DRAFT Minutes

Joint NWWAC/NSAC Focus Group Skates & Rays

Virtual meeting | 18 October 2024

Participants

Michael Anderson	Danmarks Fiskeriforening
Jurgen Batsleer	DG MARE
Falke De Sager	Rederscentrale
Pauline Delalain	CNPMEM
John Lynch (Chair)	IS&EFPO
Mo Mathies	NWWAC
Geert Meun	VisNed
Joanne Morgan	ICES
Solene Prevalet	FROM Nord
Amerik Schuitemaker	Nederlandse Vissersbond
Tamara Talevska	NSAC
Kateryna Urbanovitch	NSAC
Matilde Vallerani	NWWAC
Johnny Woodlock	Independent observer

1. Welcome and introductions

The Chair John Lynch welcomed all members of the Focus Group to the meeting and thanked the Commission and ICES representatives for their availability. Apologies were received ahead of the meeting from Sofie Smeedegard Mathiesen, Danmarks Fiskeriforening. The agenda was adopted.

Action points from the last meeting (12 February 2024)

1	Secretariat to draft letter to the Commission regarding the issues discussed
	Submitted 03 April, response received 07 August (link)
2	Jurgen's presentation to be shared only among members

2. ICES advice – Joanne Morgan, ICES ACOM Vice-Chair

Joanne Morgan introduced the ICES advice which was released in the previous week. She commented that a lot of stocks share similarities while some other stocks have very little information. She stated that a change has been made in the advice sheets regarding the conservation status advice based on stakeholder advice, it is now called 'non-fisheries conservation considerations'.

Cuckoo ray (6-7, 8ab,d)

- Advice delayed, envisaged for 21 October.
- Issues detected during advice drafting group in relation to forecasting

Small-eyed ray (7fg)

- Advice for 2025 and 2026, MSY: 103t (+20%)
- F below FMSY, stock size above trigger
- Landings from 7a and of 'sandy ray' allocated to this stock
- Cat 3 data limited stock – rfb rule
- Stability cap applied
- Discards are unquantified but known to take place

Undulate ray (7de)

- Advice for 2025 and 2026, MSY: 4821t and 4637 t (+3% 2025)
- F below FMSY, Biomass above MSYtrigger
- SPiCT assessment
- Implied landing of 3784 and 3639t based on 2023 discard data
- Advised based on a proportion of FMSY (15th percentile), has become standard for elasmobranchs using SPiCT

Spotted ray (7bj)

- Advice for 2025 and 2026, MSY: 32t each year (-11%)
- F at Fmsy, stock size above trigger
- Skates and rays managed under single TAC – prevents effective control of single-stock exploitation rates and could lead to overexploitation of some species
- Category 3 – rfb rule
- Discards unquantified but known to take place
- Stability cap not applied

Spotted ray (7a, e-h)

- Advice for 2025 and 2026, MSY: 757t each year (-7%)
- F at FMSY, stock size above trigger
- Skates and rays managed under single TAC – prevents effective control of single-stock exploitation rates and could lead to overexploitation of some species
- Category 3 – rfb rule
- No stability cap applied
- Discards unquantified but known to take place

Thornback Ray (7a, fg)

- Advice for 2025 and 2026, MSY: 1699t each year (-7.3%)
- F above FMSY, stock size above trigger
- MISSED
- Skates and rays managed under single TAC – prevents effective control of single-stock exploitation rates and could lead to overexploitation of some species
- Category 3 – rfb rule
- No stability cap applied
- Discards unquantified but known to take place

Thornback Ray (6)

- Advice for 2025 and 2026, MSY: 67t each year (-30%)
- F below Fmsy, stock size above trigger
- Skates and rays managed under single TAC – prevents effective control of single-stock exploitation rates and could lead to overexploitation of some species
- Index decreased by 60% so 30% stability clause applied
- Category 3 – rfb rule

Small-eyed ray (7de)

