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DRAFT MINUTES

WORKING GROUP 2 (CELTIC SEA & WEST OF SCOTLAND)

03 July 2025

Vigo and online

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1. Welcome and introductions

Ilaria Bellomo, NWWAC Secretariat welcomed all participants to the meeting and explained that due to the WG Chair and Vice-Chair's unavailability, the Secretariat will chair this meeting. Apologies were received from Suso Lourido (Puerto de Celeiro) and Jean-Marie Robert (LPDB) and the agenda was adopted.

Action points from the last meeting (10 March 2025)

1	Further engage with AZTI following the presentation and dissemination of the Northern Hake Stock dynamic
	Agreed to postpone in October
2	Declining SSBs while MSY-fished : members agreed to further dig in regarding the causes of the bad recruitments that several stocks are facing, leading to decreasing SSBs for several important stocks. Though not very specific at this moment, the idea would be to further look at inter-specific predation (boarfish, bluefin tuna..), intra-specific mechanisms (cannibalism), and should include analysis regarding the data collection for food stomachs analysis, that we could encourage to be funded if necessary. Asking the EC to organize a specific request to ICES could be developed.
	Agreed to postpone in October
3	Include a presentation of the Nephrops Porcupine Survey by BIM during WG2 meeting in July.
	The survey has not yet been finalised to be presented today, so this action point will be postponed until October. However, Jonathan White from the Marine Institute has confirmed his availability to give a brief presentation on the Report from the Porcupine Bank Nephrops Grounds 2024 Survey.

Emiel Brouckaert asked regarding action point one as he felt it was agreed that this would be followed up in more detail, especially regarding the Regulation and was it still valid. He suggested that this should be added to the October presentation.

ACTION: From March meeting: WG2 to further engage with AZTI following the presentation and dissemination of the Northern Hake Stock dynamic

2. ICES advice for the Celtic Sea & West of Scotland – Joanne Morgan, ACOM Vice-Chair

List of acronyms

DLS	data limited stocks
CHR	constant harvest rate
Rfb	Equation: r = biomass ratio (survey trend), f = fishing proxy (length data, target), b = biomass safeguard
CAA	catch at age
SAA	survey at age
SR	Stock recruit
B	biomass
BMSY	biomass at maximum sustainable yield
XSA	Extended survivor analysis
SAM	Stock assessment model
SCAA	statistical catch at age
SPiCT	Surplus production in continuous time
SS	stock synthesis
SSB	spawning stock biomass
Blim	Limit reference point for spawning stock biomass (SSB)
Btrigger	Value of spawning stock biomass (SSB) that triggers a specific management action
F	Instantaneous Rate of Fishing Mortality
AAP	Aarts and Poos assessment

Joanne Morgan explained that stocks for both areas would be presented in one presentation.

Advice for deep sea stocks and Nephrops will be published in autumn. There is a delay in advice publication for Megrim (7b-k) and cod (4, 6a, 7d, 20).

<u>Anglerfish in subareas 4, 6 and division 3a</u>

Advice for 2026, MSY: catch ≤ 30 358 (-1.2%)

- Advice for black bellied and white combined
- F <FMSY, SSB>Btrigger
- UK catch and sample data were revised for 2021-2023, negligible impact
- SS3

<u>Black-bellied anglerfish in subarea 7 and divisions 8a-b and 8d</u>

Advice for 2026, MSY: catch ≤ 22 390 t (-11.6%)

- F increased in 2024: below FMSY
- SSB above MSY Btrigger

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- Decrease advice – downwards revision of stock size in 2025 assessment
- Length based stock synthesis
- Note: under combined TAC with white anglerfish – could lead to overexploitation of wither species

Dominic Rihan noted that the way the figures are presented could give a misleading impression of the stock's status, as the apparent decrease might suggest the stock is in poor condition, even though this is not the case.

Morgan clarified that the advice requesters require any changes from the previous year's advice to be highlighted. While these changes are not reflected in the headline figures on the advice sheet, the reasons for the change are explained in the accompanying text beneath the catch options table.

<u>White anglerfish in subarea 7 and division 8a-b and 8d (Celtic Sea, Bay of Biscay)</u>

Advice for 2025, MSY: catch ≤ 36 090 t (+3.2%)

- F decreasing: below FMSY
- SSB above MSY Btrigger
- Small increase in biomass
- Length based age structured stock synthesis
- Note: under combined TAC with back bellied anglerfish – could lead to overexploitation of wither species

Brouckaert asked why the stock advice for this stock is not available on the ICES website.

Franck Le Barzic informed participants that it was indeed available online but needed to be searched for specifically.

Morgan explained that she finds the best way to search the ICES library is if the species code is used in the search bar instead of the name.

