



CONSEIL CONSULTATIF POUR
LES EAUX OCCIDENTALES
SEPTENTRIONALES

NORTH WESTERN
WATERS
ADVISORY COUNCIL

CONSEJO CONSULTIVO PARA
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MINUTES

WORKING GROUP 2 (CELTIC SEA & WEST OF SCOTLAND)

Wednesday 13 March 2024

14:00 – 15:30

The Printworks, Dublin Castle, Dublin

1. Welcome and introductions

The meeting was chaired by Jean-Marie Robert, Working Group 2 Vicechair, replacing Suso Lourido Garcia who was not able to travel to Dublin and sent its apologies. Further apologies were received from Kenatea Chavez-Hey (ANOP), Franck Le Barzic (Cobrenord) and John Lynch (ISEFPO).

The agenda was adopted with the addition of an item under AOB for an update on discussions ongoing on the Nephrops fishery in the Porcupine Bank by Aodh O'Donnell.

Action points from the last meeting (13 September 2023) include:

1	Members will send input to the consultation to the Secretariat by 20 September, matching the consultation format available online as much as possible. The Secretariat will then check which response format is possible and prepare draft advice based on previous advice and comments received from members.
	Response to UK consultation on discards submitted on 9 October
2	The Secretariat will share an updated version of the traffic light choke spreadsheet after the meeting. Members will review it and send comments on West of Scotland stocks to the Secretariat.
	Choke advice in preparation by FG LO
3	Pending issues of catch composition and application of the technical measures regulation across MS will be addressed with EFCA directly.
	Raised with EFCA at workshop on 16 January, to be followed up by FG Control
4	The Secretariat will draft letter to the Commission requesting that ICES and STECF are asked to look into mesh sizes and derogations for hake respectively.
	Letter sent on 8 December, awaiting reply
5	The Secretariat will draft a letter to the Commission on the need of constructive collaboration, specifically on technical matters.
	No letter sent, but topic raised at bilateral between DG MARE and Secretariat on 2 February – DG MARE is understaffed
6	Following the meeting on 26 September organised by DG MARE on VMEs, the AC will discuss how to follow up on this topic during ExCom meeting on 27 September.
	Letter sent on 17 November, response received on 29 January – to be addressed under item 4



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2. Technical Measures in the Celtic Sea

a. Update on EU-UK discussions

The Chair explained that at the last Inter-AC Brexit Forum on 5 February and at the Inter-AC meeting on 6 February, the Commission said that the EU has a commitment with the UK to improve measures for cod and whiting in the Celtic Sea. This is a priority topic for SCF in 2024. The two parties will be looking at effectiveness of remedial measures for cod and whiting in the Celtic Sea aiming for a level playing field. These measures can be both spatial and gear-based and would involve whiting as well. Technical meetings were held in the previous months to initiate the discussion and narrow down measures that could be considered. It is also important to refine the area where these measures are needed. Similar work is planned for whiting in the Irish Sea.

The NWWAC asked for clarification on how ACs and regionalisation overall can feed into this work and if regional MS Groups will be requested to produce joint recommendations. The Commission is still figuring out how regionalisation can be fully realised, whether there should be joint recommendations and what they should include. Nevertheless, at the February Inter-AC meeting, DG MARE Director General Charlina Vitcheva invited the NWWAC to get involved and contribute to this work.

The Chair pointed out that the NWWAC hasn't received any information on the latest scientific analysis on technical measures including data from the UK. *"This is a recurrent matter and we need to fully understand the situation in each MS"* he said, asking members' feedback. He reported that in France discussions between the administration and the sector started 5 years ago and at the time the sum of discards and landings was above scientific recommendations. However, things have changed since then, due to both a decrease in the number of vessels due to Brexit and significant progress in selectivity, and currently this sum is in line with ICES advice. This challenges the rationale for strengthening technical measures. In his opinion, the AC should recommend the updating of the scientific perception and the state of fleet activity in light of the new ICES advice and the number of vessels that took the French and Irish fleet exit plans due to Brexit.

