CONSEIL CONSULTATIF POUR LES EAUX OCCIDENTALES SEPTENTRIONALES | NORTH WESTERN WATERS ADVISORY COUNCIL | CONSEJO CONSULTIVO PARA LAS AGUAS NOROCCIDENTALES

NWWAC Minutes

WORKING GROUP 3 (CHANNEL)

Wednesday, 04 March 2026
Copa Cogeca, Brussels & Online

1. Welcome and introductions

The Chair Manu Kelberine welcomed all participants to the meeting. Apologies were received from Arthur Yon, Dominic Rihan and David Vertegaal. The agenda was adopted. The Secretariat displayed a slide outlining the code of conduct for the meeting.

Action points from the last meeting (14 October 2026)

1	WG to follow up on topics of red mullet and lemon sole once more information is available from the NWW Member States Group
	On red mullet: During the last NWW MS TG on 25/02 - The Dutch Presidency informed that no update was available on this. The matter currently concerns primarily the Netherlands and France. The Netherlands has undertaken a socio-economic analysis to better understand the potential impacts of the proposed measures. Following recent governmental changes, discussions have resumed under a renewed ministerial mandate. The Presidency confirmed that the issue will remain on the agenda and that efforts will continue to progress the file. On lemon sole: no new updates.
2	Secretariat to organise a FG Seabass meeting as soon as new information is available from Ifremer.
	Postponed. The Ifremer study has not yet been published.
3	WG to follow up of the Multi Year Strategy implementation on scallop
	There are no new updates at the moment. We had expected to receive the first part of the scientific report by the end of January, but it has not yet arrived.
4	Secretariat to organise a Focus Group Scallop meeting to discuss progress and potential additional meetings in 2026
	Completed, we organised the FG meeting in December 2025.

2. Appointment of the new Working Group 3 Vice Chair

The Chair noted the need to appoint a new Vice Chair for WG3 following the resignation of Pauline Stephan from her position as Project Manager at the CNPMEM. The Chair expressed gratitude for P. Stephan's dedication and contributions over the past years and informed members that the NWWAC Secretariat had also thanked her for her active involvement and valuable input, which were greatly appreciated.

In accordance with the Rules of Procedure, the Secretariat had invited expressions of interest for

the WG3 Vice Chair position via email. An expression of interest was received from Falke De Sager, representing the Belgian Fisheries Producer Organisation. Members voted unanimously to appoint Falke De Sager as Vice Chair of WG3.

Falke De Sager thanked the members for appointing her as WG3 Vice-Chair and expressed her gratitude to the NWWAC for the opportunity, reaffirming her commitment to representing members in this working group.

3. Dialogue with DG MARE – Norman Graham, DG MARE C.5

The Chair welcomed Norman Graham from DG MARE C.5 and thanked him for joining the WG3 meeting in person, to provide an update on the current state of discussion between the EU and the UK, focusing in particular on the Channel.

N. Graham reported earlier that morning, the 11th meeting of the Working Group of the EU-UK Specialised Committee on Fisheries (SCF) had taken place. The Plenary will be held on 22 April. The meeting focused on reviewing the various commitments made during the EU–UK consultations and the follow-up work required in the coming months. Among the key topics discussed were technical measures, which had represented a significant component of last year's discussions.

He explained that the work under the SCF is currently organised into two main configurations. The first focuses on general fisheries management issues, including conservation and management aspects that are not stock-specific. This area of work is becoming increasingly important and was discussed during the morning session.

The second configuration focuses on a range of more specific topics, including technical measures and fishing opportunities in the Channel. Discussions in this configuration primarily relate to the scientific advice and to the implementation timelines for potential measures within the relevant legal frameworks, including possible UK legislation. Five agenda items have been discussed:

On technical measures, as part of last year's discussions with the UK, a decision was taken to introduce additional remedial measures in the Channel, Celtic Sea and Irish Sea. This is a legal requirement under both the EU and UK multiannual plans, which stipulate that when a stock falls below the biomass limit reference point, additional remedial measures must be adopted to ensure the rapid recovery of the stock concerned. The measures implemented should reflect the status of the stock, with more severe measures applied where the stock status is more critical.