- Advice for 2025-2028, PA: 32 t landings in each year – no change
- Cat 5 – no information on abundance or exploitation
- PA buffer applied (applied in 2022)
- Skates and rays managed under single TAC – prevents effective control of single-stock exploitation rates and could lead to overexploitation of some species
- Discards unquantified but known to take place
- Landings from 4c and of 'sandy ray' have been allocated to this stock
- Advice will be for 4 years until more information

Undulate ray (7bj)

- Advice for 2025-2028, PA: 0t (no change)
- Can not assess stock status
- Listed as endangered IUCN
- Found in shallow coastal areas – sensitive to habitat degradation
- Listed as species that 'should not be retained'
- Discards unquantified

Blonde ray (7afg)

- Advice for 2025-2028, PA: landings 573t in each year- no change
- Can not assess stock status
- Can not quantify catches
- Category 5 – no information on abundance or exploitation
- PA buffer not applied – applied in 2022
- Skates and rays combined TAC – could lead to over exploitation of some stocks
- No assessment
- Advice will be for 4 years until more information (catch and survey data) is available

Blonde ray (7e)

- Advice for 2025-2028, PA: landings 213 t in each year (no change)
- Cannot assess stock status
- Can not quantify catches
- Category 5 – no information on abundance or exploitation
- PA buffer not applied – applied in 2022
- Skates and rays combined TAC – could lead to over exploitation of some stocks
- No assessment
- Advice will be for 4 years until more information (catch and survey data) is available

Sandy ray (6-7)

- Advice for 2025-2028, PA: landings 27t in each year (no change)
- Can not assess stock status
- Can not quantify catches
- Category 5 – no information on abundance or exploitation
- PA buffer not applied – applied in 2022
- Skates and rays combined TAC – could lead to over exploitation of some stocks
- No assessment
- Advice will be for 4 years until more information (catch and survey data) is available

Shagreen ray (6-7)

- Advice for 2025-2028, PA: landings 134 t in each year (no change)
- Can not assess stock status
- Can not quantify catches
- Category 5 – no information on abundance or exploitation
- PA buffer not applied – applied in 2022
- Skates and rays combined TAC – could lead to over exploitation of some stocks
- No assessment
- Advice will be for 4 years until more information (catch and survey data) is available

Thornback Ray (7e)

- Advice for 2025-2028, PA: landings 170 t in each year (no change)
- Cannot assess stock status
- Cannot quantify catches
- Category 5 – no information on abundance or exploitation
- PA buffer not applied – decrease in effort but increasing catch
- Skates and rays combined TAC – could lead to over exploitation of some stocks
- No assessment
- Advice will be for 4 years until more information (catch and survey data) is available

Other rays and skates (6, 7a-c, e-k)

- Advice for 2025-2028, ICES cannot provide advice
- Lack of survey and catch data
- Species specific landings data should be improved
- Skates & rays combined TAC – could lead to overexploitation of some stocks
- 540t of catch in 2023

Common skate complex (6, 7a-c, e-k)

- Advice for 2025-2028, PA: zero catch
- Complex is blue skate (Dipturus batis) and flapper skate (Dipturus intermedius)
- Can not assess status
- All dipturus species are large bodied - low productivity
- Depletion and range contraction known to have occurred
- Listed as critically endangered by IUCN
- 5 t of catch 2023

The Chair thanked Morgan for her presentation and opened the floor for questions.

Jurgen Batsleer stated that landings are still possible for the long-nosed skate as it is not on the prohibited species list. Looking at the spotted ray in 7b,j, he pointed out that the survey showed a high peak and low value in one specific year. He also referred to the Scottish survey which was not used in the assessment and asked for clarification on the use of non-commercial data instead of the commercial landings length frequency.

Morgan explained that the working group explained that sampling was not good enough from the commercial catches, therefore, the survey lengths were used for the rfb rule. This would have been reviewed by external groups, including the length frequency distribution. She was unsure if only the commercial sizes were used in the length frequency distribution and would have to check this. This approach is considered appropriate for using the rfb rule.

Batsleer felt it was a bit tricky then to use it for fishing proxy as it does not resemble the commercial index, only the survey index.

