

DRAFT MINUTES

Joint NWWAC/NSAC Focus Group Skates & Rays

Virtual meeting 02 December 2021

Participants

Rosalie Crespin	CNPMEM
Graham Johnston	Marine Institute
Pauline Joyeux	DPMA
Pierre Leconte	DPMA
Erik Lindebo	DG MARE
John Lynch	Irish South & East FPO
Geert Meun	VisNed
Sander Meyns	Rederscentrale
Linda Planthoff	Stichting Noordzee
Solène Prévalet	FROM Nord
Dominic Rihan	BIM
Amerik Schoutemaker	Nederlandse Vissersbond
Sofie Smedegaard Mathiesen	Danmarks Fiskeriforening
Jonathan White	Marine Institute
Johnny Woodlock	Irish Seal Sanctuary
Mo Mathies	NWWAC Secretariat
Tamara Talevska	NSAC Secretariat

1. Welcome and introductions

The Chair welcomed all participants. The agenda and minutes from the previous meeting were approved. Apologies were received from Paddy Walker, Dutch Elasmobranch Society.

2. COM response to joint NWWAC/NSAC request to the Commission for updated scientific advice on skates and rays / next steps

The Chair introduced the background to the NWWAC/NSAC request for updated scientific advice on skates and rays. A discussion followed on the details and current state of play regarding reviewing management measures for skates and rays in the NWW and North Sea. He advised that the group TAC has been discussed repeatedly and that the situation has not changed as setting individual TACs for different species in every different area is enormously difficult, especially in relation to relative stability.

Graham Johnston identified that the setting of TACs, while based on scientific advice, is a management measure which means that the question of groups TACs vs. individual TACs is not normally addressed in scientific advice. However, since 2017 ICES has been providing species and

stock specific landings advice for some off the stocks as requested by the Commission. While catch advice has been requested, landing data may only be available in many cases.

Erik Lindebo provided an update on the ongoing EU-UK discussions with the next meeting scheduled for this afternoon. He identified skates and rays as one of the contentious issues, especially on how the ICES scientific advice currently available is broken into the current group TACs. The EU and the UK have different approaches, as highlighted in consultations earlier this year.

The Commission is engaging with the UK to come up with reasonable and pragmatic figures for 2022, in terms of following the science but also in terms of expectations from the industry. Usually, the Commission pulls all advice sheets together and establishes an average change in advice for each TAC area. The UK, however, considers the addition of tonnages of the advice sheets. We need to seek a clear commitment to engage in the Specialised Committee on Fisheries with the appropriate experts, possibly with the inclusion of ICES, to reflect on how to move forward in terms of using the science to set group TACs.

Secondly, possibly later on next year, discussions will need to be held if the group TAC is the best way forward or if the science and the fisheries reality should be used in a different way, for example for the setting of individual TACs or sub TACs for certain species, or any other measures. The ACs' work on this second part and contributions would be greatly appreciated, especially regarding a long-term management approach and for the protection of vulnerable species, whilst at the same time allowing the fishing industry to utilise the sustainable resources that are out there. The Commission, on behalf of the EU, is looking to propose the best management approach going forward. However, the current TAC setting for 2022 is based more on trying to find a pragmatic way forward in the short term, while the long-term ambition is to try establishing a framework that works both for science and for the industry and stakeholders at large. Following on from all the previous work carried out by the ACs and STECF, progress needs to be made, especially in relation to working with the UK in the SCF from next year onward, in order to ensure sustainable management of the skates and rays.

The Chair commented that the UK may not be in favour of breaking the group TAC into individual TACs and that the focus might rather be on additional work to protect vulnerable species.

Lindebo replied that some of the bigger species could possibly be looked at regarding sub TACs, but that the group TAC could also be evaluated regarding improvements in the implementation, as well as additional measures to ensure protection over vulnerable species.

Dominic Rihan added that the available science regarding certain species is fairly good allowing for a suitable TAC to be set, while for some species it is not, especially when looking at catch data. The question arises as to how the scientists see the closing of these gaps evolving, which species may be problematic and which species have sufficient data available for confident TAC setting.

Jonathan White identified that currently some of the species are very difficult to identify and that geographical distribution varies between species. This makes collecting reliable data difficult and "analytical assessments virtually impossible." He commended ICES on their work on skates and ray stocks across Western Europe in relation to trying to indicate their status and trying to develop pathways to improve the knowledge base. He wondered how up to date participants were regarding the available ICES advice sheets and suggested a full review of same as a first step before pulling together proposals of how the stocks. This could possibly be carried out by an independent expert,

or potentially the STECF. The Chair agreed that this was a concise analysis of what the ACs needed to do.

