

## MINUTES

### Joint NWWAC/NSAC Focus Group Brown Crab

#### Virtual meeting via Teams

28 January 2026

#### Participants

Ilaria Bellomo	Secretariat	NWWAC
Marc Eskelund	FSK-PO	NSAC
Norman Graham	DG MARE C.5	
John Lynch	ISEFPO	NWWAC
Anna Marcout	CNPMEM	NWWAC/NSAC
Mo Mathies	Secretariat	NWWAC
Carlos Mesquita	ICES WGCRA	
Norah Parke		
Dominic Rihan	KFO	NWWAC
Kateryna Urbanovych	Secretariat	NSAC
Dirk Van Guyze	Vlaamse Overheid – Agency Agriculture and Fisheries	
Noor Visser	Ministerie van Landbouw, Visserij, Voedselzekerheid en Natuur	

#### 1. Welcome and introductions

**Mo Mathies**, NWWAC Secretariat, welcomed all participants to the meeting which was followed by a quick round of introductions. Apologies were received in advance of the meeting by Geert Meun (VisNed). It was agreed to move point 2 “appointment of the FG Chair” to be included in point 5 of the agenda after members had the opportunity to listen to the updates from ICES and the Member States Group and identify potential work for the ACs.

#### 2. Update on the work of ICES WKCRAB – Carlos Mesquita, Member of ICES WGCRA, first author of recently published ICES report

**Carlos Mesquita** explained that he served as the Chair of the ICES Working Group on the Biology and Life History of Crabs (WGCRA) from 2020 to 2022. At the conclusion of his three-year term, the group reached a consensus on the need to publish a comprehensive update on

the current status of brown crab (*Cancer pagurus*). He was responsible for coordinating this project, resulting in a report published last year.

WGCRAB was established in 2006, succeeding the Study Group on the Biology and Life History of Crabs (SGCRAB), which had met biennially prior to that date. Initially, the group's focus was restricted to the biology and fisheries of two species: snow crab in Canada and spider crab in the Northeast Atlantic. However, following recommendations to expand the remit to other commercially significant species, the current Terms of Reference (ToR) now include brown crab, velvet crab, European lobster, and king crab.

The group meets annually, typically in November, with various subgroups meeting throughout the year to progress specific collaborative projects.

Historically, WGCRAB membership was primarily centred on the UK and Norway, with France also being an early participant. Mesquita noted that Ireland was also among the initial members. In recent years, the group has expanded significantly to include Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden. On the western side of the Atlantic, Greenland and Canada are active participants, though their focus remains primarily on species such as the snow crab.

The primary aims focus on crustacean fishery biology, stock assessment, and the generation of new scientific knowledge through international collaboration. The ToRs are categorised into four main areas:

- **Fishery Statistics:** Compiling annual data on landings, effort, and Landings Per Unit Effort (LPUE), alongside legislative and management updates.
- **Stock Assessment:** National institutes present their assessments for peer review of methodology and findings.
- **Environmental Drivers:** Investigating the impact of environmental factors (notably in Canada and Greenland regarding snow crab).
- **Research Projects:** Presenting ongoing research on diverse topics to support scientific advice.

While WGCRAB provides recommendations on fishery status, it is important to note that, with the exception of king crab, quota-based advice is not addressed.

The group produces a formal report every three years. Recent research has focused on brown crab maturity, lobster indices, and the role of climate (including the North Atlantic Oscillation) on crab stocks.

The most recent output is the specific report on brown crab. Initiated in late 2022 and supported by a 2023 data call, this project was a major collaborative effort involving experts from the Marine Institute, Cefas, Bangor University, and various national institutes across Belgium, Denmark, Scotland, and France. The report was motivated by concerns regarding increasing landings, declining catch rates in several regions, and general uncertainty regarding exploitation levels.

The group has identified several main assessment units. While these are managed as units, they are not necessarily true biological stocks, as there is currently a lack sufficient data on larval dispersal and genetics to define exact biological boundaries. They instead reflect the spatial scales at which fisheries are currently managed and reported.

