

MINUTES

Joint NWWAC/NSAC Focus Group Skates & Rays

Virtual meeting via Teams

11 June 2025

Participants

Michael Andersen	Danmarks Fiskeriforening
Jurgen Batsleer	DG MARE
Ilaria Bellomo	NWWAC
Katinka Bleeker	Wageningen Marine Research
Pauline Delalain	CNPMEM
Falke de Sager	Rederscentrale
Alfred Fisker Hansen	Danmarks Fiskeriforening
Graham Johnston	Marine Institute
John Lynch	ISEFPO
Geert Meun	VisNed
Mo Mathies	NWWAC
Solene Prevalet	FROM Nord
Amerik Schuitemaker	Nederlandse Visserbond
Sofie Smedegaard Mathiesen	Danmarks Fiskeriforening
Tamara Talevsak	NSAC
Kateryna Urbanovych	NSAC

1. Welcome and introductions

The Chair John Lynch welcomed all participants. The agenda was adopted.

Action points from the last meeting (01 October 2024)

1	Morgan to revert back with an answer to the Secretariat for distribution to the group. Response included in minutes of last meeting
2	Organisation of workshop on skates and rays in 2025 in Brussels. To be discussed under Agenda item 5
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. Response submitted 08 January
4	Jurgen's presentation to be circulated to members. Circulated October 2024

2. Update on Commission work re. skates & rays – Jurgen Batsleer, DG MARE C.5

Jurgen Batsleer provided an overview of the current work in the Commission on skates and rays management. He recapped the Group TAC approach introduced in 1999 for the North Sea, and in an additional 5 regions since 2009. An agreement was reached in the Specialised Committee on Fisheries (SCF) to review the Group TAC approach and develop possible alternatives.

Batsleer followed by explaining the various proposals for management options that could be explored using the example of the North Sea, though the approach is also applicable to the Celtic Sea in his opinion. He outlined that the single species advice and stock distribution may not necessarily be consistent with the combined TAC areas. Nevertheless, all stocks are currently grouped together “like a sum”. That sum is then distributed over 3A, 2AC4 and 7D by an agreed percentage under the SCF. Then the TCA distribution is applied leading to the agreed percentages from 2026 onwards which leads to the Group TAC for the three different areas in the North Sea.

However, the single species advice and the stock distribution may not necessarily be consistent with the combined TAC areas as there are straddling stocks. Other stocks do not occur in certain areas. For example, small eyed ray in 7D of which actually 53% of the advice is allocated to 4, and 1.46% to 3A, where it does not occur.

There is an additional assumption that stocks covered by the TAC can sustain similar fishing mortality. Batsleer explained that some species are more sensitive to fisheries than others which also has to be taken into account. Finally, he highlighted the issue of overshooting or undershooting of the advice, i.e., some of the TAC advice is not fully used, or more is landed than actually provided for in the advice. The expert report has now been finalised and circulated to Member States. In it the overshooting/undershooting is shown in absolute numbers for various species.

Batsleer then outlined several management options:

- Vulnerable stocks in footnote with mx. Tonnage
- Vulnerable stocks on prohibited species list
- A hybrid option: genus-based approach
- Separate TAC for commercially important stocks
- Sub-TACs for vulnerable stocks
- Individual TAC for all stocks

He added that negotiating individual TACS for over 30 species between EU-UK would not be desirable from an administrative and management point of view. Therefore, he developed a different approach where a general TAC would be set for specific areas with “of which” clauses applied.

Batsleer identified several key considerations which need to be taken into account, including the legal obligation of managing stocks at MSY level, and the requirement to adhere to the TCA with the UK. The latter means that no new TACs can be agreed leading to the need to use “of

which” clauses. He felt that the approach he presented would align the TACs more closely with the ICES advice as well as match the defined stocks in areas and potential adjustment to fishing patterns. The “of which” clause would also allow addressing the over- and underutilisation of quotas. However, he pointed out that this approach would impact the distribution of TACs across the three different areas and therefore shift the split between EU and UK leading to higher quote for the EU. This would be in breach of the TCA and impact relative stability between Member States as well.