<u>Cod North Sea W. Scotland, E. Channel (4, 6a, 7d, 20)</u>

- Advice 2026 delayed until autumn, likely October
- Struggle with mixing implications for advice – will give time for ACOM to further discuss
- A team is being established to work on improving the assessment. In the short-term, progress is expected before the 2027 advice, while in the long-term, it is expected another benchmark for this stock

<u>Cod in western Channel and southern Celtic Seas (7e-k)</u>

Advice for 2026, MSY: 0 t (no change)

- F above FMSY
- SSB below Blim
- Recruitment low
- No catch scenario brings stock above Blim by the beginning of 2027
- Some tendency to overestimate SB and recruitment

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- UK catch and sample data were revised for 2021-2023 (minimal impact)
- Caught In mixed fisheries with haddock and whiting (catch in 2024 = 272 t; 8.5% discards)
- Assessment include the south division 7a (rectangles 33E2-33E3) 0.8% of catch from 7.e-k
- SAM assessment

Haddock in North Sea, West of Scotland, Skagerrak (4, 6.a and subdiv. 20)

Advice for 2026, MSY: catch ≤ 108 301 t, (-3.7%)

- F below FMSY
- SSB above MSY Btrigger
- Revised survey model
- Changes assessment model settings
- Upwards revision in SSB, downward revision F
- Improved retro
- Reference points updated, changes within the range of 4%
- SAM model

Rihan expressed interest in the observed trends, highlighting a significant increase SSB despite consistently low recruitment over nearly 20 years, apart from a few minor increases around 2019–2020. He questioned whether it is normal to see such a large rise in SSB while recruitment remains relatively low and stable. He also noted that the graph's scaling might exaggerate the perception of the trend but found the situation curious and worth further explanation.

Morgan acknowledged that the sharp increase in SSB over just a few years had also caught her attention. She explained that this steep rise is likely due to a combination of factors: a period of improved recruitment—while still low compared to the earliest part of the time series, it is noticeably higher than in the previous couple of decades—and a simultaneous decline in F. She suggested that these two factors together explain the significant increase in SSB.

John Lycnh added that the SSB was relative to recruitment and appears to be slightly off.

Morgan commented that haddock have "episodic recruitment" seemingly unrelated to spawning stock biomass. For haddock it is often difficult to understand the underlying patterns.

Haddock at Rockall (6.b)

Advice for 2026, MSY: catch ≤ 20 432 t (-35%)

- F below FMSY
- SSB above trigger
- Downward revision of estimated size of very strong 2022-year class and lower fishery selectivity of older fish in recent year reflected in forecast
- Sampling remains sparse
- SAM model

Rihan pointed out that the advised catch for this stock is still about three times higher than what has typically been advised in recent years. He explained that when the advice figures were shared with one of their fisheries representatives, the immediate reaction was concern that

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there might be a serious problem with Rockall haddock. This perception came from seeing a sharp decrease which could be misunderstood as an indication of poor stock status. Rihan emphasised that, in reality, the stock seems to remain in good condition and is being fished sustainably.

Morgan acknowledged that while ICES prepares the catch scenarios and runs the requested analysis, the design of the advice sheets is largely their responsibility. She noted that any major changes to how the advice is presented would need to be discussed with the requesters. She agreed on the importance of clear communication, recognising the challenge of presenting a 35% reduction in advice without giving the false impression that the stock itself has declined by 35%.

Patrick Murphy referred to the actual catch which was lower in 2024 and wondering the recruitment should not have such a large impact unless there is natural mortality impacting the stock. He agreed with Rihan's comment on the presentation giving the impression that the stock was in trouble.

Morgan explained that the model doesn't interpret the recruitment as having collapsed; rather, it adjusts to the idea that the initial recruitment estimates were too high. Each year, as more data on a cohort becomes available - at ages 1, 2, 3, and from surveys and fisheries - the model updates its estimates. For example, a year class may initially appear very strong based on early surveys, but as further information comes in, it becomes clear that it was strong, but not as strong as first thought. She clarified that when recruitment is revised downwards, this reflects that adjustment process. While this is understood by scientists, it may not be clear to others reading the advice. Morgan stressed the need to explain this clearly, but without overloading the advice sheet with technical detail, and acknowledged that the current balance might not yet be right.

<u>Haddock in the southern Celtic Sea and Channel (7.b-k)</u>

Advice for 2026, MSY and PA: 0 catch (2025 advice 4 644 t)

- F below FMSY
- SSB declining: below MSY Btrigger but above Bpa and Blim
- Recruitment low
- Below Blim in all catch scenarios
- SAM assessment
- Stock includes the south division 7a (rectangles 33E2-3), 9% if landings of 7b-k stock

Regarding recruitment, Le Barzic asked regarding the figures which seem to represent the average over the past three years. He felt the catch recommendation would change if a longer time period was considered.