Emiel Brouckaert added that in Belgium the main fleet is beam trawlers, which is not as much affected by technical measures. However, he pointed out that, considering environmental changes, it might not be meaningful to work aiming for a return of cod in the Celtic Sea.

Irene Prieto and José Beltran explained that for the Spanish organisations they represent the situation is similar to Belgium, with beam trawlers and long liners not being so affected by technical measures. However, there have been issues with mesh sizes in the Celtic Sea.

Referring to the situation in Ireland, Patrick Murphy mentioned complications in the understanding of the technical measures regulation in different areas, in particular in relation to mesh sizes and catch compositions. The Irish sector is concerned about lack of harmonised interpretation of the regulation by the different control agencies.

The Chair asked him whether seasonal closures for cod are considered appropriate by the Irish sector and Murphy replied that it is not the case, because the historical catch data is not quite



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correct due to vessels catch compositions which were not properly evaluated. Moving fishing ground to avoid cod could lead to choke issues or to the use of more fuel to catch the target species, affecting the financial viability of the fishery.

Taking into account participants' interventions and previous discussions within the AC, the Chair felt confident that the AC would be in the position to prepare advice to the Commission on technical measures, pointing out especially that:

- The AC has not received the most recent scientific data on technical measures in the Celtic Sea including information from the last data collection campaign by the UK.
- The Commission should consider the impact of the post-Brexit situation in relation to a decrease in the number of vessels active in the Celtic Sea as well as the most recent ICES advice.
- NWWAC members seem to agree that seasonal closures nor additional technical measures are needed. Rules that apply to fisheries operating in the Celtic Sea should be simplified.

ACTION: In response to DG Vitcheva's request at the last Inter-AC meeting in February 2024 and following up on the STECF EWG 23-15 meeting, the NWWAC should prepare advice on technical measures in the Celtic Sea. This advice should also include a request to receive results from the data collection campaign recently carried by the UK.

The Chair then referred to the comment made by Brouckaert - is it still possible for cod in the Celtic Sea to recover? There seems to be lack of operational understanding about the effects of climate change, in particular the increase of water temperature, which influences cod reproduction. He therefore proposed to organise a webinar inviting both experts working on cod stock assessments and scientists researching ocean warming (such as the Copernicus project) to discuss the topic and gather relevant information.

Beltran added that there was a publication by AZTI on Nature magazine on warming of ocean waters and it would be interesting to take it into account.

ACTION: A webinar should be organized by the NWWAC in June 2024 on scientific assessment of the Celtic Sea cod stock and the impact of climate change, inviting involved scientists, NWW Member States representatives and DG MARE.

b. Follow up on STECF EWG 23-15

The STECF Expert Working Group on the Implementation of the Technical Measures Regulation took place on 22-26 January and was attended by John Lynch, Jean-Marie Robert and Matilde Vallerani as observers. The European Commission had requested STECF to discuss how it could be possible to conduct socio-economic assessments of the implementation of the Technical Measures Regulation, especially regarding improvements in selectivity. NWWAC observers provided input both during the meeting and in writing via email after the meeting.

The Chair remarked that AC members should have a closer look to STECF work on technical measures due to the relevance of the topic and the work progressing which will impact technical



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measures in the NWW. In his opinion, the work of the EWG was very conceptual but more clarification should come from the publication of the report of the meeting.

3. NWW MS proposal for survivability exemption for spurdog

The Chair explained that the NWW MS are working on a survivability exemption for spurdog under 100 cm size caught in otter trawls in ICES subareas 6 & 7. In particular, the draft joint recommendation received in January 2024 states that *“the introduction of the maximum landing size of 100cm creates difficulties for compliance with the landing obligation, as this provision requires fishermen to discard spurdog above 100cm. Given this seeming contradiction and the indications of reasonably high survivability of discarded spurdog, the North western Waters group requests the introduction of a high survivability exemption for spurdog caught with bottom trawls in ICES divisions 6 and 7”*. Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM) in Ireland is conducting study to support this exemption request. The Chair gave the floor to Ronan Cosgrove (BIM) to present on their research. Slides are available [here](#).

