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

DRAFT MINUTES

FOCUS GROUP CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

Thursday 05 June 2025

Participants

Ilaria Bellomo	NWWAC
Richard Cronin	DHLGH
Falke de Sager	Rederscentrale
Mo Mathies	NWWAC
Alexandra Philippe	EBCD
Corentine Piton	France Peche Durable et Responsable
Pauline Stephan	CNPMEM

1. Welcome and introductions

The Chair Alexandra Philippe welcome all participants to the meeting. Apologies were received from John Lynch (ISEFPO) prior to the meeting. The agenda was adopted.

Action points from last meeting

1	Keep the topic of funding support to energy efficiency technology on the agenda of this Focus Group
2	The Focus Group will work on drafting advice on stakeholder engagement in MSFD processes.

2. Progress to date on MSFD Seabed Thresholds and link to EU Nature Restoration Regulation – Richard Cronin, DHLGH

Richard Cronin explained that he was moving to Brussels at the end of the month to the permanent representation of Ireland and offered to provide links to colleagues in DHLGH. Therefore, he will not be available to engage with the NWWAC on these topics after this meeting.

He commenced with a review of stakeholder engagement in the Nature Restoration Regulation which came into force in August 2024. Cronin noted that the timing of the Nature Restoration Regulation, i.e. the first restoration plan, and the timing of the 3rd and 4th cycles of the MSFD will not match up. The first plan under the Nature Restoration Regulation is due to be delivered in 2026. The fourth cycle of MSFD will be after 2030. So from a stakeholders' point of view, it is important to understand that while the two are very closely connected, particularly the Group 7 habitats, i.e. the

broad benthic habitat types of which many are productive fishing grounds, the actual interlink between the two will not take place for a number of years. This should give the ACs time to prepare and consider what is most important.

Cronin recalled the provisions of Art. 5 of the Nature Restoration Regulation in relation to the plans and the geographical scope. Group 1 to 6 are the Natura habitats, whereas Group 7 are the MSFD habitats that cover most of the EEZ of the Member States to a depth of 1000m. This means that are part of the NWWAC remit are to which the Nature Restoration Regulation will not apply.

The Regulation contains three deadlines with the 2030 one fast approaching. It is a very accelerated process and at the time of the drafting of the regulation, Member States pointed out to the Commission that this very fast implementation process was a challenge for meaningful stakeholder engagement.

In Ireland work has started on the national restoration plan, with the marine group's work beginning only this January involving predominantly State agencies and government departments. There are still a lot of knowledge gaps on certain habitat types, condition baselines and reference areas, and distribution of pressures. Targets up to 2030 need to be decided as well as what percentage of habitats will need to be restored beyond that. Most importantly, where are these areas for restoration going to be and how will they be restored with which legal instrument, e.g. marine protected areas, or fisheries regulations.

Ireland has already identified specific problems for achieving a coherent nature restoration plan, however, work will go ahead despite this.

INFOMAR is Ireland's extensive sea floor mapping programme, but there are still unmapped areas. And while that mapping identifies what the benthic habitat types are, it does not identify the conditions. Fishing pressure is used as a proxy against habitat type.

When putting in place a restoration measure for restore a habitat, the cost of removing an activity must be considered. For these restoration plans to be effective to work, it is essential to understand where to put them, so they have the least socio-economic impact. Any measures that are being developed must serve several objectives, for example they must also address achieving good environmental status under the MSFD.

There is a recognised need for more information, more data and the sharing of data. For Group 1-6 habitats, i.e. the NATURA habitats, the information can be taken from the work under the Habitats Directive. While this may not be sufficient, Member States cannot defer this work under the Regulation.

In relation to MSFD and Group 7 habitats, a lot of work has been carried out, and the environmental targets will be linked to the adopted threshold values under MSFD, i.e. the 25% disturbed and the 2% loss thresholds.

Cronin explained that when it comes to the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, the Commission does not have very strong levers to follow up with Member States if they do not achieve good environmental status (GES). This is something that will possibly be addressed in the revision which was just announced yesterday. Work of the MSFD is now coming into the 3rd cycle with several Member States having completed their updating of environmental targets and their assessment of good environmental status, while the rest will finish that work in 2025. Ireland is now working on monitoring programmes followed by the programme of measures which is expected in 2028. This programme of measures will contain nature restoration, and some plans are being included as a measure under the MSFD for seafloor habitats.

Most of Ireland's seafloor habitats are in good condition, however, several need additional work. Certain areas to the west and south of Ireland have also not been assessed. Information on fishing intensity is used as a proxy for environmental condition. This methodology is used across all Member States in the NE Atlantic who are parties to OSPAR, however, it does highlight potential shortcomings when determining GES.

Under the Nature Restoration Regulation, degraded habitats need to be restored. Under the MSFD, to meet the threshold values of 25% disturbed or 2% loss or potentially 10% undisturbed, existing habitat conditions can be used, i.e. if a habitat is in a good condition, it can be allocated that towards the 10% undisturbed. Ireland would be able to meet, for example, a 10% undisturbed threshold value across many broadband habitat types because they are not disturbed, but there are five that need more action. This then can overlap with the Nature Restoration Regulation.

