



MINUTES

WORKING GROUP 2 (CELTIC SEA & WEST OF SCOTLAND)

Online meeting on Zoom
Wednesday 9 October 2024, 09:30 – 11:30 CET

1. Welcome and introductions

The Chair Suso Angel Lourido Garcia welcomed all participants to the meeting. Apologies were received from Dominic Rihan (KFO) and Patrick Murphy (IS&WFPO). The agenda was adopted as drafted. Action points from the minutes of the last meeting include:

1. The Secretariat will keep members informed regarding the organisation of an update session on VMEs by DG MARE. This could also be organized as part of the next WG2 meeting.

Caroline Alibert from MARE C.1 and Ralf Doring from STECF joined the Working Group for a presentation under item 2

2. Comments made following presentation of ICES advice will be taken into account in the preparation of the AC advice on Fishing Opportunities by the FG Landing Obligation. Members are invited to send any other contribution via email before the FG meeting on 24 July.

This action point was completed as the advice on Fishing Opportunities was submitted in August 2024.

3. The Secretariat will circulate the report from the webinar on cod and climate change held on 12 June. Members are invited to go back to the Secretariat with any comment/suggestion on actions to follow up on that meeting.

This action point was completed, the report shared on 16 July and circulated again in advance of this meeting.

4. The WG should continue to address the management of the hake northern stock as a priority topic.

To be kept on the agenda.

5. Updates on the ongoing work on the Nephrops fishery in the Porcupine Bank are expected at the next WG2 meeting in March 2025.

To be kept on the agenda.

6. Follow up on DG MARE's response to letter on Technical Measures in the Celtic Sea Letter shared with members in advance of this meeting.

2. VMEs socio-economic analysis

The Chair invited Ralf Doring (EWG 24-09 Chair) to take the floor and give an update on the STECF work on socio-economic impacts of VMEs closures and key dates for the delivery of the final advice. His slides are available [here](#).



Doring began to explain that STECF is requested to do an additional analysis on the socioeconomic impacts of the closures. DG MARE had requested this analysis, which focused on two issues: the displacement effects of fishing vessels due to closures and the impacts on small-scale fisheries. These two areas became the main points for further investigation after initial discussions within STECF.

Doring explained that the analysis aimed to gather input from stakeholders, particularly regarding the socioeconomic impacts not apparent in applied models. This is part of a feedback loop to improve the accuracy of the modeling results, especially regarding vessel displacement. He noted that 2023 data on vessel movements would be available in 2024 which allows first analyses of what happened after the closures. The process began with initial analysis of data up to the year 2022 and stakeholder feedback, including exchanges during previous meetings. He emphasized that stakeholder information would help refine the analysis.

He then made a specific request for stakeholders to share any relevant data or qualitative insights on the socioeconomic impacts of the closures. This information will be used in a working group meeting in February, but only publicly available data can be included. Doring also mentioned that he planned to conduct interviews to get a reality check on the model results, ensuring that personal data would be anonymized and interviews recorded and transcribed in compliance with data protection rules.

Finally, Doring outlined the three phases of the project: explaining the process and collecting data, receiving feedback on the modeling results, and preparing a final report in a working group meeting in March 2025. He provided information about the working group's schedule and clarified that observers would be able to participate in specific sessions focused on issues like displacement and small-scale fisheries.

Before opening the floor for questions, the Chair asked how small-scale fisheries are being defined in the study, particularly whether the definition being used is the one outlined in the CFP. Displacements in NWW happen differently compared to regions like the Gulf of Biscay, implying that the definition might need to account for these regional differences.

Doring clarified that there are two separate issues under discussion. The first is the displacement effects, which affect all fleets, not just small-scale ones, as far as the available data allows. The second issue pertains specifically to small-scale fishing around the Iberian Peninsula. These two topics emerged from the initial round of data analysis. He emphasized that the displacement analysis involves larger vessels as well, not just small-scale ones. However, small-scale vessels require special attention because there is typically less reliable data on them. Instead of strictly using the technical definition of "small-scale" (under 12 meters), they are focusing on vessels that use passive fishing gear, which better reflects the fleet in the Iberian Peninsula, where vessels tend to be larger than 12 meters.