A data call spanning 2008 to 2022 revealed that overall landings in Northern Europe peaked in 2016 before declining to a series low of approximately 40,000 tonnes in 2022.

- Declines: Notable in the UK, Ireland, France, Belgium, the Isle of Man, and Jersey.
- Increases: Recorded in newer fisheries such as Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands.
- Stability: Norway, which accounts for roughly 10% of total landings, has maintained a relatively steady trend.

Spatial analysis shows an increase in activity in the central North Sea and German Bight, though the majority of landings remain concentrated around the UK and Ireland.

Because brown crabs cannot be easily aged, assessments typically rely on length-based indicators or production models (such as the SPiCT model used in Ireland).

- Growth Overfishing: Current indicators suggest the species is being over-exploited in several areas, specifically in the form of growth overfishing.
- LPUE Trends: Both fishery-dependent and independent indices (such as trawl and dredge surveys in the Isle of Man and Scotland) show a general downward trend in most regions, excluding Norway.

Management currently relies on technical measures, primarily Minimum Conservation Reference Sizes (MCRS). Other measures include:

- Restrictive licensing (though high "latent capacity" remains a concern in the UK).
- Pot/trap limits and escape gap regulations.
- Effort restrictions (e.g., kilowatt-day limits in ICES Area 6a).

Harvest Control Rules (HCR) are not yet widely implemented, with the Shetland Islands being a notable exception. Furthermore, there are no output controls (quotas) for brown crab.

Mesquita concluded that as brown crab stocks are frequently shared across international boundaries and jurisdictions (EU, UK, and Norway), management must be integrated. National institutes currently advise a reduction in fishing mortality where data is available. WGCRAV advocates for a coordinated, international approach to align management responses with the economic importance of the stock and to prevent further depletion.

**Mathies** thanked Mesquita and opened the floor to questions.

**Marc Eskelund** thanked Mesquita for his presentation and explained that he represents small-scale fisheries in Denmark. Therefore, his members do not account for the majority of these catches and generally encounter brown crab as a bycatch. His first question related to mapping. Eskelund outlined that one of the key areas for the brown crab fishery in Denmark is the Limfjord, a strait that cuts through Jutland and connects the Kattegat with the North Sea. As

it is a vital area for the fishery, he expressed concern about it being grouped together with the broader North Sea, as it is a somewhat isolated body of water. Recalling that the ICES WG works with management units rather than biological ones, he then wondered to what extent it was had been determined how 'local' these populations are and if there are studies indicating whether these stocks are tied to specific locations. Finally, he asked if any data was available on larval dispersal or how large an area is impacted when a local fishery suffers depletion.

**Mesquita** responded that there are several studies, primarily from the UK but also including research from Sweden in the early 2000s, based on tagging data that demonstrate crabs are highly mobile. Consequently, we believe that true biological stocks may span hundreds of kilometres; they are quite widespread. He provided a specific example from Scotland where a distinct pattern was observed: males tend to remain in inshore waters, whereas females undertake significant migrations of over 100 miles to the north of Scotland. They settle there in softer ground once they become berried (egg-bearing). Despite lacking specific data for the Limfjord area in Denmark, it is known that brown crabs are highly mobile and it is likely that different populations are interconnected. Regarding the current assessment units, these are essentially the areas that individual nations have historically proposed for management purposes. He proposed that if there are researchers in Denmark working on brown crab who believe there is a specific justification for defining a smaller, distinct management area, they are welcome to present this to the ICES working group which could then look into establishing or including that specific area.

**Eskelund** followed up by asking if genetic studies have been conducted to determine the extent of stock connectivity across the North Sea. Specifically, he questioned whether brown crabs are coastal-dependent or if they are capable of crossing the open sea. The enquiry also sought to clarify if larval drift might allow for such crossings or if populations are largely confined to regional, near-shore environments.

**Mesquita** explained that genetic studies generally indicate a high degree of uniformity across populations, with insufficient genetic variation to differentiate distinct stocks based on DNA alone. Regarding the species' distribution, his experience with the Scottish fishery suggests that as inshore catch rates have declined, vessels have moved into previously unfished areas within the Central and Eastern North Sea. This confirms that brown crabs are found in the middle of the North Sea, at considerable distances from the coast. While smaller, juvenile crabs show a clear preference for inshore waters, larger individuals, particularly females, thrive in offshore environments. Currently, fisheries are active throughout much of the North Sea and are potentially expanding, which explains why certain countries continue to report increasing landings as they move into these offshore areas.