In this context, the EU and the UK have committed to jointly developing a guidance note clarifying the practical application of certain technical measures. The document will specify which fisheries will be affected, the timeline for implementation, and the relevant technical parameters (e.g. mesh sizes, catch composition threshold, square mesh panels, etc.). The intention is to produce an aligned document between the EU and the UK, even if it will not formally be a joint publication. The aim is to finalise this guidance by the end of the month, given the importance of

providing sufficient time for the fishing industry to prepare for the upcoming changes.

On EU commitment with the UK to develop rebuilding plans/strategies for depleted stocks, this is expected to become a major area of cooperation with the UK in the coming months. In the written record of the last year, the establishment of a technical team is envisaged to develop the rebuilding plans. While the primary focus will be on stocks in the Celtic Sea (cod, haddock and whiting) and the Eastern Channel (sole and plaice), the Irish Sea whiting and cod stocks are also of concern and may be considered in the scope of the work. To support this process, the Commission is establishing a joint EU–UK technical expert group, expected to begin work in the coming weeks. The group will bring together scientists from several national institutes (including IFREMER, the Marine Institute, and others) and will focus on improving the spatial and temporal understanding of fisheries interactions with depleted stocks, through also VMS analysis. This work of the expert group will involve analysing catch patterns, fleet behaviour, and the distribution of fishing effort in order to identify more precise and targeted management measures in the future. N. Graham added that, in the more immediate term, the work would build on the outcomes of ICES' WKREBUILD workshop, which examined rebuilding strategies for depleted stocks. In this context, the Commission is keen to explore different types of harvest control rules (HCRs) that may be better suited to supporting stock recovery. Initial exchanges on this topic have already taken place with the UK, although discussions remain at an early stage. Work is currently underway to finalise the terms of reference for the joint EU–UK technical expert group, which is expected to address these issues as part of its mandate. The group is likely to become a key component of future EU–UK cooperation under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) framework.

He noted that further discussions would also be needed regarding how stakeholders, including Advisory Councils, can effectively provide input into this process. The governance landscape remains complex, as several parallel processes exist, including the EU–UK SCF, the UK's Fisheries Management Plans, and existing EU multiannual management plans. The Commission is aware of the need to ensure appropriate stakeholder involvement and will provide further clarification as the work progresses.

Turning to non-quota stocks, N. Graham outlined three main issues currently under discussion.

The first relates to brown crab. An ICES research report published shortly before Christmas (the WKCRAB workshop report) highlighted a number of concerns regarding the status and management of brown crab stocks. At the same time, other environmental and ecological factors – such as octopus blooms and related ecosystem interactions in the Channel – are also being closely monitored. Both the EU and the UK are paying particular attention to these developments, and further work on brown crab management is expected in the near future. However, the institutional framework through which this work should be conducted is still being clarified.

In parallel, regional groups of Member States are currently working on the development of joint recommendations concerning management measures for brown crab, including potential minimum conservation reference sizes. On the UK side, there are also plans to revise certain national conservation measures. Given that work is progressing on both sides, efforts are being

made to ensure that these initiatives remain coordinated and coherent, although the exact mechanisms for doing so are still being explored. N. Graham emphasised that brown crab is likely to become an increasingly important issue in future discussions.

The second non-quota stock issue concerns the ongoing work on a multiannual management strategy for king scallops. This work has been progressing for some time, and a scientific report covering ICES areas 7d and 7e (Eastern and Central Channel) has recently been received. Additional stakeholder engagement activities are expected to take place in the coming weeks and months. Once the report will be fully reviewed by the Commission, it will be shared with the relevant stakeholders, including the Advisory Councils. The aim is to develop a multiannual strategy for the Channel scallop fishery, particularly in areas 7d and 7e. N. Graham noted that area 7d is generally considered to be relatively well managed and productive, but further work is nevertheless needed to support a longer-term strategic framework.