Jose Beltran mentioned that data had already been requested from stakeholders a few weeks ago. Specifically, his Producers Organization (OPP7 Burela) had sent data to the European Commission, and Beltran expressed the hope that the Commission would forward it to the STECF. They submitted two reports: one on the impact of displacement on commercial longliners and another focused on specific activities of this type of fleet. He highlighted a shortcoming of the VME regulation: it applies to all fleets and regions equally, without differentiating the varied impacts across different fleets or fishing areas. Beltran flagged that the closures occurred in fishing grounds where these commercial longliners typically operated. With the closures, these fleets have been displaced to other fishing



grounds, resulting in negative impacts. The displacement forces them to travel farther or to fish in areas with less favorable conditions. Beltran pointed out that the reports include public data and hoped the STECF would take these findings into account.

Jean-Marie Robert pointed out that while the task of identifying the impacts and consequences of fishing closures is complex, one straightforward approach would be to calculate the turnover of vessels in each area before the closures. Modeling the consequences would be much more difficult because the responses from vessels would vary significantly. For instance, some vessels have been destroyed due to a lack of fishing opportunities caused by the closures, and this was the feedback received from some companies. Robert also pointed out the challenge of addressing the coexistence of different fishing gears after the closures, as vessels are now more concentrated in the remaining open areas. He questioned how the impact of this concentration could be effectively modeled. He finally raised concerns about how the results of the modeling exercise might be used in decision-making. While he felt that turnover data from each area could be useful for the decision-making process, he was skeptical about the practicality and utility of the more complex modeling. He asked for clarification on how the process would move from calculating turnover, as developed by ICES, to conducting a modeling exercise that could influence future political decisions.

Starting from Robert's intervention, Doring replied by acknowledging the complexity of the modeling exercise and agreed that any information on vessels that went out of business due to the closures would be highly useful. He agreed that modeling the real-world effects is challenging but emphasized that the goal is to capture aspects like crowding effects, i.e. where vessels are concentrated in certain areas due to closures. He explained that the current model focuses on displacement effects and fishing efforts and, though originally developed for another area, it can be adapted for the present regions. Doring admitted that they face a significant challenge due to the absence of a bioeconomic model that covers the stocks and fleets of interest for these particular fisheries. In other fisheries, they have such models that allow for deeper analysis, but this is not the case here. The intention is to see crowding and displacement effects through modeling and complement the results with interviews to gather feedback. He mentioned that a literature review was being conducted, which includes not only academic papers but all relevant information they've received. He also assured that the reports mentioned earlier, such as those on longliners, would be taken into account and integrated into a preliminary report for the Commission by November.

Caroline Alibert-Deprez confirmed reception of documents sent by OP Burela, which have been transmitted to STECF. She stated that all documentation received from stakeholders before 16 September has been taken into account in the literature review, which will give grounds for a specific report to be considered by STECF in their future analyses. Regarding timing for review of current closures, Alibert-Deprez clarified that the socio-economic analysis on VMEs is not only looking at current closures but will also consider future closures under the new ICES advice released in September 2024. Therefore, the process will take into account the socio-economic aspects of the current closures (ICES advice 2021) and future closures (ICES advice 2024).

John Lynch asked about the level of detail in the questionnaire related to the study. He was specifically concerned with how detailed the spatial questions would be regarding vessel movements and turnover. He wanted to know if the spatial data would be fine-grained enough to capture small movements of vessels and their impact on turnover. He asked if the questionnaire would allow for a more precise spatial analysis than just looking at broad areas like statistical rectangles, hoping that smaller shifts in vessel location and corresponding reductions in turnover would be visible in the data.



Doring replied that the model does not have such fine resolution. This is why STECF needs stakeholder input to complete what the data are showing. Additional information is needed as the impact could be severe for certain fleets.

Edward Farrell asked about the [new ICES VME advice](#) published at the end of September, which included significant changes to the Celtic Sea area, particularly concerning the polygons and closures previously identified. Farrell mentioned that ICES had reviewed some areas, corrected mistakes in the data, and stated that certain closures were not backed by an evidence base. He expressed concern that some of these changes seemed urgent and sought clarification on the timeline for addressing them. Specifically, he asked whether they would need to wait for the socioeconomic analysis to be completed before these issues could be addressed and how long it might take for those changes to occur.