Cosgrove explained that a case for a survivability exemption for spurdog was submitted in 2023 based on findings from a review of available scientific literature, a planned full-scale assessment of spurdog survival and new data on the condition and vitality of spurdog caught in Irish otter trawl fisheries. STECF concluded that more information on fish survival, catches and discarding is needed in the new spurdog fishery. Work in this regard is ongoing.

Cosgrove gave some background on the species and the fishery. The quota for spurdog is around 1900 t in 2023 and 2024. Catches are sporadic and they mainly occur in winter months when weather is poor, which makes it challenging to carry out the research. Spurdog generally need to swim to breathe and literature suggests higher survival in bottom trawls than gillnet fisheries. Satellite tagging with survivorship pop-up archival tags (SPATS) was conducted in 2023 in trawl fisheries and more is planned in 2024, while observations of fish condition in set nets are ongoing.

469 fish were assessed over 7 trips on board trawlers to date. The majority of trawl-caught spurdog (72%) was in poor, moribund or dead condition. 10 spurdog in excellent or good condition were tagged with SPATS in October 2023 in ICES 7b. The size range was between 80 and 100m. SPATs were programmed to pop off after 30 days. Data from the tagging exhibited a distinct diel vertical behaviour.

Vitality assessments were also carried out in gillnets in 2024, with 90 fish assessed over 5 trips on board gillnetters to date. Just over half of gillnet caught spurdog (51%) in excellent or good condition. Further assessment needed on this fishery.

Cosgrove concluded its presentation by identifying the next steps of BIM work, which include performing further SPAT tagging on trawler. BIM will also continue assessing spurdog condition in trawl and gillnet fisheries and building evidence base on spurdog survivability. A progress report is due in early April.

Murphy asked if there were different levels of survivability based on the size of the fish.



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Cosgrove replied that it seems that bigger fish are in better conditions than smaller fish, but more data are needed before this conclusion can be confirmed.

Murphy explained that the size is important to the marketplace and he was hoping there would be no difference between releasing smaller and larger individuals because there is a requirement to release spurdog larger than 100cm.

The Chair felt that the forbidden landing of spurdog of more than 100cm might not be so much linked to the fish survival capacity, but rather to the regulatory framework that existed before the closure in 2009/2010, when the scientific advice for this species was really bad. With the advice improving over the years and following discussions with the UK, the fishery was reopened but with an extra precautionary approach instead of properly managing the stock. Thus, the work carried out by BIM is very relevant.

ACTION: The WG will continue following the work by BIM on spurdog and consider the final report of the ongoing campaign for advice to the NWW Member States.

4. VMEs: follow up on STECF scoping meeting 20 February

The Commission announced a socio-economic assessment of the VMEs closures to be undertaken by STECF in the course of 2024, building on the conclusions of the 2023 STECF opinion. The NWWAC was invited to take part in a meeting on 20 February under the STECF guidance to undertake such an assessment. Both the Chair and Prieto attended the meeting.

The Chair explained that the meeting focused on the socio-economic analysis of potential closures and especially on the methods to be used in this analysis. He felt it was important to note that the Commission has decided to follow the STECF's working method, carrying out work throughout 2024 which will form the basis for the future revision of the Implementing Act, which will probably not take place until the very end of 2024 or the beginning of 2025. He expressed his disappointment as the AC had submitted advice to the Commission last year pointing out a number of issues and it seems that the revision process will take a very long time. *"We cannot be satisfied with this, also because we don't have certainty that the issues we've raised will be addressed. We know that ICES is also working to improve their assessment, but we have no specific indication on how that work is progressing"*.