Therefore, he identified a more simplistic approach which he also presented to the Member States and will share with the UK next week. Here, instead of looking at where the landings occur of the different species, the split as agreed under the SCF is kept in place. Individual species such as blonde ray or Thornback ray could be removed from the Group TAC and the TCA applied accordingly. This would identify catch limits per species. For example, last year for the North Sea the Group TAC was 5943 tons in total. Removing Thornback ray and blonde ray for example could provide individual TACs but leave the remaining Group TAC in place. This would also allow calculations on the percentage TAC for each Member State based on the current relative stability key and show up the TAC allocation for each species per Member State. The same exercise can also be carried out for the Celtic Sea, and both are available in the Excel document shared with the Member States administrations.

Batsleer concluded that “by using this of which clause, we can limit the fishing mortality, which is in line with the ICES advice. We legally adhere to the TCA with UK, and there is no change in shares between EU and UK. There is also no change in shares between the Member States.” He also felt that the administrative burden linked to this approach would be limited. Disadvantages of this approach include that some species are still under the Group TAC, over/undershooting of the advice is likely to continue occurring, it does not match the defined stock areas and cannot be adjusted to fishing patterns.

The Chair thanked Batsleer for his presentation and complimented him on the work. He felt that there were still complexities that need to be addressed, but a start as been made.

Michael Andersen referred to the legal obligations and ICES perception of stocks. He felt that ICES is not accurate in estimating stock size for every species. Management based on this advice for stocks where a difference in abundance is observed could create choke issues for fisheries.

Batsleer commented that the approach is complex. The split is kept as currently in place for example regarding Thornback ray where 53% will be allocated to the North Sea and 45% will be allocated to 7D similar to what is happening now under the Group TAC. Importantly, using this approach should not affect the inter area flexibility, but needs to be negotiated with the UK. The approach would combine mainly 7d and 4 into one area where an “of which” clause could be applied for example to Thornback ray. Regarding choke problems he added that a lot of work has been carried out on survivability especially by Bord Iascaigh Mhara, and the exemption is in place and valid until 2027 so there should not be any impact. This approach removes the main commercial stocks from the Group TAC, but in the same way the UKM could suggest removing the vulnerable stocks instead. He felt there should not be any choke issues.

Andersen stated that for some POs the “of which” clause approach could create issues.

Batsleer hoped that Member States have shared the proposed approach with stakeholders in order to have as much input as possible and identify issues perceived by stakeholders.

Amerik Schuitemaker informed participants that the Dutch Government had yet to share the documentation provided by the Commission. He appreciated that this was a more simplified approach.

Pauline Delalain advised that the French administration has also contacted stakeholders.

Geert Meun informed participants that a meeting on this topic is scheduled with the Dutch administration for the following day.

The Chair commented that some Member States were slow in approaching stakeholders especially with a deadline of 20 June.

Before Batsleer left the meeting, Mo Mathies enquired if the proposed AC workshop on the management of skates and rays, initially scheduled for 11 September in Brussels is still envisaged. She commented that EAPO is holding its General Assembly on that day, and a different date may be needed.

Batsleer explained that the Commission would very much welcome this workshop and that the focus might be clearer following the next EU-UK meeting the following week. He indicated that it would be useful to hold the workshop prior to the next SCF meeting scheduled for 17 September, and that UK involvement similar to the AC workshop held in 2023 would be preferable.

3. ICES WSKATE2– Graham Johnston, Marine Institute, Katinka Bleeker, Wageningen University

Graham Johnston provided a brief overview of the ICES advice process and the work of the [WGEF](#) stating that for most elasmobranchs advice is released every two years. He outlined the various ICES stock categories in relation to elasmobranchs identifying changes in the advice if benchmarks have been carried out. For skates and rays, a Category 3 assessment is most common, with Cat. 5 the next biggest group. While data and surveys are available for Cat 3 stocks, not enough data is available for Cat 5 to make a proposer assessment, and the precautionary buffer is applied leading to a 20% reduction in advice each year. As new surveys become available in time, combinations of survey trends can be investigated.