Alibert-Deprez replied that she expects some MS to reach out to the Commission regarding the need to review the VME polygons. She emphasized the importance of first understanding the socioeconomic impact before proceeding with a full revision of the areas and noted that the final socioeconomic opinion from the STECF would be available in March. After that, she estimated that a proposal for a new list of areas for an implementing act could be expected during the course of 2025. Alibert-Deprez also mentioned that MS would need to meet in committee to vote on the new list, which could happen around the summer of 2025.

Robert asked when discussions would take place regarding the modalities to translate ICES advice into precise definitions for closure polygons. He provided an example of existing closures that have established buffer zones of varying sizes, questioning whether this approach effectively corresponds to the reality of protecting marine biodiversity. He emphasized the importance of analyzing the geographical factors since the c-squares in northern Europe are smaller than those in southern Europe, which affects access for vessels. He suggested that correcting the ICES advice could positively influence the socioeconomic analysis. Robert also brought up two appeals lodged with the European Commission over two years ago. While he did not wish to delve into the specifics of the appeals, he asked for any available information on the timeframe for a decision, as this decision could impact the broader exercise being discussed.

Alibert-Deprez responded that the appeal lodged with the Court of Justice addresses the issue of buffer zones. The Commission's position is that they do not intend to alter the zones identified by ICES, and any changes to these zones are not on the table. She added that there was a public hearing in July where the Court raised several questions, including those related to buffer zones and the total surface area of closures. She explained that it is unlikely that the court would make a judgment on the scientific methods used by ICES. However, she noted that the decision from the Court is anticipated to come in 2025, with March 2025 mentioned as a possible timeframe for more clarity. Alibert-Deprez highlighted that the 2024 ICES advice reinforces the scientific methods previously employed. She acknowledged that concerns and mistakes had been raised in the past on ICES advice on VMEs and that the ICES 2024 has addressed those, including those from industry stakeholders. Finally, she emphasized that the Commission would not challenge or question the definitions of the c-squares established in ICES advice and would continue to work based on the information provided by ICES.

ACTION: The NWWAC will continue the liaison with STECF on VMEs and members will remain available to contribute to STECF analysis with data and interviews.



3. Technical measures

The Chair had to leave the meeting due to unforeseen circumstances. The Working Group Vicechair, Jean-Marie Robert, replaced him for the remainder of the meeting.

Robert noted that there was a response from the Commission concerning technical measures received in June, and he suggested that members discuss this further. He felt that there is a need to revise technical measures in the Celtic Sea. There have been longstanding issues with the current measures, indicating that they are problematic. Specifically, he mentioned that when considering both catches and discards, they often exceed ICES recommendations, which has been identified as a main problem by the Commission and the UK. He emphasized the importance of considering factors like climate change and warming water temperatures in their discussions and actions. There is ongoing work related to these issues and it is essential to continue addressing them. Finally, he opened the floor for discussion, inviting members to contribute their perspectives on how the AC can move forward amidst these interconnected issues.

Matilde Vallerani added that her and Lynch will attend the next STECF Expert Working Group on the implementation of technical measures on 21-15 October. She noted that although the focus may not currently be on NWW, there might be general aspects that the AC could contribute to. She invited Doring, one of the co-chairs of the Expert Working Group, to take the floor.

Doring explained that the group is currently at a stage of assessing what can be done. In the upcoming meeting, they will focus on two specific cases: the Western Mediterranean and the Bay of Biscay, to explore the potential effects of increased gear selectivity. While they are not conducting a full analysis yet, they aim to determine if they have the necessary data and models to evaluate the impact of improved gear selectivity on bycatch reduction and its subsequent effects on stocks and fleets. The goal is to gather insights on these fisheries to inform future socioeconomic impact assessments, indicating a need for further work to accurately model these effects.