Morgan explained that Frank was referring to the recruitment assumptions used in the short-term forecast. She confirmed that the forecast is based on the median recruitment from 2022 to 2024 and highlighted that the last three years show exceptionally low recruitment, as seen in the graph's top right panel. Each year, the experts review key assumptions in the short-term forecast, including the recruitment level, the exploitation pattern, and sometimes the weight assumptions. In this case, they decided that including a longer recruitment period would not accurately reflect the current situation in the stock. Morgan noted that if recruitment improves unexpectedly (such as in 2025), the short-term forecast would be incorrect, but these

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assumptions are reviewed annually to ensure they reflect the most up-to-date understanding of the stock and the fishery. She stressed that the short-term forecast covers only one year and aims to represent the stock's current state.

Hake – Northern stock (3.a, 4, 6, 7, 8.abd)

Advice for 2026, MSY: catch ≤ 54 912 t (+4.7%)

- F below FMSY
- SSB above MSY Btrigger but decreasing
- Upward revision of SSB and lower F in 2024 than assumed in last year's forecast
- Stock area does not correspond to the TAC areas
- Length based and sex disaggregated stock synthesis

Megrim in northern North Sea and West of Scotland (4.a, 6.a)

Asvic for 2026, MSY: ≤ 8050 (+66%)

- F below FMSY
- Stoc size above NSY Btrigger
- Increase in stock size
- UK data revised 2022-2023, negligible impact
- Advice for 2 species XX
- L. boscii negligible in catches
- Bayesian production model specifically designed for this stock

Megrim in Rockall (6.b)

New advice to be released in autumn 2025

Megrim in the west and southwest of Ireland, Bay of Biscay (7.b-k, 8.a-b, and 8.d)

- Advice for 2026 delayed
- Retrospective issue
- Hope to release in autumn

Pollack in the Celtic Seas and Channel (6 and 7)

- Benchmarked 2025 – WKBSS3
- Examined
    - Input data – more work on recreational data including more work on survival of releases – overall 71% survival
    - Stock structure – no change – remains uncertain (included tagging, acoustic telemetry)
    - New natural mortality estimates
    - Increased number of surveys (5 to 12), several commercial indices
- Accepted SS3 – move from SPiCT

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- New reference points estimated

Advice for 2026, MSY: ≤ 3310 t (last year 0 catch advice)

- F below FMSY
- B below Btrigger but greater than BlIM and Bpa
- Still uncertainties in recreational catches
- 3 commercial LPUE not calculated in 2024 – sensitivity to this tested in benchmark – no impact
- SS3

Murphy referred to the recovery of the stock and wondered how the recruitment is calculated.

Morgan said she hadn't looked closely at the survey indices or their spatial coverage but assumed that the multiple indices aim to increase the number of fish sampled—since some had low catches in certain years—and to improve area coverage. She explained that a lot of work had been done on stock structure but that stock structure was still uncertain.
On recruitment, she explained that in stock synthesis models, early recruitment is smoothed during a "burn-in" period, while recent years show estimated values. The latest years, from 2023 onwards, are assumed or projected, adding uncertainty. She noted that actual recruitment estimates likely end in 2022 and that further details would be in the working group report, not in the advice sheet.

Manu Kelberine referred to the survival rate in recreational fishing and felt that this was surprising based on his experience that fish caught at a depth of more than 50m would die quite rapidly.

Morgan stated that she is not an expert on recreational fisheries but mentioned that new studies on survival had been carried out which led to these numbers. She referred to the benchmark report WKBSS3 which can be found in the ICES library. She will ensure that the final report will be made available to AC members.

Le Barzic expressed surprise at the 2024 recreational fisheries catch estimate and asked where these figures come from and whether there is a breakdown by Member State. He pointed out that in France, recreational anglers have been subject to catch limits on pollack – restricted to two fish per trip – and seasonal closures, which have reduced fishing effort. As a result, he was surprised that the recreational catch figures for 2024 appeared similar to previous years, despite these constraints.

Morgan stated that the report would specify what countries are involved and that similar people would have been involved in this work as in the work on seabass. She mentioned that figures relate to total removals and was not sure if releases were included or not.

Le Barzic felt that in France the practices on Pollack angling are strict and fish may be caught but not released. He queries the sensitivity of the model regarding recreational fisheries and how important these were.

Morgan felt that the team would have worked hard to capture the uncertainties. As this is a stock synthesis model, various uncertainties can be considered and weighted differently. She added that more work on recreational fisheries was recommended as part of the outcomes.

