



Mr Bernhard Friess  
Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries  
European Commission  
1049 Brussel  
Belgium

Dublin, 21 April 2020

Dear Mr Friess,

**Subject: Request for STECF evaluation regarding the potential for stock size improvement in relation to new technical measures for whiting in ICES Division 7a (Irish Sea)**

In its latest advice on Whiting (*Merlangius merlangus*) in Division 7a (Irish Sea) ICES advises that when the MSY approach is applied, there should be zero catches in 2020 and 2021. The advice identified that most whiting is below MCRS and that the introduction of further highly selective gears to reduce finfish catch and discards in the *Nephrops* fishery appears to have reduced whiting catches in the last three years.

Since the introduction of the Landing Obligation, Bord Iascaigh Mhara's Fisheries Conservation team in collaboration with the Irish fishing industry has investigated numerous opportunities to reduce unwanted bycatches in the *Nephrops* fishery in the Irish Sea resulting in the publication of a factsheet covering all technical solutions developed by BIM and the Irish fishing industry<sup>1</sup>.

A four-year programme of work to design, trial and implement more selective fishing gears for the purposes of reducing and eliminating unwanted catch was also carried out involving Seafish, ANIFPO, NIFPO, The Department of the Environment and Rural Affairs, and the Agri-Food & Biosciences Institute (AFBI). It concluded that whilst further work is needed to address unwanted effects on target catch, trials of the inclined net grid are indicating that it can be efficient at removing fish from a trawl.<sup>2</sup>

The BIM trials for the *Nephrops* fishery in 7a have shown that:

- The Swedish Grid and 90 mm codends each as stand-alone measures are most effective.
- The grid effectively eliminates catches of all fish species and can have handling difficulties.
- Most < 20 cm whiting escapement occurs through codend meshes in SELTRA and 300 mm SMP with 90 mm codends.
- Mortality levels of < 20 cm whiting through contact with codend meshes are likely to be high.

<sup>1</sup> BIM: Reducing unwanted catches: one page summaries of technical solutions developed by BIM and the Irish fishing industry, August 2018 ([link](#))

<sup>2</sup> Northern Ireland Gear Trials Project 2017-2020: Summary Report on work completed in 2019 ([link](#))





Considering this scientific evidence, the NWWAC asks that the Commission requests STECF to evaluate the current technical measures in place in the Irish Sea taking into account the results from the BIM and the Northern Ireland gear trials and to identify those gears which are most successful at eliminating whiting below MCRS in the *Nephrops* fisheries in the Irish Sea (Area 7a). This should be done with the objective of ensuring optimum selectivity of the measures in place to exclude undersized whiting. In the past, the NWWAC has advised to prioritise measures which *'do not only minimise the amount of unwanted catches (and thus the choke risk), but also help the relevant stocks recover to mitigate chokes in the longer-term'*<sup>3</sup>. There is the view that it is also crucial to identify those measures which are most effective at allowing small whiting to escape alive. Accordingly, evaluations should continue regarding the effectiveness of these measures to protect the stock from being fished unsustainably.

Should this STECF review indicate positive results in selectivity that may benefit the situation of the stock, the NWWAC suggests that steps are taken to incorporate these findings in future stock assessments and the resulting TAC advice.

Yours sincerely,

Emiel Brouckaert  
Chairman Executive Committee

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<sup>3</sup> NWWAC advice 'Addressing Choke Risk in NWW after exemptions' of 17 October 2019, p. 3.