Le Barzic voiced concerns regarding the introduction of new selective gear in Celtic Sea fisheries, emphasizing two key issues. First, while the adoption of improved gear may benefit some fisheries, it could impose financial burdens on others. He acknowledged the importance of advancing gear technology but stressed the need to weigh these changes against their economic impact on different sectors. Second, he referenced a letter sent to the Commission in May, urging them to consider fleet reduction plans within each MS. Although the Commission responded, Le Barzic questioned whether the latest scientific advice from ICES sufficiently addresses the planned fleet reductions. He pointed out a notable decrease in hake stock, which is a positive development, and expressed hope that this trend will lead to reduced fishing pressure. However, he remained concerned about whether the Commission will fully incorporate fleet exit strategies and future data in their decision-making process.

Lynch asked about the upcoming EWG and how it will assess the implications of certain technical measures. He raised concern about the high levels of discarding in specific species within the Celtic Sea, despite the presence of highly selective fishing gears. He questioned the economic viability of using certain selective gears, noting that they may be designed to target only one or two species, while most fisheries in the Celtic Sea are mixed-species operations. He asked whether the EWG will evaluate the amount of fish caught using different types of gear and assess which gear derogations are being utilized and their economic viability. He emphasized the need for refining technical measures to reduce discards rather than forcing fishermen to adopt conservation measures that may



not be practical or economically feasible for their fisheries.

Doring replied that the matter ultimately falls under the Commission's jurisdiction. He noted that the EWG is not currently focusing on the Celtic Sea, having just held its second meeting. Doring mentioned that if their upcoming exercise is successful, they may inform the Commission that they can analyze cases in the Celtic Sea where increased selectivity might benefit fish stocks but could also negatively impact the fleet's economic viability. He emphasized the importance of ensuring that the methodologies used in their analyses are sound and that they have the right data before proceeding. Doring stated that they are still in the process of clarifying these aspects and gaining experience, particularly with mixed fisheries advice.

Robert acknowledged that while the STECF is starting with the Bay of Biscay as a case study to develop new methods, it will take time before those methods could be applied to the Celtic Sea. He highlighted that for the past two to three years, area closures have been a significant topic in discussions between the European Commission and the UK, and he expects it to resurface soon, possibly with an implementation date in 2025. He emphasized the importance of prioritizing this issue, recalling past discussions and the fact that vessel decommissioning in 2023 is starting to impact fishing dynamics. This change is now being reflected in ICES advice, which shows some progress. He suggested that the NWWAC should wait for the EWG report to gain a full overview of the situation, allowing for a detailed response to the Commission's letter.

ACTION: The NWWAC should follow up on the Commission's response to the AC letter on technical measures in the Celtic Sea, taking into account the new ICES advice, discussion at STECF EWG 24-16 and the impact of vessels decommissioning.

4. Review of draft advice on choke risk in the NWW – Celtic Sea & West of Scotland stocks

Vallerani shared the choke traffic light spreadsheet on screen. The document had been updated with the latest ICES advice and is the basis for NWWAC advice on choke risk in the NWW.

The Chair invited members to take the floor and express their views on the stocks that they consider having the higher choke risk.

Brouckaert proposed that the Secretariat shares the spreadsheet and ask members to comment, taking into account the new ICES advice and the advice on Fishing Opportunities for 2025 submitted by the NWWAC in August this year.

ACTION: The Secretariat will share the updated choke spreadsheet and invite members to send their comments. The input received will feed the preparation of advice by the Focus Group Landing Obligation.

Le Barzic expressed concern about significant declines in key fish stocks that affect the fishing industry and about the stability of ICES assessment. He mentioned fluctuations in the assessments for whiting, haddock and hake, emphasizing that such variability is unsustainable for businesses.

Lynch highlighted the severe challenges facing the Irish fishing fleet, particularly due to sole in the Celtic Sea. He explained that the fleet is dealing with an extreme "choke risk" from this stock, which



severely impacts their ability to fish for other species like megrim, monkfish, and now even *Nephrops*. The Irish quota for 7f,g is so small that Irish vessels are being forced to stop fishing for extended periods, sometimes up to a month, as they can't continue fishing. This is becoming a critical issue, restricting the overall fishing activity of the Irish fleet and making it harder for them to utilize their full allocations of other species.