ACTION: Morgan to revert back with an answer to the Secretariat for distribution to the group.

In relation to data limited stocks (Cat 3 and 5) where the advice is dependent on catches, the Chair asked if the effort was misjudged where catches go up, as it may not have such a big impact on the stock as these are mainly bycatch in other fisheries depending on the areas where the fishermen are working. He felt that too much is being read into stocks where the TAC is small, i.e. that if the catch goes up there is a big increase in effort as well.

Morgan responded that where only landings are available in Cat 3 and 5, due to the amount of data available the precautionary approach needs to be applied because there is so little data available. In terms of Cat 5, if there is an indication that the catch does not have an impact on the stock, the PA buffer will not be applied, e.g. Thornback ray in the English Channel. This would normally have been applied this year but though there is an increase in effort, catch has gone down and the advice remained the same. ICES does not have anything in place that would allow an increase in advice unless there was expert judgement based on auxiliary data, but there is no rule that could be applied. Attempts at developing rules have so far been unsuccessful.

Regarding identifying different species, the Chair asked if the 5t catches for other skates and rays include records and releases of prohibited species.

Morgan will check and revert back with an answer.

The Chair felt that any releases should be recorded.

Michael Anderson commented that the ACs need to consider the way ICES provides advice on these stocks. He felt that the rfb rule is not a calculation of the allowable fish and completely different from Cat 1 stocks and based on previous advice and catches. Though this gives the impression of being better than PA advice, in his opinion this was really not the case.

Batsleer agreed with this statement and referred to the proxy reference points which were available for certain stocks. He felt this could be linked to his previous query on using survey data as fishing proxy. The LC used is length at first catch. However, surveys provide a different length composition than derived from commercial data. He commented that a move to SPiCT assessments would be preferable. He added that some advancements have been made.

*Updates received from Joanne Morgan following the meeting:

Q: Why are length frequencies from the survey for rjm.27.67bj for fishing pressure for that stock in the calculation of the rfb rule rather than commercial length frequencies?

A: The application of the rfb rule for this stock was externally reviewed in 2022 and approved by the reviewers and by the Advice Drafting Group. Survey indices can be used in this rule, although sometimes the length frequencies are truncated to cover only the commercial size range. The lower end of the survey indices has not been truncated. In 2024 the WG used both the survey and commercial indices in different rfb calculations. The mean catch length in the commercial catch was 56 cm with MSY proxy length of 53 cm. For the survey the mean catch length was 53.3 cm with MSY proxy length of 53.3 cm. The difference is not great, but the survey is considered more reliable. The commercial length distribution is multimodal which causes some difficulties when using it for the rfb rule. The decision was to stay with the approved (and reviewed) approach of using the survey length frequency.

Q: Are the discards of restricted species included in the 'catch' figures for other skates and rays?

A: No, only landings are included.

3. Update on Commission work re. skates & rays – Jurgen Batsleer, DG MARE

Batsleer started by providing an overview of previous actions, explaining that it started with a STECF EWG, following which new benchmarks were carried out and new assessment metrics developed. The roadmap in 2023 is a joint EU-UK paper for developing alternatives, and then second benchmark for North Sea stocks was carried out which brought to new proposed methodology for TAC setting jointly with the UK.

In 2024, discussions were held on how to proceed with group TACs and what the potential candidates might be for single TACs. A third benchmark was carried out on stocks in 9a with two stocks being moved into SPiCT. In addition, a joint request was submitted to ICES to provide a split in landings and dead discards in the advice.

An expert meeting was held in September 2024 concluding that there will not be a split this year as there is not enough time with consultations already happening, but this will be addressed in 2025.

The problem: Current skate and ray fisheries management:

- What is working and what isn't working?
- What are the stocks/species of greatest sustainability concern?

The options: What are the main options and the associated pros, cons and barriers including knowledge gaps?