Johnny Woodlock commented that without fully documented fisheries protection of vulnerable and critically endangered species is hampered. The Chair agreed that endangered species possibly require further protection and best practises are of importance here, for example tagging. He also referred to the available technical measures and gear specificities which allow for a certain amount of reduction in bycatch. He enquired with the NWWAC Secretariat regarding a possible way forward to progress the work of the group.

Mo Mathies identified that while generally the Secretariat would assist in the compiling of the information identified in the discussion, this goes beyond both Secretariats' capabilities and capacities and that a scientific expert could be engaged to assist with this task. Tamara Talevska concurred with this assessment.

Lindebo pointed out that possibly two different groups of experts may be needed, one in relation to the science and another in relation to the management. He also pointed to the STECF and their comprehensive work in 2017 and wondered if members of the FG could develop terms of reference for questions relating to management on which the STECF experts might be able to produce useful input on. Rihan identified that the STECF is holding a Bureau meeting next week with the chairs, vice-chairs and the Commission during which the latter could address this topic. Lindebo agreed to flag this with the relevant DG MARE representatives ahead of next week's meeting. He agreed that the main new issue is the changed relationship with the UK and that this could provide the needed impetus to review previous STECF work.

ACTION: NWWAC Secretariat to develop supporting request and submit via email by 03 December.

White enquired to the follow up from the 2017 STECF report. Rihan responded that while little had changed since that report, the main new impetus now relates to the EU-UK negotiations putting an onus on both parties to develop a better way of managing skates and ray stocks.

Lindebo confirmed that following the 2017 workshop and report little decisive action has been observed, from both the Member States and the Commission, but that the changed political landscape requires a fresh look now. If the EU does not "grab the bull by the horns and make progress here" making it important to find the right channel and the right experts to make progress in order to facilitate a good discussion with the UK.

Mathies summarised the agreed action expected from the AC including development of the supporting request to STECF by the Commission. Based on the response following the STECF meeting, the Focus Group can identify next steps.

Woodlock queried if the request should cover all species or focus on specific ones. The Chair referred to the case of undulate ray and how introducing management measures in one area could make things more difficult in another.

Johnston informed the participants that in March 2022 ICES is carrying out a benchmark assessment on undulate ray in the English Channel happening which means that next year best scientific advice will be available on this stock.

Rihan referred to the survival exemption in the landing obligation for skates and rays which has been in place for a number of years. He enquired if the ACs could possibly coordinate the collection of information on survivability data to support the continuation of this exemption and the evaluation by STECF. He pointed out that the Commission is going to come under pressure from their own legal services and the Parliament about retaining that exemption without any additional supporting information.

The Chair agreed that this exemption is important for the industry and enquired from the NWWAC Secretariat if this work could be carried out. Mathies recalled the best practice table that had been developed by this FG and how this could be used as a basis for an enquiry with the members of both ACs as well as with the relevant research institutes.

ACTION: NWWAC and NSAC Secretariat to circulate enquiry to all members on survivability data for skates and rays.

White pointed out that the Marine Institute's Irish stock book could be useful in the context of establishing a list of species which may need to be addressed as a priority for the work of the FG.

Solène Prévalet enquired why the Commission did not follow a similar approach to the UK's when setting TACs. Lindebo pointed out that the Commission has followed the same approach over the past years but is not averse to making necessary changes, including taking tonnages into account as one of the potential options. He pointed out that this could be one of the aspects that the STECF could evaluate should the request be accepted.

Amerik Schuitemaker enquired regarding the response from the Member States regarding the previously submitted joint advice by the NWWAC and NSAC on best management practices and what additional information was expected. Talevska pointed out that no response was received from the MS in response to this advice. Mathies added that the advice contained a list of projects and studies, possibly relating more to gear technology rather than survivability. The list is non-exhaustive and does not include information from Member States not represented in the Focus Group, e.g., Spain or Germany.

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

The Chair thanked all participants for their contributions and closed the meeting.

The next meeting will be held in January 2022 depending on the response received from the Commission regarding the STECF request.

Actions

1	NWWAC Secretariat to develop supporting request and submit via email by 03 December.
2	NWWAC and NSAC Secretariat to circulate enquiry to all members on survivability data for skates and rays.