**Document 5.3**

Fish, fisheries and fisheries management in the Arctic Ocean

Globally significant fisheries take place in the seas surrounding the Arctic Ocean. The pollock fisheries in the Bering Sea and the cod fisheries in the Barents Sea are among the largest in the world. Large fish stocks require large feeding areas. Global warming has brought warmer waters and reduced ice cover in the Arctic, facilitating the northwards extension of fish stocks such as capelin and cod. This has brought speculations that commercial fisheries might develop in the Central Arctic Ocean.

By



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The Arctic Ocean is situated to the north of the landmass of the five coastal states the Russian Federation, USA, Canada, Denmark/Greenland and Norway. In the middle of that ocean there is an area beyond the jurisdiction of the coastal states. That international area is 2.8 million km2, about four times the size of the North Sea. It is ice covered most of the year. It is expected that summer ice extent will continue to be reduced in the years ahead, leaving an increasing part of the high seas area open in late summer and early fall.

For a fish stock to extend its range into new areas, it needs the right water temperatures, it has to find food, bottom topography has to be suitable, and spawning grounds should not be too far away. These conditions are not in place in the deep Central Arctic Ocean for groundfish like cod or haddock. Pelagic species like polar cod, which live in the water column and thrive on cold water conditions, might spread into the deep water areas. This has brought concerns that vessels from distant water fishing nations can initiate an unregulated fishery in the international waters beyond the 200 mile zones. Parts of this area, off Alaska and Northeast Russia, have been ice free in summer in recent years.

These concerns have also brought discussions of how to manage potential future fisheries in the area beyond national jurisdiction. The five coastal states have considered the issue for several years, taking the existing international legal framework for the oceans as their point of departure. The 1982 Law of the Sea Convention as well as the 1995 UN Fish Stocks Convention oblige states to cooperate on resource management in the areas beyond the 200 mile zones. In the North Atlantic regional bodies for the management of fish stocks in international waters exist, the Northeast Atlantic Fisheries Commission being one of them. Its mandate extends all the way to the North Pole.

Norway held a meeting among government officials of the five coastal states in Oslo in 2010. The outcome of this meeting was a request to marine research institutes to assess the situation regarding fish stocks in the Arctic Ocean and relevant research. A meeting of scientists took place in Anchorage in 2011 and concluded that commercial fisheries are not likely to emerge in the Central Arctic Ocean in the short term. It also pointed to a continued need for research in this area.

Another meeting among government officials took place in Washington D.C. in spring 2013. This meeting requested additional information from the scientists, in particular regarding the probability of commercial fisheries emerging in the areas beyond national jurisdiction in the Central Arctic Ocean. It also discussed measures to prevent potential unregulated fisheries. A second meeting of scientists on fish stocks in the Arctic Ocean was held in Tromsø in October 2013, assessing existing arrangements for surveying the marine ecosystems in the Arctic Ocean and the resources there and providing recommendations in this regard. As before, it was concluded that it is not likely that demersal fish will expand into the deep basin of the Central Arctic Ocean.

Government officials met again in Nuuk 24-26 February this year where they agreed that scientific research to better understand the living marine resources of the Arctic Ocean is to continue, that interim measures to prevent the development of IUU (illegal, unregulated and unreported) fishing in the area beyond the 200 mile zones in the Central Arctic Ocean should be introduced, and that a broader process involving more countries will be initiated by the end of 2014. This process could have a binding international agreement as its outcome. As of yet, Norway is the only country who prohibits vessels flying its flag to fish in unregulated waters, including that of the Central Arctic Ocean.

Even with a continued reduction in ice cover in the Central Arctic Ocean, potential future fishery is likely to be mainly within the 200 mile zones of the coastal states. The five coastal states are all major fishing nations and have extensive management regimes for their fisheries. Where fish stocks are shared between two countries, bilateral arrangements exist for cooperation on management, such as the Norway-Russia bilateral fisheries commission. What the process outlined above adds to this established system, is a commitment on the part of the five coastal states to prevent vessels flying their flag to engage in unregulated fisheries on the high seas in the Central Arctic Ocean, should such a possibility emerge. Also, an intention to initiate a broader process to involve more states is stated, as are continued efforts in scientific research.

In a larger perspective, the more important aspect of this development in the North is that the five coastal states demonstrate to themselves and others that a coastal state responsibility is to act in advance of future challenges to promote the desired outcomes.