The third issue relates to seabass, specifically the seabass catch allocation tool used for distributing fishing opportunities. The current allocation tool requires updating for the upcoming fishing season, and this work is expected to continue in the coming months together with ICES. The benchmark will need to be updated. N. Graham reported that during that morning meeting the Commission was informed of a UK university looking for spawning information on seabass.

Regarding “configuration 2” on ICES requests, N. Graham reported that three stocks have been discussed:

On horse mackerel, in the Southern North Sea and Eastern Channel, 0 TAC catch advice has been in place for the last couple of years, with bycatch provisions applied in some of the mixed fisheries. ICES is exploring other methodologies to gather more data on this stock. A feedback should be received by the Commission around next summer.

Additional scientific work is also expected regarding sole stocks in ICES areas 7h, 7j, 7k and 7e. In particular, further analysis of genetic information collected for these stocks is being considered, and a request for additional work may be submitted to ICES.

On skates and rays, a joint request is in place to ask for an alignment of the minimum conservation reference size.

In conclusion, N. Graham summarised that the morning meeting of the SCF Working Group had covered a broad range of topics, including quota and non-quota stocks, technical measures, rebuilding strategies, and scientific coordination. The next meeting of the Working Group is scheduled for 22 April. He noted that much of the work currently underway is process-oriented and preparatory in nature, but it will form the basis for more substantive discussions in the months ahead.

Frank Le Barzic asked whether professional organisations and the fishing sector would be involved in upcoming meetings of the expert group. He then highlighted the need for consultation on the implementation of the Seabass tool noting that the first version had limitations particularly

because it estimates catches based on fishing opportunities and not on real catches. He also raised the issue of the seabass moratorium in these areas, questioning its relevance given recent scientific advice. Regarding whiting in the Channel and Celtic Sea, he noted that following alignment of TAC with the ICES' advice, sub-quotas had been introduced, which warranted further attention in particular to take into account the link between the two stocks. Finally, he raised questions concerning the justification and coherence of certain technical measures, particularly in relation to the biological status of stocks and the application of emergency measures. He noted that some measures apply across both the Channel and the Celtic Sea, even though the biological indicators and stock status may differ between areas. He also asked how these new technical measures interact with the existing regulatory framework, including provisions under Article 20 and other technical measures regulations, as well as previously adopted delegated acts. In particular, he requested clarification on whether certain delegated regulations currently in force might become obsolete and what practical implications this would have for fishers, for example regarding mesh size requirements (e.g. 80 mm or 90 mm square mesh panels). He stressed the need for clear guidance so that producer organisations and their members can correctly implement the applicable measures.

On the stakeholder engagement in the technical expert group, **N. Graham** highlighted that at this stage the expert group is focusing on evaluating Harvest Control Rules and conducting stock assessment exercises, which require specific technical expertise. At the same time, stakeholder engagement remains important, and the Commission will seek to improve it in upcoming discussions with the UK.

On the seabass allocation tool, **N. Graham** replied that the development of the tool is a technical exercise led by ICES. The aim is to ensure that the tool aligns with the current assessment methodology and takes into account that stocks mix between the northern and southern components. Regarding the moratorium, the Commission acknowledged that this request has been raised and discussed during previous annual consultations. Scientific evidence will need to be considered and discussions will continue. The Commission is aware of the request and indicated that it is on its agenda. A new data call to Member States may be launched in the future to populate the seabass allocation tool.

Regarding whiting, **N. Graham** reported that there has been a long-running assessment of the Celtic Sea and Eastern Channel TAC. This issue has been examined several times and discussed in detail during 2022–2023 in the context of TAC alignment exercises and prior to the benchmark report, with a particular focus on stock identification and stock mixing. Significant work has been carried out over the years, including tagging studies, which indicate that migration occurs from west to east. There is currently no scientific evidence to support migration from east to west.

