Minutes

Joint NWWAC/NSAC Focus Group Skates & Rays

Virtual meeting via Teams

08 December 2025

Participants

Michael Andersen	Danmarks Fiskeriforening	IND	DK	NSAC
Falke de Sager	Rederscentrale	IND	BE	NWWAC/NSAC
Pauline Delalain	CNPMEM	IND	FR	NWWAC/NSAC
Franck Le Barzick	COBRENORD	IND	FR	NWWAC
John Lynch (Chair)	ISEFPO	IND	IE	NWWAC
Geert Meun	VisNed	IND	NL	NWWAC/NSAC
Joanne Morgan	ICES			
Amerik Schuitemaker	Nederlandse Vissersbond	Ind	NL	NWWAC/NSAC
Solène Prévalet	FROM Nord	IND	FR	NWWAC/NSAC
Ilaria Bellomo	Secretariat	Sec		NWWAC
Mo Mathies	Rapporteur, Secretariat	Sec		NWWAC
Tamara Talevska	Secretariat	Sec		NSAC
Kateryna Urbanovych	Secretariat	Sec		NSAC

1. Welcome and introductions

The Chair John Lynch welcomed all participants. Apologies were received from Sofie Smedegaard-Mathiesen in advance of the meeting. The agenda was adopted.

Action points from the last meeting (11 June 2025)

1	Secretariat to contact MARE C.5 with proposed new date 02 September
	DG MARE agreed to hold the joint workshop on 02 September.
2	Secretariat to share draft ToR with FG members for review
	Terms of Reference were circulated and will be addressed under agenda item 5.
3	Secretariat to prepare email to MSG presidencies regarding gathering stakeholder information
	Both the NWW Member States Group and the Scheveningen Group were contacted emphasising the need for timely stakeholder engagement on the Commission's request for information.

2. Latest ICES advice – Joanne Morgan, ICES ACOM Vice-Chair

Lesser-spotted dogfish W Scotland, Irish Sea, S Celtic Seas (6,7a-c,7e-j)

Advice for 2026 and 2027, MSY: 4781 t +20%. Landings

- F below Fmsy proxy,
- Stock size above Itrigger
- Stability clause applied
- Discard survival 78% applied to length data in 2025 assessment – affects length based indicators
- Can't quantify all discards (only good data for otter trawls)

Spotted ray North Sea, Skagerrak, Kattegat and E English Channel (3a47d)

Advice for 2026 and 2027, MSY: 1468 t and 1357 t +3.7 and -7.6% (landings 832 t and 769 t)

- F below Fmsy, Biomass above MSYBtrigger
- Skates and rays managed under single TAC - prevents effective control of single-stock exploitation rates and could lead to over exploitation of some species.
- Gear specific discard survival rates applied – avg 56.8%
- Downward revision of F
- Some discard data reconstructed using effort data
- SPiCT assessment
- Advice based on a proportion of FMSY (15th percentile) Elasmobranchs considered more vulnerable to fishing mortality

Michael Andersen was wondering if any information was available regarding size of individuals caught and survivability. He also queried why the TAC would be increased by 3.7% in one year and then reduced by 7.6% the following year.

Joanne Morgan responded that it is possible to develop projections at a specific catch tonnage, ICES projects based on the MSY approach based on its framework. In relation to survivability no size specific survival information was presented for spotted ray, but she explained that metier specific survival estimates would take into account differences in selectivity between various metiers as well as damage from different methods of fishing. She added that more information might be available in the relevant ICES working group, and that ICES is putting together a new working group to work with the assessment working groups, particularly during benchmarks. This working group is going to be composed of experts on discard survival, who will be looking at any studies on particular species and gear to help the assessment experts determine how best to incorporate this information into the assessment.

Greater spotted dogfish W Scotland, S Celtic Seas, Channel (6 and 7)

Advice for 2026 and 2027, MSY: 758 t +11% (landings advice)

- F below Fmsy proxy
- Stock size above Itrigger
- Can not quantify catch
- Length composition 2024 incomplete – used 2023
- Only 2021 and 2022 used in index B – 2020 incomplete –Covid
- Discard survival not available but expected to be high

Lesser spotted dogfish North Sea, Skagerrak Kattegat, E Channel (3a47d)

Advice for 2026 and 2027, MSY: 2765 t +3.2% (landings advice)

- F above Fmsy proxy
- Stock size above Itrigger
- Can not quantify catch
- Estimation of index updated based on WKSKATE2
- Discard survival 78% used to update length based indicators

Blonde ray central and south North Sea and E English Channel (4bc7d)

Advice for 2026 and 2027, MSY: 1627 t and 1546 t +35 and -5% (Landings 1447 t and 1375 t)