Regarding the existing data gaps, **Dominic Rihan** wondered where the most significant deficiencies lie. He asked for clarification in which areas efforts should be focused to collect additional data that would most effectively support improved stock assessments and a more robust understanding of how the fishery is managed.

**Mesquita** felt that the answer depends on the specific country. For the UK, France, Ireland, and Norway, significant volumes of length-frequency data have been collected over the years,

which allows for the conducting of length-based assessments. However, countries with more recent fisheries have not yet reached that stage; they should focus on collecting baseline data regarding length and biological studies to derive maturity and reproduction indices, specifically, at what size crabs reach maturity in their local waters. In contrast, for countries that are already 'data-rich', the most significant gap is effort data. ICES needs to know precisely how many traps are being deployed. In Scotland, for instance, there is no clear understanding of this. While biological information and the number of vessels active in the fishery is available, there is no mandatory requirement in Scotland, or indeed much of the rest of the UK, to report the number of creels or traps used. Establishing a system to record this would be a vital step toward developing more accurate indices of abundance. Mesquita summarised that countries with developing fisheries should begin with maturity and length data, while established fisheries must prioritise the collection of robust effort data.

**Norman Graham** thanked Mesquita and his colleagues for producing the Cooperative Research Report which he felt was an extremely useful document providing a clear overview of the current knowledge and the remaining uncertainties. He noted that production models are already in use for some stocks. Regarding the data gaps you mentioned, he wondered to what extent these inhibit the development of formal advice. For example, a surplus production model based on a CPUE index, where the effort data is highly uncertain, might not be a sufficiently robust indicator for a formal assessment. The Commission is keen to support the scientific evidence base, and if there are specific elements that are critical to collect, it should be discussed how to formally expand data collection to plug these gaps. Finally, Graham asked how far away ICES is from being able to deliver stock-specific advice for brown crab, adding that it seems there are still significant hurdles to overcome before we reach that point."

In **Mesquita's** view, the necessary data largely exists, but the primary constraint is the lack of a formal structure, such as a dedicated assessment working group. Currently, WGCRA functions as a working group focused on life history. While some assessment work is also done, a specific group would be required to produce regular, formal advice. Under existing ICES rules for data-limited stocks, he felt that advice could be delivered almost immediately for several countries if a formal request was made. However, for nations with emerging fisheries, such as Germany, Belgium, and Sweden, the data simply does not exist yet, as they are only now beginning to recognise the importance of brown crab in their waters. He outlined that the first step is the implementation of data calls to aggregate international landings and ensure comprehensive coverage. The data call for this report, spanning 2008 to 2022, required a monumental effort, with some institutes taking weeks or months to share their records. If a mechanism were established through ICES to include brown crab in the standard annual data calls used for quota species, producing advice would become significantly more feasible for those countries that already possess the requisite data."

### **3. Update on the work of the Scheveningen Group – Dirk Van Guyze, Agency of Agriculture and Fisheries, Flemish Government**

**Dirk Van Guyze** provided a brief overview of the work undertaken within the Scheveningen Group over the past year. Two working group meetings were held focused on brown crab, most recently in October, where the findings of the ICES report were discussed. The report received several reactions from the Member States Group (MSG) members. German colleagues noted the absence of a clear assessment for the German Bight, and there was a general observation that the report did not reach a final conclusion on which specific technical measures are most effective.

As a starting point, the MSG working group concluded a Joint Recommendation (JR) regarding the Minimum Conservation Reference Size (MCRS) could be pursued, currently moving towards a standard of 150 mm. While not yet finalised, there was a consensus that the MCRS is the most straightforward issue to address in an initial JR, with other matters to follow in a subsequent phase. Under the Belgian chairmanship last year, a draft was prepared which has since been progressed. The chairmanship has now passed to the German colleagues, and during the first technical meeting this week, the new chair reaffirmed the intent to collaborate with the North Western Waters (NWW) MSG. The objective is for both regional groups to align on two key elements: the 150 mm MCRS and improved protection for berried females.