Prieto agreed with the Chair and added that there should be another meeting organised by STECF on 15 September.

Beltran added that there seems to be a lack of empathy from the Commission despite the socio-economic impacts on the sector and the clear issue of lack of data in both ICES and STECF assessments.

ACTION: Issues and concerns regarding VMEs to be raised with DG MARE at ExCom meeting on 20 March.



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5. AOB

Aodh O'Donnell felt it was important to inform members on a stakeholder initiative in relation to the Nephrops fishery on the Porcupine bank. This ties with discussions on VMEs, as fishers have been displaced from a very valuable fishing ground. Scientific advice is still good for the area and ICES recommendations for this year were for a significant increase in TAC. There is a stakeholder initiative in Ireland, a partnership between scientists and the sector, to have a survey to look at the optimization of the catching months for this species, both in terms of value and biology. The project started in 2023 and it was led by ISEFPO, involving 12 vessels over 3 months in 2023. This year surveys will be repeated to gather more data but over a period of 4 months. The key element to look at will be the socio-economic aspects on how to optimise the closure period. O'Donnell suggested this is kept on the agenda and under review by the Working Group.

The Chair asked O'Donnell if a preliminary report is already available to share with members and what kind of follow-up he would recommend.

O'Donnell replied that certainly the data gathered so far can be shared and it could be arranged at the next meeting that the Marine Institute presents on the progress of the work. He felt there is also possibly scope for the data to be collected from vessels from other MS active in the area.

ACTION: The WG will continue following ongoing work on the Nephrops fishery in the Porcupine Bank. Aodh O'Donnell will share the report from the first assessment from 2023 and additional information when available.

6. Summary of actions agreed and decisions adopted by the Chair

1	In response to DG Vitcheva's request at the last Inter-AC meeting in February 2024 and following up on the STECF EWG 23-15 meeting, the NWWAC should prepare advice on technical measures in the Celtic Sea. This advice should also include a request to receive results from the data collection campaign recently carried by the UK.
2	A webinar should be organized by the NWWAC in June 2024 on scientific assessment of the Celtic Sea cod stock and the impact of climate change, inviting involved scientists, NWW Member States representatives and DG MARE.
3	The WG will continue following the work by BIM on spurdog and consider the final report of the ongoing campaign for advice to the NWW Member States.
4	Issues and concerns regarding VMEs to be raised with DG MARE at ExCom meeting on 20 March.
5	The WG will continue following ongoing work on the Nephrops fishery in the Porcupine Bank. Aodh O'Donnell will share the report from the first assessment from 2023 and additional information when available.
6	Follow up on Celtic Sea whiting recovery (proposed and agreed by ExCom based on dialogue with DG MARE)



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7. Participants list

Members

Name	Organisation
Jose Beltran	OPP-7 BURELA
Emiel Brouckaert	Rederscentrale
Enda Conneely	IIMRO
Gérald Hussenot Desenonges	BLUEFISH
Manu Kelberine	CRPMEM de Bretagne
Olivier Lepretre	Comité Des Peches Des Hauts De France
Anaïs Mourtada	CNPMEM
Patrick Murphy	Irish South & West Fish Producers Organisation
Aodh O Donnell	Irish Fish Producers Organisation
Alexandra Philippe	EBCD
Irene Prieto	OPPF4
Dominic Rihan	Killybegs Fishermens Organisation
Jean-Marie Robert	Pêcheurs de Bretagne PO
Despina Symons	EBCD
Arthur Yon	FROM Nord

Observers & experts

Name	Organisation
Daragh Browne	Bord Iascaigh Mhara
Ronan Cosgrove	Bord Iascaigh Mhara
Alexandre Rodriguez	Long Distance Advisory Council

NWWAC Secretariat

Name	Role
Mo Mathies	Executive Secretary
Matilde Vallerani	Deputy Executive Secretary