On the urgent technical measures for flatfish in the Western Channel, N. Graham reported that the measures were introduced due to bycatches, particularly of whiting, and to ensure alignment with measures already applied in Area 7d.

E. Brouckaert, referring to the TAC and quota regulation and the written records, asked how the regulation on new mesh sizes for flatfish will be applied and managed on both sides of the

Channel.

N. Graham replied that the forthcoming guidance note is intended to address these issues and improve harmonisation.

Geert Meun questioned how realistic the proposed approach to technical measures in the Celtic Sea is, given the current situation of cod and the ICES reference points. They highlighted major environmental and ecosystem changes, as well as increasing spatial constraints, and asked how policymakers, the Commission, and the UK are taking these factors into account.

N. Graham replied that there has been a marked reduction in the productivity of several stocks, which is concerning, as they are no longer producing juveniles at historical levels. The issue involves both stock depletion and environmental pressures. Regarding rebuilding, the Commission is working with the UK to explore scenarios under conditions of low productivity. ICES is also integrating these considerations within a broader ecosystem perspective.

Dominique Thomas enquired whether the EU is continuing to analyse the consequences of implementing the UK MPA programme, including what works, what does not, and the impact on fisheries and the types of vessels allowed. They stressed the need to assess the effectiveness of these measures to avoid introducing further restrictions. Regarding technical measures, harmonisation with the UK is necessary so that EU vessels do not have to repeatedly change their gear.

N. Graham reported that an EU-UK meeting on UK MPAs is expected to take place in the coming weeks. It will be a good opportunity to address the different issues.

The Chair, noting the potential loss of the Channel fishing area, invited the European Commission to continue defending European fisheries and emphasised that the importance for both sides of the Channel to respect the rules under the TCA.

N. Graham reflected that this agreement focuses on fisheries management. The EU is committed to ensuring that the TCA is respected, bearing in mind what is inside the scope of TCA agreement or outside, as the MPAs.

D. Thomas referred to the recent climate-related disruptions, noting that these changes have significant implications for quota management, for example for bluefin tuna in ICCAT area. She highlighted that certain species, particularly in northern regions, are affected differently, and that the European Commission may not yet have fully accounted for these effects in their stock assessments. She emphasised that, for some northern stocks, quota allocations and historical entitlements may no longer correspond to the current distribution of the species, and that this issue should be addressed to ensure quotas remain appropriate and fair across all regions.

N. Graham acknowledged the point but noted that this falls outside his area of expertise.

The Chair concluded this agenda item, once again thanking N. Graham for his availability to attend the meeting.

4. Discussion on the effects of electromagnetic frequencies (EMF) on flatfish in the framework of the TenneT project – Annemiek Hermans, University of Wageningen

The Chair welcomed Annemiek Hermans from Wageningen University, who presented the results of a study analysing the impacts of electromagnetic frequencies on flatfish in the Channel area.

A. Hermans introduced herself as a marine ecologist working part-time at the University of Wageningen while completing a PhD on the effects of electromagnetic fields (EMFs) from offshore cables on sharks and rays. She also works for a consultancy firm (Witteveen+Bos), based in the Netherlands, where she conducts research for TenneT, the transmission system operator in the Netherlands and parts of Germany. The work presented focused on the effects of EMFs on flatfish, including both historical studies and new research commissioned by TenneT.

A. Hermans explained that the rapid expansion of offshore wind energy requires the transport of electricity generated at sea to the mainland. Recent studies indicate that, under a worst-case scenario, approximately 5% of the Dutch continental shelf could be influenced by anthropogenic, cable-induced EMFs by 2030, with the field strength linked to power transported through the cables.

She described the two main types of cable systems: three-phase alternating current (AC) cables within wind farms and longer AC or direct current (DC) export cables to shore. The configuration of these cables – whether joint or laid separately – affects the intensity and type of EMFs produced.