Originally, the aim was to submit this to STECF in March. However, Member States have concluded that this is premature due to several uncertainties. Crucially, as any Joint Recommendation will impact the UK, it must be shared with them for assessment. The exact procedure and timing for this are currently unclear, and clarification is sought from the Commission. The initial thought was to submit it to the UK simultaneously with the Advisory Councils, but this remains unconfirmed. Consequently, the plan is now to submit the JR to the Commission by 22 May, allowing for STECF review during their July plenary.

Van Guyze concluded that while this is a complex issue, its urgency is recognised. The Commission has stressed the need for prompt action, particularly given that the UK has already implemented its own measures for brown crab. Member States are doing their utmost, and it is now for the German and Dutch chairmanships to progress these drafts.

**Mathies** thanked Van Guyze for this updated and recalled that that NWWAC and NSAC submitted a joint advice in 2023 regarding the management of brown crab stocks. This advice identified very specific management options, including one particular measure for the English Channel that came directly from AC members. She wondered whether these proposals, which represent what could be implemented on the ground immediately, have been taken into account by the MSG as there is clear agreement among the stakeholders who put forward these measures via the ACs.

Van Guyze responded that both MSGs reviewed this advice. However, because this is such an urgent matter, the conclusion was that the fastest way to make progress was to prioritise the MCRS. While the MSGs have considered all the other management recommendations, it was felt those required more in-depth discussion and reflection, which would be better suited to a second phase. The fact that the MSGs are proceeding with an initial Joint Recommendation on the MCRS does not mean they intend to overlook the other management issues. Rather, Member States felt—and continue to feel—that establishing a uniform MCRS is currently the

most straightforward path toward reaching an agreement. More detailed measures can be addressed in a subsequent stage, though that will now be a matter for the current chairmanships.

#### **4. Discussion & next steps**

Mathies asked the participating AC members if they felt it was worthwhile to formally establish the Focus Group based on what they had heard.

**Rihan** expressed support for establishing a dedicated focus group, noting that while the administrative burden on the Secretariat and membership must be considered, the scale and economic importance of the fishery justify the additional resources. He highlighted that the ICES presentation painted a concerning picture of the current state of both the stocks and the fisheries, further reinforcing the need for such a group.

**John Lynch** also expressed his support for re-establishing the focus group, echoing previous comments regarding the extensive geographical reach of the fishery. He emphasised the importance of achieving cohesion in how both the stocks and the fisheries are managed across such a wide area. While acknowledging the significant workload involved, he noted that the high proportion of shared waters with the UK makes a dedicated group within the North Western Waters framework particularly essential.

**Eskelund** added his agreement with the preceding points and formally supported the establishment of the focus group. He noted that the proposed timeline, specifically the Scheveningen Group's plan to submit a Joint Recommendation by June, would necessitate a busy work schedule. He emphasised that his participation was driven by a strong desire to be involved in the future management of the species. He concluded by expressing hope that the group can collaborate effectively to ensure the long-term sustainability of the fishery and establish a clear, common path forward.

**Mathies** thanked the members for their expressions of interest in establishing this focus group. Regarding the next steps, she added that the NWWAC Secretariat will draft the Terms of Reference and suggested that the group's first task should be to meet and review the Joint Recommendations proposed by the Member State Groups once the ACs are formally asked for their contributions. Following that, the FG could either develop additional advice on management measures or continue to support the Member State Groups as they refine their own recommendations.

She also proposed to defer the appointment of a FG chair for the time being as only four AC members joined this meeting, stating that several other interested parties were unable to attend. This can be addressed at a future meeting or via an electronic procedure.

Members agreed with this approach.

## 5. AOB

No AOB were raised.

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

Mathies thanked participants and closed the meeting.

1	Secretariat to draft Terms of Reference and circulate to members.
2	Secretariat to share slides from ICES presentation.
3	Appointment of FG Chair deferred to later meeting/electronic procedure.