Brouckaert mentioned the upcoming advice from ICES on skates and rays and *Nephrops*, which also should be added in the spreadsheet. He stressed the urgency of coordinating their advice with ongoing EU-UK bilateral discussions and suggested that any updates or elaborations on the Fishing Opportunities advice should be addressed by the Focus Group Landing Obligation.

Robert asked Brouckaert for clarification on the scientific efforts related to the Celtic Sea sole stock. He referenced the difficulties France is facing with this stock, which is assessed using ICES precautionary principle. Robert specifically inquired about the national scientific institute in Belgium that has been working for several years to improve the quality or category of the stock assessment. He asked Brouckaert to provide any updates or a timeline for when the results of this work might be incorporated into the official stock assessment process.

Brouckaert responded by explaining the challenge with methodology for changing stock categories. He pointed out that before changing the category, ICES requires a benchmarking exercise, which is a process many stocks undergo each year, but only a few are actually benchmarked due to capacity limitations. He acknowledged the problem with the precautionary approach, emphasizing that all available scientific information should be considered in decision-making, not just ICES advice.

Brouckaert mentioned that the Belgian institute involved in the DNA project might have been working on abundance estimates to compare stock figures year by year, but these results may not yet have been integrated into the ICES advice. He suggested it would be valuable to examine these results, especially for future assessments, though he wasn't sure if the Belgian institute's findings were already available.

Robert suggested reviewing all relevant stocks to identify the most urgent cases that need scientific benchmarking to improve advice. He added that this assessment should be further developed in other Working Groups too and eventually presented to the Executive Committee to form a comprehensive response.

ACTION: The NWWAC should draft advice to the Commission on stocks that urgently need their assessments improved through benchmark exercises.

5. AOB

Brouckaert referred to one of the action points from the July meeting, about the need to address the issue of hake, a fish stock that has seen its quota reduced by half over the last three years, causing significant impacts. He mentioned that although the topic of hake was not on the current meeting agenda, it is essential to include it in future action plans. He acknowledged that there had been a webinar on the topic and stressed the importance of revisiting and making decisions about hake. He also commented on the broader topics of cod and climate change discussed earlier, saying that everyone needs to take the time individually to understand these issues and work on them.



ACTION: The management of the hake northern stock should be kept on the agenda of this Working Group.

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

1. The NWWAC will continue the liaison with STECF on VMEs and members will remain available to contribute to STECF analysis with data and interviews.
2. The NWWAC should follow up on the Commission's response to the AC letter on technical measures in the Celtic Sea, taking into account the new ICES advice, discussion at STECF EWG 24-16 and the impact of vessels decommissioning.
3. The Secretariat will share the updated choke spreadsheet and invite members to send their comments. The input received will feed the preparation of advice by the Focus Group Landing Obligation.
4. The NWWAC should draft advice to the Commission on stocks that urgently need their assessments improved through benchmark exercises.
5. The management of the hake northern stock should be kept on the agenda of this Working Group.

7. Participants

NWWAC members

Name		Organisation
Jose	Beltran	OPP-7 BURELA
Emiel	Brouckaert	Rederscentrale
Edward	Farrell	KFO
Gerald	Hussenot	Blue Fish
Manu	Kelberine	CRPM de Bretagne
Julien	Lamothe	ANOP
Franck	Le Barzic	OP COBRENORD
Suso	Lourido	Puerto de Celeiro SA OPP77
John	Lynch	Irish South & East Fish Producers Organisation Ltd
Aodh	O Domhnaill	Irish Fish Producers Organisation
Irene	Prieto	OPPF4
Jean-Marie	Robert	Pêcheurs de Bretagne
Pauline	Stephan	CNPMEM
Arthur	Yon	FROM Nord

Observers

Name		Organisation
Caroline	Alibert-Deprez	DG MARE
Ralf	Doring	STECF
Pablo	Iraeta	Ministerio de Agricultura, Pesca y Alimentación



Mike	Park	SWFPA
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NWWAC Secretariat

Name	Organisation
Matilde Vallerani	Deputy Executive Secretary