Opening statement by Iceland, at the 38th Annual Meeting of NEAFC

Mr. President, dear colleagues and observers

I would like to start by thanking the President, the other Contracting Parties and the Secretariat for good cooperation and valuable work since the last Annual Meeting.

Thankfully, we generally cooperate well on many issues, and have together built NEAFC into a world leader among RFMOs. However, we can not overlook the difficult challenges we face and have been unable to overcome. For far too long we have not been able to agree on the management of the shared pelagic stocks in the Northeast Atlantic, and have not managed to keep our combined catches consistent with the respective ICES advice, which must always be the basis for our management. This is a situation that significantly undermines our collective reputation as leading, responsible fishing nations and will in the long run inevitably undermine NEAFC’s reputation.

We are all well aware of the situation and we have made several attempts to solve the problem. We all know that what we need is more willingness and more flexibility than we have seen so far, and we all have to look not only at our counterparts but also at ourselves to see if we can do more to contribute to a conclusion. We are willing to take part in any discussions that are likely to lead us forward in this and would like to assure everyone that Iceland will certainly make every effort to find solutions. We have tried to be proactive in finding ways forward and will continue to do that. We know that this concern is shared by all the other Contracting Parties and therefore trust that we will continue to have intense discussions in order to find ways to resolve our differences. Of course, these discussions are mostly within the framework of the coastal State consultations, and not within NEAFC. However, as the failure to reach comprehensive agreements within the coastal State fora directly impacts NEAFC, we feel that it is important to highlight this issue again in our opening statement here at the NEAFC Annual Meeting.

Regrettably, herring, blue whiting and mackerel are not the only stocks where we have failed to reach an agreement, with the result that overall catches go beyond the scientific advice. This problem is even bigger for the pelagic redfish stocks in the Irminger Sea and adjacent waters, which we continue to be very concerned about. The ICES advice has been very clear for a number of years, and continues to be that there should be zero catches from the stocks. We have been disappointed in recent years that there has not been sufficient support for following the scientific advice, but hope that this time we can agree to take the appropriate measures to meet the worrying state of the stocks and adopt measures for a 0-fishery. This is not a case where the difficult issue is reaching an agreement on a sharing arrangement, but rather a case of deciding whether we can agree to follow scientific advice, which should be simpler.

In recent years, Iceland has tabled a proposal for conservation and management measures for the Irminger Sea redfish that are consistent with the ICES advice. We have been disappointed that there has not been sufficient support for such proposals for them to be adopted. Once our own proposal has been defeated, Iceland has abstained from voting on a separate proposal tabled by others, which has included allowed catches in defiance of the ICES advice. The inconsistency with the ICES advice has made it impossible for Iceland to support these proposals, but the abstention has allowed for them to be adopted without Iceland’s support.
After examining the issue further, Iceland has now come to the conclusion that it is not acceptable to have conservation and management measures in place that so blatantly go against the ICES advice. We have therefore concluded that even if there will still not be sufficient support for our redfish proposal, we will vote against any other proposal that blatantly disregards the ICES advice. We realise that this may result in no measures for the redfish stocks in the Irminger Sea being adopted at this meeting, but we sincerely hope that other Contracting Parties can agree to join us in accepting the scientific advice, and in any case not set unilateral quotas that allow for catches from fish stocks that have for some years been subject to ICES advice on zero catches.

On a happier note, we continue to welcome the fact that NEAFC remains a leading RFMO when it comes to the protection of vulnerable marine ecosystems and the management of deep sea fisheries. The formally agreed NEAFC approach for deep sea species, and the revised general conservation and management measures for deep sea fisheries have closed a gap that previously existed in our regime and ensured that we have measures in place to address all four categories in the NEAFC approach. 2019 is the first year that this new system is in full effect, after the previous out-dated effort limitation for deep sea species expired.

The North-East Atlantic also remains a global leader in cross-sectoral cooperation and coordination among international organisations with complementary legal competences. We remain committed to continuing the cooperation under the Collective Arrangement with OSPAR, including to expand it with involvement by other relevant organisations, and note possible interest from NAMMCO in that context.

Another positive development is the Electronic Reporting System, or ERS, which we finally agreed on at the Annual Meeting a year ago. Of course, much work still needs to be done to resolve all issues related to its implementation, but the fact that we are now working on the implementation aspects rather than still trying to agree on the basic design of the system shows how much we can achieve if we work well together. ERS is certainly an example of current activities that reinforce NEAFC’s position as a leading RFMO globally.

To conclude, I would like to also bring attention to the work of the Working Group on Fisheries Statistics. This group’s work has revolutionised the quality of NEAFC’s statistical information in recent years. Iceland welcomes the fact that the Working Group continues to improve NEAFC’s practices, including with a proposal to this year’s Annual Meeting to amend the statistics Recommendation, and that it continues with its more long-term task of building what has informally been referred to as the “one-stop-shop”.

President, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to end this opening statement by expressing my hope that we will have constructive discussions this week that will lead to this being a fruitful meeting.