock and that the current regulation remain in place until such time as significant recovery of that stock is observed.