- Changes to the group TAC structure, including species-specific TACs, genus-based TACs and other potential approaches
- Management measures such as MCRS, spatial-temporal closures etc… (no lengthy discussions)

The problem: Management

- Single species advice and stock distribution may not necessarily be consistent with the combined TAC areas (straddling stocks).
- Assumption that stocks covered by the TAC can sustain similar fishing mortality.
- Valuable bycatch in mixed fisheries. Fishing pressure largely dictated by availability/quota of teleost/shellfish
- Overshooting or undershooting the advice
- Precautionary approach used by ICES for category 5 stocks, results in a decrease in single stock TACs over time.

The paper "Comparisons of landings to scientific advice indicate overshooting within the common TAC for skates and rays in the Northeast Atlantic" published in 2024 explored the issue of overshooting and undershooting of the ICES advice. It evaluated various stocks ad showed that for example blonde ray has higher catches compared to ICES advice across all regions. The analysis also considered the effect by life history traits and by ICES assessment category, i.e. which stocks more information was available for. An additional issue is the lack of input data including from surveys.

Looking at the assessments and changes in the ICES advice, currently 20 stocks are assessed relative to proxy reference points, 5 were subject to fishing pressure above FMSY (proxy), and 1 had a stock size below (proxy) ref. point.

There are advancements in scientific data, with dedicated tagging studies being carried out bringing new information to the table. Information on distribution can be extracted from data available and used in benchmarks to help

understand what the TAC unit to use might be. Genetic studies are also very helpful in understanding the stock structure and inform TAC setting. Several studies on discards are also being carried out, bringing new elements to the discussion.

Blonde ray, sandy and shagreen ray were identified as stocks of greatest concern at the expert meeting in September. While it is not only necessary to look at species with bigger issues, it is also important to look at species for which more information is available already in order to move forward. Regarding blonde ray, there is a mismatch between catches and advice that needs to be addressed.

A risk exists when increasing the number of TAC units as this could complicate negotiations on fishing opportunities. At the September meeting, experts reviewed the options of considering sub-stocks.

Advantages	Disadvantages	Questions
Potential for alignment between TAC and ICES stock-specific advice	TAC shares and (national) quota allocation would need to be re-examined.	How to deal with the landings which belong to species without 'assessed stock unit'?
Annual changes to stock-specific TACs will shift fishing pressure toward stocks with higher quotas, while reducing pressure on those with more limited quotas.	Potential future changes in stock delineation and/or new stocks having advice may require periodic updates	Would this require more studies on discard survival?
The TAC units could equate with the defined stock units	MS concerns on multiple new TACs (administration)	
Experience, as it was done for RJU.	Skate species can co-occur, and so potential increase in discarding or lead to mis-identification issues	

The option of combining commercial species was also considered, leaving a group TAC of non-commercial species.

The UK proposed another approach using genus-based TACs:

- Somewhat of a compromise between previous approaches
- Advantages/disadvantages still exist…
- Coastal Raja spp. (Raja microocellata, Raja undulata) with stock-specific TACs
- Main Raja spp. (Raja brachyura, Raja clavata, Raja montagui) could have a combined TAC over certain areas (footnotes for coastal Raja when outside current units)
- Leucoraja spp. – larger scale TAC units for these offshore species with footnote(s) for extra restrictions for sandy and shagreen ray (e.g. max size, trip limits)
- Dipturus spp.- relevant TAC units for the larger-bodied species (long-nosed skate an important commercial species in Iberian waters, possible future unit for common blue skate)

Based on the 2017 STECF review scientists are now asked to update the table again and share this information with managers.

Batsleer concluded that there is a lot of complexity and several options to consider. He saw the benefit of this FG to contribute to this process and to identify pros and cons of the different options, taking into account the reality on the ground.

As next steps, the report from the expert meeting with the UK will be finalised and shared with the AC. DG MARE will have to discuss internally about the outcomes of this meeting and also involving EU stakeholders. In addition, a discussion needed with the UK on footnotes and possible need to update them.

4. Discussion

The Chair thanked Batsleer for the detailed presentation and opened the floor for questions.