- F below Fmsy, Biomass above MSYBtrigger
- Skates and rays managed under single TAC - prevents effective control of single-stock exploitation rates and could lead to over exploitation of some species.
- Discard survival applied ~89%
- Both F and B revised downwards
- Some discard data reconstructed using effort
- SPiCT assessment
- Tagging, genetics, distribution - Division 4b added to the stock in 2023
- Advice based on a proportion of FMSY (15th percentile) Elasmobranchs considered more vulnerable to fishing mortality

Cuckoo ray North Sea, Skagerrak and Kattegat (3a4)

Advice for 2026 and 2027, MSY: landings 95 t in each year +20%

- F below Fmsy proxy
- Biomass above Itrigger
- Stability clause applied

- Skates and rays managed under single TAC - prevents effective control of single-stock exploitation rates and could lead to over exploitation of some species.
- Index updated 2025
- Discard survival 21% applied in calculation of length based indicators

Thornback ray North Sea, Skagerrak, Kattegat, E English Channel (3a47d)

Advice for 2026 and 2027 MSY: 6081 t and 6045 t +14.6 and -0.59% (Landings 4922 t and 4894 t)

- F below Fmsy
- Biomass above MSYBtrigger
- Skates and rays managed under single TAC - prevents effective control of single-stock exploitation rates and could lead to over exploitation of some species
- Some missing discard data reconstructed using effort
- Discard survival 81% applied
- SPiCT assessment
- Advice based on a proportion of FMSY (15th percentile)
- Elasmobranchs considered more vulnerable to fishing mortality

Smooth hound Northeast Atlantic (1-10, 12 and 14)

Advice for 2026 and 2027, MSY: landings 6395 t in each year +20%

- F below Fmsy proxy
- Biomass above Itrigger
- Stability clause applied
- Advice for Mustelus spp
- 3 species of smooth hound = species specific landings data unreliable
- Advice based on surveys for starry smooth hound – mainly occurs 4, 6-8 and on commercial data for the genus
- Rfb rule
- Based on 5 surveys but for starry smooth hound only

Other stocks of interest – advice in 2024

	2025	2026	2027	2028	
Small-eyed ray Bristol Channel, Celtic Sea North (7fg)	103 t	103 t			L
Undulate ray English Channel (7de)	4821 t	4637 t			C

Spotted ray West of Scotland, west & southwest of Ireland (67bj)	32 t	32 t			L
Spotted ray southern Celtic Seas and western English Channel (7a,e-h)	757 t	757 t			L
Thornback ray southern Irish Sea, Bristol Channel, Celtic Seas North(7a,fg)	1699 t	1699 t			L
Thornback ray West of Scotland (6)	67 t	67 t			L
Small-eyed ray English Channel (7de)	32 t	32 t	32 t	32 t	L
Undulate ray west and southwest of Ireland (7bj)	0 t	0 t	0 t	0 t	C
Blonde ray Irish Sea, Bristol Channel, Celtic Sea North (7afg)	573 t	573 t	573 t	573 t	L
Blonde ray Western English Channel (7e)	213 t	213 t	213 t	213 t	L
Sandy ray West of Scotland, Celtic Seas south, English Channel (6-7)	27 t	27 t	27 t	27 t	L
Shagreen ray West of Scotland, Celtic Seas south, English Channel (6-7)	134 t	134 t	134 t	134 t	L
Thornback ray western English Channel (7e)	170 t	170 t	170 t	170 t	L
Other rays and skates Rockall W Scotland, Celtic Sea & W Channel (6,7a-c,e-k)	Can Not provide advice				

Where to find these:

ICES library: https://ices-library.figshare.com/ or https://ices-taf.shinyapps.io/advicexplorer/

The Chair thanked J. Morgan for the presentation and opened the floor to questions.

Franck Le Barzick why the 15th percentile was being used for a specific species whereas for other species the 35th or 40th were used. He wondered if the higher precautionary approach was being used to determine the sustainable exploitation rate.

J. Morgan explained that for stocks that are using the SPiCT, the 35th percentile is generally used, except for species considered more vulnerable to fishing where the 15th percentile is

used. Originally, when applied to elasmobranchs and other deep-water species, stock experts were concerned about their vulnerability and ability to withstand standard fishing mortality rates. Specific research by WKLife confirmed these species are more vulnerable, concluding they should be fished at a lower level (lower F). The current estimates for these species have a wide confidence interval, meaning there's a large difference between F estimates at different percentiles (e.g., the 15th percentile vs. the 50th percentile/mean). This wide gap is considered a temporary thing. As a longer time series of data is collected, it is expected that the confidence limits will decrease, i.e. narrowing the interval, the distance between the percentiles will become less, and the estimates for F and the resulting catch advice will become closer and closer over time.

M. Andersen expressed concern regarding the high level of discards though this seemingly is not impacting the stocks too much. He felt that this might be a sign of generally lower fishing activity at sea. He worried that while the total effort at sea might have this positive consequence, introducing regulations for fear that stocks might be overexploited could lead to choke situations despite survival of discards being high.