A. Hermans illustrated the mechanism by which some fish detect electromagnetic fields, referencing rays as an example. Rays possess electroreceptive organs, the ampullae of Lorenzini, which detect electric and, possibly, magnetic fields. Sharks and rays are known to be highly sensitive to EMFs. In contrast, knowledge of EMF sensitivity in flatfish remains limited. Fishers have reported differences in catch rates on either side of cables and local knowledge suggests potential effects on migratory patterns, but these observations are not yet scientifically validated.

She explained that cables generate both electric and magnetic fields. While the electric field is often shielded within the cable, the magnetic field cannot be contained and extends into the surrounding environment, potentially reaching 200–300 meters from the cable. Movement of fish or other organisms through this magnetic field induces an additional electric field, creating a complex EMF environment. In biological terms, electric fields are believed to influence short-range interactions such as prey detection, while magnetic fields may guide long-distance migration, similar to how animals use the Earth's magnetic field as a reliable navigational cue.

A. Hermans presented research indicating that flatfish generally do not exhibit strong electroreception, in contrast to other species. However, there is evidence suggesting that they are magnetosensitive, supporting long-distance migrations along geomagnetic lines. She referenced Metcalf's 1993 study, which observed flatfish navigating open waters without other cues, leading to the conclusion that magnetic fields are used for orientation.

A. Hermans then highlighted that while flatfish may not be highly sensitive to electric fields, their

apparent magneto sensitivity warrants further study, particularly in the context of expanding offshore wind energy infrastructure.

A. Hermans continued by discussing the potential responses of flatfish to magnetic fields, assuming they are magnetosensitive but not strongly electroreceptive. Modelling indicated that magnetic fields from offshore cables could extend up to approximately 250 m from DC cables and 120 m from AC cables. She noted that various responses were possible, including altered prey–predator relationships, local disorientation, attraction to cables, or avoidance behaviours. For example, because flatfish feed on crabs – species known to be magnetosensitive – changes in crab behaviour could indirectly influence flatfish. Larval movements and migratory patterns might also be affected, although these effects remain largely unquantified. She emphasised that the previously mentioned estimate of 5.5 % of the Dutch continental shelf under EMF influence by 2030 is based on sensitivity thresholds established for sharks and rays; flatfish sensitivity may differ, altering the effective range.

A. Hermans then reviewed earlier research, in which juvenile flounder were exposed to high static or AC magnetic fields (up to 3 mT) for several weeks. All individuals survived, indicating no acute mortality, but the study provided no information on behavioural impacts. She drew a parallel to shark studies, where survival was unaffected but behavioural changes were observed, suggesting similar effects could occur in flatfish.

She presented more recent work, in which flatfish were observed in a 15 m tank with a simulated cable at the 10 m mark. AC and DC fields (15–20 µT), comparable to field exposures, were applied. While no avoidance, attraction, or erratic behaviour was observed, resting behaviour at the seabed was altered: exposed fish remained active throughout the monitoring period instead of resting at night as controls did. A. Hermans noted that disrupted resting could potentially increase predation risk or reduce physiological recovery, though the underlying mechanism is unknown.

A. Hermans also referenced studies on Atlantic halibut by the U.S. Department of Energy, which exposed larvae to EMFs of 3 µT for 10 days. Results were statistically inconclusive; some larvae showed slightly reduced growth or delayed development, while others were unaffected. Similarly, studies on California halibut did not detect significant effects, highlighting variability across species and uncertainty regarding ecological relevance.

Finally, A. Hermans presented results from beam trawl surveys conducted in collaboration with Wageningen Marine Research. Surveys compared three flatfish species, including plaice and sole, north and south of cables at two sites in the Netherlands. No significant differences were observed in species abundance, diversity, or size, although behavioural observations were not possible.

In conclusion, A. Hermans summarised that current research indicates limited knowledge on flatfish sensitivity to EMFs. Evidence suggests some behavioural effects, but no direct mortality has been reported. Potential impacts are likely chronic rather than acute, given the long-term presence of cables (40+ years). She emphasised the need for further research to better understand these long-term ecological consequences.