The NRL is moving very fast, and the first cycle may not be ambitious as the MS do not have enough time to make these ambitious. The objective is to have these in place for 2026. However, it is essential for fishermen to be engaged in the process to ensure that the right information on socio-economic aspects is consulted by decision makers. If there are economically important areas

That socio-economic information is available to the fisheries ministries but not always shared with the environmental ministries.

Several ACs are observers to the MSFD implementation strategy through which the opportunity arises for engagement. If it is felt that the engagement is not effective enough, the ACs can approach the Commission for improved engagement particularly in relation to the effect of 10% undisturbed habitat types. In relation to the 25% disturbed and 2% loss, there is enough time for engagement. The 10% undisturbed will not come into effect until 2030, and it is important for the ACs to be involved prior to adoption.

In Ireland, there is a stakeholder participation approach to the implementation of the MSFD and NRL, as well as the delivery of MPAs. The FPOs are able to participate in this work, however, the AC could try to become involved and contribute to the process.

Yesterday, the Commission announced a revision of the MSFD. Cronin commented that this could simplify the MSFD for the Commission to make Europe more competitive. This could mean making the numbers clearer and more binding, e.g. threshold values might become targets and GES values. As many are already in place this would mean a simple adjustment. However, this does not mean that these might be achieved any faster due to nature's own processes. As the marine environment does not stop at borders, this may lead to the establishment of a legal entity to take action if Member States do not put measures in place to meet environmental targets. Cronin outlined that potentially if there was a problem regarding the seafloor in one Member State, but the pressure was caused by another Member State, the Commission may have a legal power to impose measures by prosecuting Member States which will make the MSFD a much more real tool regarding implementation. This might also mean that the Commission could make adjustments via the CFP to regulate fishing activity in certain cases which could affect the economic viability of the sector in certain areas.

The expected Ocean Pact mentions an upcoming Ocean Act which could be a way of tackling CFP and ocean policy. The question of stopping all bottom contact fishing in MPAs has become a political issue with the scientific approach moving into the background. It is important that not only the polarised views are heard but also the middle view.

The Chair thanked Cronin for his presentation and explanations and opened the floor to questions.

Falke de Sager commented on the difficulties in making information available between government departments and asked if Cronin had any suggestions.

Cronin responded that the availability for socio-economic information is vital as it has an impact of peoples lives and politics. He mentioned that there are different policy objectives for different Departments, i.e. nature conservation vs. food production. This has led to institutional mistrust. He felt that a fresh take on this is needed as some part of the global environment is needed to support society and needs to be managed, while the environment also needs to benefit. Pitching environmental groups against lobby groups is not beneficial, and a good way forward could be to make all information freely available in user friendly formats so that anyone has access and can understand this.

The Chair referred to the revision of the MSFD and the expected publication of the EU Ocean Pact as well as the recent NWWAC statement made in the last meeting of the Marine Strategy Coordination Group asking for more transparent stakeholder engagement.

Cronin pointed out that the Commission will be holding workshops on the MSFD after the summer in which AC experts should be involved. He recommended that the NWWAC as an official observer to the MSCG could make direct contact with Veronica Manfredi or Paula Duarte in DG ENV, possibly in conjunction with the NSAC. He also pointed out that at the meeting of the Marine Directors during the previous week, the Commission presented their assessment of the MSFD including several

recommendations. As part of this DG ENV has recognised that improved stakeholder engagement is needed, for example a participatory approach as practiced in Ireland. Cronin explained it is most useful to engage early with all stakeholders so that information is available from the beginning and can help with identifying the real issues up front, so that these do not need to be managed at the end of the process.

The Chair felt that it was important to raise awareness regarding these issues with all members of the NWWAC and that it would also be interesting to understand how other Member States are progressing their work regarding the Nature Restoration Regulation and MSFD.

She thanked Cronin for his engagement with the AC over the years and wished him success in his new role in Brussels.

3. NWWAC Draft European Transition Partnership advice review

Members discussed the draft advice and how to proceed with additional work. It was agreed that the Secretariat would update the available draft following the discussion and circulate this for final review by FG members. Due to the tight timeline, members are asked to submit their comments and continue with any additional review via the approval procedure in the Horizontal WG. Deadline for submission to the Commission is 20 June.

4. Next steps

It was agreed that Alice Belin, DG ENV, would be invited to the next meeting of the NWWAC HWG for an update on the MSFD following the announcement of the revision.

5. AOB

None raised

6. Summary of actions agreed

1	Secretariat to update the draft advice and circulate to FG members for immediate review.
2	Secretariat to invite Alice Belin, DG ENV, to HWG meeting on 03 July.
3	Chair to review NWWAC statement made to MSCG and update for potential letter to DG ENV on AC participation in the announced workshops.