J. Morgan explained that the stability clause ensures that the advice is precautionary which was a result of discussions of how to approach data limited stocks. She added that the information on discard survival would be assessed by the new ICES working group.

Solène Prévalet asked if any benchmarks were planned so that some stocks could be moved from Ct.3 to Cat1.

J. Morgan replied (via email) that no benchmarks for elasmobranchs are approved for 2026/2027 or on the list of proposals for 2027/2028.

3. **Joint EU–UK request for projected effects of different management scenarios for spurdog (*Squalus acanthias*)–** Joanne Morgan, ICES ACOM Vice-Chair

ICES was requested to use the current spurdog assessment for the purposes of medium-term stochastic projections, accounting for estimates of discard survivability by length and gear, in order to explore the effect on the stock status of releasing and retaining spurdog under different management measures. This should take into account differences in the main gear types for the fishery. Furthermore, ICES is requested to explore a combination of the potential management scenarios.

<u>Main take homes - 'headline advice'</u>

All the scenarios tested predicted the biomass to be maintained above MSY Btrigger.

The greater the proportion of the stock that is protected through management (e.g. minimum and maximum landing length and setting a total allowable catch [TAC] as a proportion of advised catch), the higher the predicted total biomass and recruitment, and the lower the predicted harvest rate. The results of scenarios are dependent on discard survival, which will vary by factors such as length and gear.

ICES recommends that improved knowledge of discard survival is required to develop more robust outputs in relation to potential management measures. Such data are also required to provide more robust evidence in relation to any potential exemption from the Landing Obligation.

The target harvest rate and fisheries selectivity would likely change in response to changes in management. This factor has not been fully considered in this request. ICES recommends that future evaluations be undertaken, including in relation to potential changes in gear and length selectivity (e.g. because of changes in targeting behaviour), discard survival scenarios (e.g. by length and gear), and subsequent changes in target harvest rates.

The Chair thanked J. Morgan for the presentation and added that both survivability and minimum size would be discussed in the coming year.

M. Andersen warned against seeing the results as de facto developments emphasising that they are modelling scenarios of what could happen, not of what will definitely happen.

J. Morgan pointed out that one positive result is the fact that all scenarios maintain the stock above MSY Btrigger. She felt that this was useful in the short and medium term, but that uncertainty of course increased when looking 30 years ahead.

The Chair thanked J. Morgan for her involvement in the work of the NWWAC overall and the joint NWWAC/NSAC Focus Group and wish her well on her retirement.

4. Thornback Ray FIP in the eastern Channel update – Solène Prévalet, FROM Nord

Solène Prévalet outlined the progress and plans of a Fishery Improvement Project (FIP), which is in its fifth and final year, aiming for Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification.

The FIP is currently in its fifth and last year, concluding in June 2026. The goal is to launch the full MSC assessment in 2026, with completion expected in 2027. It is anticipated that there will be a couple of conditions, so actions will still be carried out in the future, but the objective is to make it work.

In 2024, the MSC Pre-Assessment was conducted to assess readiness for the full MSC assessment. Following the pre-assessment results, the action plan was adjusted to gather lacking data for success. This primarily involves data from observer programs, control data, and VMS data.

The FIP's final, and hardest, steps heavily rely on management decisions at a higher level. Progress has been made on the management of Rays, including during the ACs' September workshop and ongoing negotiations. Work is still needed on thresholds, footnotes, and reference periods.

The auditors required work on the declaration of smooth-hounds. Most landings are reported simply as "SPP" (species not provided) instead of the specific species (e.g., starry smooth-hounds). Work is underway to improve species identification and reporting by members.

Information on accidental catches of marine birds and mammals is being provided via scientific reports and observer programmes. A new Life Project (in partnership with the Marine Park in France and concluding in 2029), will test devices such as pingers and lights to reduce interactions.

The project is working on the notification of Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems (VME) habitats in the Eastern Channel. The aim is to regulate activities, possibly by reducing pressure through measures like lighter grids, to combine fishing activity with habitat protection.

Fishing effort by gear type is currently being mapped for auditors with effort being made to get control data from French authorities to check compliance. The project is also working to change fraud regulation, so the final product packaging lists the species' Latin name instead of just the generic French term "Rays" to match the precise reporting required of fishers. This change is facing resistance due to concern, e.g. in relation to imports. A national traceability project is conducting a diagnosis from catch to sales to find where errors can occur. A report is due for publication.

5. Next steps & AOB

Due to a lack of time, it was suggested that members review the draft Terms of Reference and send comments/suggestions to the Secretariat in writing.

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

1	Members to review draft Terms of Reference and send comments to NWWAC Secretariat by 15 December 2025.
2	Secretariat to organise next meeting for February 2026.
3	Secretariat to invite DG MARE for update to next meeting.
4	Secretariat to invite ElasmoPower project for update to the next meeting.
5	Secretariat to add update on Thornback Ray FIP to next agenda.