Andersen commented that there are obvious reasons to protect some stocks, but that it is the consequence of management that causes concern. Splitting up the TAC could raise quota allocation issues and implications in terms of the landing obligation, as there might be choke situations caused by those skates and rays species that are caught as bycatch in mixed fisheries. It is essential that there is a pragmatic approach to the landing obligation. He asked whether the commission already considered derogations for these species.

Batsleer replied that the key question is the degree of flexibility that can be allowed for those species in the prohibited species list. A lot depends on the flexibility of the stocks and their ability to recover, as well as the possibility of removing any stocks then from the prohibited species list and back in to the group TAC for example. It is important to involve stakeholders to avoid choke situations as much as possible.

Johnny Woodlock asked whether the meeting of the expert group considered the impact of subsea cables and ORE developments, impacting movements of certain skates species.

Batsleer replied that this topic was not considered as the main focus was on TAC setting, but the Commission is aware of research ongoing in certain institutes.

The Chair referred to blonde ray in 7f,g and asked whether it is being fished beyond the advice and if this was an indication that the advice had been misrepresented or if there is a need for adjusting the advice. He felt that it was one of the advantages of the group TAC that in areas where several species are more abundant these will be caught. More vulnerable species which are les abundant would be caught less, so in that way the group TAC works very well.

Batsleer commented that there is no survey for this stock and that it is a bycatch in a different fishery. While Cat 5 is far from ideal, however, landings should be updated accordingly from time to time as basically the TAC is set based on the previous three years' data, which means if landings are not adjusted, the TAC will continue to go lower and lower as it does not reflect how the stock is actually performing in reality.

The Chair mentioned that there is a degree of targeting for that stock but it is localised.

Batsleer added that one of the things discussed in the meeting with the UK is the possibility to consider LPUE as an index for this stock. WKSKATE2 should be organised in 2025 and will look at survey indexes. That could help in moving away from category 5.

Andersen commented that it is very important that the new methodologies do not become too inward-looking, with situations at sea moving in the opposite direction. Regarding the use of LPUE, he felt that there is a risk that good recruitment in the stock would lower the LPUE and indicate that the stock is overfished.

Batsleer responded that there is a way to move around this statistically. LPUE is already being used for certain Portuguese stocks. He encouraged the FG members to attend the WKSKATE2 meeting and contribute to the discussions.

5. Next steps

The Chair proposed to wait until the FG receives the report from the EU-UK meeting.

Batsleer expressed his interest in holding another FG in Brussels such as the workshop held in 2022. The 2017 STECF table review could also be a good exercise from a stakeholder perspective.

Mo Mathies pointed out at the need of having clear terms of reference and to agree if UK attendance is needed or not. Assistance would be needed from DG MARE for booking the location. She proposed having the meeting in a in-person format only.

ACTION: Organisation of workshop on skates and rays in 2025 in Brussels.

Mathies wondered if it would be wiser to wait for the WKSKATE2 meeting before having the workshop.

Batsleer agreed this would be the best option. The ICES workshop should be happening in February 2025 but this needs to be confirmed.

6. AOB – UK FMP

The Chair informed the FG that the UK has launched a consultation on a new FMP on skates and rays in the North Sea and in the Channel. He asked members on the relevance of the consultation questions.

Mathies felt that it is not a very detailed questionnaire but the ACs should make their voices heard.

Andersen mentioned the introduction of minimum and maximum landing size proposed in the FMP. This and other details included in the plan should be considered in the feedback to the UK.

Mathies asked group members to review all available documentation and come back to the Secretariat in three weeks. The Secretariat will then collate them and draft advice.

ACTION: FG members have three weeks to review all documentation related to the proposed UK FMP on skates and rays and come back with the Secretariat with comments to feed advice drafting.

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

1	Morgan to revert back with an answer to the Secretariat for distribution to the group.
2	Organisation of workshop on skates and rays in 2025 in Brussels.
3	FG members have three weeks to review all documentation related to the proposed UK FMP on skates and rays and come back with the Secretariat with comments to feed advice drafting.
4	Jurgen's presentation to be circulated to members.