Johnston outlined that the first WSKATE was held online in 2020 and focussed mainly on North Sea stocks, followed by Bay of Biscay and Iberian stocks. It led to a change in the assessment process for several stocks. WSKATE2 was held in April 2024 with a focus on the Celtic Sea region and the aim to move stocks potentially from Cat 5 to Cat 3. He commented that the

meeting had been very technical and that the report is still being finalised. It will include several recommendations, one of which is that the advice requesters can specify the need for stock specific advice. This has not been made yet but may happen next year. Other recommendations include:

- Use IAMS data for blackmouth dogfish in NE Atlantic, and spotted ray in W of Ireland assessments
- Use UK Q1 SWBeam, UK FSP and FR WCGFS surveys for thornback ray assessment in Western Channel.
- Provide individual advice for *Dipturus batis* and *D. intermedius* in the Celtic Seas Ecoregion
- Cuckoo ray in North Sea should use lower than currently used exploitable biomass (30cm vs 50cm)
- Consider using Norwegian Longline spurdog data in spurdog assessment
- Develop further methods for the use of LPUE data where survey data are not available.

Once the report is finalised it will be peer reviewed in ICES, and once approved go into the recommendations for 2026/2027 advice cycle.

The Chair thanked Johnston for his presentation and mentioned that the NWWAC Secretariat had circulated an internal report following WSKATE2 to Focus Group members.

ICES work on the Joint Request from UK and the European Commission on the Management Scenarios for Spurdog (*Squalus acanthias*)

Johnston explained that while this topic has been discussed for several years now, recent weeks saw increased activity with ICES holding a workshop on management scenarios following a joint EU-UK advice request ([link](#)). He outlined the terms of reference for the workshop and specifically identified the need to look at the impact on the stock of changing or removing the 100 centimetres in maximum landings as fishermen are mostly unhappy with this restriction.

The group is using the current stock assessment as a baseline with survey and commercial data from the entire area while adding discard survival information mainly established by Bord Iascaigh Mhara. Johnston emphasised that the work is being carried out very quickly with the draft report and draft advice due on 25 July. Both the EU and UK will look at the recommendations and use them in the negotiations at the beginning of October.

The Chair thanked Johnston for this update.

Andersen enquired regarding the species ID problem experienced between catch, landing, sale and scientific research.

Johnston commented that ICES WKSHARKS2 for the first time looked at ID at landings and rules were created in order to harmonise ID data. He added that a data preparation workshop is being held annually to ensure the IDs are harmonised prior to ICES advice is being issued.

The Chair added that in Ireland species ID is monitored after landing and monitored regularly after the logbook has been filled.

Katinka Bleeker added that while the report is still being finalised, it includes a chapter on landings per unit of effort. Where data is missing for certain stocks, it may be possible to create an LPUE index. Species specific landings issues are also mentioned, as well as Norwegian landings where 70% of landings are still identified as “other skates and rays”. She expects that some form of recommendation will be included on improving the species-specific landings information.

Johnston final comment related to unusual landings reported by Denmark over the previous year. He explained that ICES observed these and was able to make certain corrections.

4. Discussion

As above

5. Next steps

- Preparation of proposed stakeholder workshop 11 September Brussels

ACTION: Secretariat to contact MARE C.5 with proposed new date 02 September

ACTION: Secretariat to share draft ToR with FG members for review

6. AOB

- COM request to MS on group TACs

ACTION: Secretariat to prepare email to MSG presidencies regarding gathering stakeholder information

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

1	Secretariat to contact MARE C.5 with proposed new date 02 September
2	Secretariat to share draft ToR with FG members for review
3	Secretariat to prepare email to MSG presidencies regarding gathering stakeholder information