5. Small-scale Coastal Fisheries issue

The Chair noted that, as agreed at the last ExCom meeting in October 2025, each working group should include a standing agenda item on small-scale coastal fisheries (SSCF), providing members with the opportunity to raise any relevant issues. He then invited members to share their views on this topic, recalling that recently the NWWAC has submitted to the Commission an advice on SSCF.

F. Le Barzic raised the issue of the definition of SSCF.

Alexandra Philippe reiterated that the aim to include this point on the agenda is to provide members with the opportunity to raise any specific issues on SSCF requiring NWWAC particular attention.

Mo Mathies informed that the NWWAC Secretariat is aware that the SWWAC and MEDAC are working on updating the definition. They were asked to keep the NWWAC informed about their work and next steps, as discussions are still at a very early stage.

6. NWWAC Work programme overview and planning for Y22 – Secretariat

Mo Mathies informed members that the preparation of the work programme will take place in the coming weeks. Members will be contacted shortly via email to provide their input, with the aim of finalising the programme prior to its submission to the European Commission in June.

A. Philippe intervened, noting that CHARM (Management Team) has recently emphasised the importance of making the drafting of advice more efficient, where members have greater ownership and engagement in the process and enable the focus to remain on the most significant issues. When a member proposes an idea for advice, they are encouraged to support the Secretariat in its drafting, by providing a first draft or bullet points. This approach ensures that the advice is meaningful and reflects full stakeholder engagement within the Advisory Council.

7. AOB & Summary of actions agreed and decisions adopted by the Chair

1	Secretariat to follow up on the Guidelines Note related to Technical Measures, which should be finalised by the end of March and sent to the AC by the Commission.
2	Secretariat to keep WG3 updated on the ICES Rebuilding Strategy.
3	Focus Group Scallop to continue monitoring developments regarding the multi-annual strategy for scallops and await receipt of the scientific report.
4	Focus Group Sea Bass to follow up on the sea bass allocation tool and examine the possibility of AC input.

5	Secretariat to follow up on the ICES productivity study mentioned at the MIRIA meeting in January 2026.
6	Secretariat to follow up on the EU-UK meeting on UK MPAs (26 March).
7	Members to send questions to the Secretariat for Annemiek Hermans following her presentation on "The effects of electromagnetic frequencies (EMF) on flatfish in the context of the TenneT project".
8	Secretariat to monitor work of MEDAC and SWWAC on the definition of small-scale coastal fisheries.
9	Secretariat to initiate members' consultation regarding Year 22 Work Programme.

The Chair concluded the meeting, thanking the WG3 members for their participation, the Secretariat and the interpreters.

Participants

NWWAC members		
Emiel	Brouckaert	BFPO
Falke	De Sager	BFPO
Manu	Kelberine	CRPM de Bretagne
Franck	Le Barzic	OP COBRENORD
John	Lynch	ISEFPO
Geert	Meun	VisNed
Corentine	Piton	France Pêche Durable et Responsable
Dominique	Thomas	OP CME MMN
NWWAC observers		
Guillermo	Bravo Téllez	Ministerio de Agricultura Pesca y Alimentación
Simone	Enemaku	Permanent Representation of Ireland to the EU
Norman	Graham	DG MARE
Annemiek	Hermans	University of Wageningen
Michael	Keatings	ISEFPO
Olivier	Lepretre	CRPMEM Hauts de France
Llibori	Martinez Latorre	IFSUA
Alexandra	Philippe	EBCD
Erwan	Quemeneur	CDPMEM 29
Xavier	Tetard	CRPMEM Normandie
Durk	van Tuinen	VisNed
David	Vertegaal	EAA
NWWAC Secretariat		
Ilaria Bellomo	Bellomo	Fisheries Strategy & Administration Officer
Mo	Mathies	Executive Secretary