Llibori Martinez commented that, in his understanding, releases were not included in total removals. He added that puncturing the bladder of fish aids survivability.

Morgan felt that it was likely that releases were not included in total removals which would

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mean that recreational removals would have remained similar over the years.

Saithe in the North Sea, Rockall and West of Scotland, Skagerrak and Kattegat (4, 6, 3.a)

Advice for 2026, MSY: catch ≤ 60 167 t (-24%)

- F just above FMSY
- SSB below MSY Btrigger
- Lower stock size, stock weights, proportion mature, lower advised F because below trigger
- SAM assessment
- In 2025, quota in 6 is 9.4% (7433 t) of TAC for the stock

Sole in the Bristol Channel, Celtic Sea (7.f, g)

Advice for 2026, MSY: ≤ catch 989 t (-13.9%)

- F above FMSY
- SSB above trigger
- Decrease in advice: downward revision in stock size (retrospective)
- UK Q3 survey incomplete in 2024, UK catch and sample data revised 2021-2023 – both found to have minimal impact on the assessment
- SAM assessment model

Brouckaert felt that the retrospective impacted the advice and wondered how the advice could be explained when F is above FMSY and SSB above MSY Btrigger. He added that catching sole was unavoidable in that area and felt that the TAC was underestimated for this area. The reality at sea does not reflect what is being identified in the advice.

Morgan felt that retrospective issues add uncertainty to the advice. ICES considers it very important to include fishers' perception and held several workshops in order to take advantage of fishers knowledge and include it in the assessment. She mentioned that ICES feels an index would be useful, however, sense checking with stakeholder prior to the assessments could be beneficial. This work is part of ICES stakeholder engagement strategy but has not been carried out yet due to other priorities in recent months.

Lynch asked about stakeholder engagement in the assessment process. He questioned whether the advice was being driven solely by fishing mortality (F) being above FMSY, noting that last year there was a reduction of around 11%. He suggested that one possible data source for stakeholder engagement could be to look at historical patterns of when fish are caught during the year. While this would vary by species and type of fishery, examining how catch patterns change over time—such as the period of the year when most of the fish are taken—could provide useful evidence from the fleets themselves.

Morgan commented that data analysis needs to be quantitative and systematic.

Kelberine reiterated that there was plenty of sole in 7hjk as well and wondered if this will be taken into account for the 2027 advice. Morgan commented that what the 2027 advice will be still to be decided.

Murphy referred to the earlier points made by Lynch, noting that although fishing mortality is above FMSY, the FMSY reference point itself keeps being lowered, even though there seems to

be plenty of fish in the water. He questioned whether this situation is affecting the assessment model, meaning that because the stock is above the lowered FMSY, the advice keeps recommending further reductions. He used the analogy of a barrel being lowered while the stock remains above it, suggesting that if the reference point is set too low, it could be artificially dragging down the assessment results.

Morgan explained that the in the model when F is above FMSY, generally the stock size is declining. She added that in the past year the SSB has been flat. The experts feel that the retrospective is causing the decline in the advice, however, the cause of the retrospective is unclear and probably different for every stock.

Murphy reiterated that the model could potentially give another decrease for next year though fish are actually being seen on the ground.

Rihan asked whether there are any plans to benchmark the assessment, noting the significant retrospective issues. He pointed out that when comparing F to FMSY, it almost suggests that fishing pressure has been consistently high and that quotas—or TACs—may have been set too high over the past 30 years.

Morgan was unsure if a benchmark was planned.

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Whiting West of Scotland (6.a)

Advice for 2026, MSY: 5 364 (+4.8%)

- F below FMSY
- SSB just below MSY Btrigger
- Increased recruitment leading to increased biomass in 2026 (interim year)
- Tendency to overestimate SSB – retro
- SAM assessment
- TAC includes division 6b for which advice is given separately. ICES recommend, therefore, that the TAC area corresponds to the assessment area.

Whiting 7.b-c and 7.e-k

Advice for 2026 MSY and PA: 0 catch

- F below FMSY
- SSB below Blim
- No catch scenario brings SSB above Blim with 50% probability
- Recruitment is low
- Overestimate SSB and underestimate F
- UK catch and sampling revised 2021-2023 – some rescaling of the assessment, but not make any big change
- SAM assessment
- Assessment and advice are for divisions 7. b-k, including rectangles 33E2 and 33E3 (0.8% of catch)
- Historically fished under a common TAC with whiting in Division 7.d In 2025 limits for the two components in place

Le Barzic noted that while there is a single TAC, there are actually two separate catch limits in

place. He explained that the management areas are already separated, with one catch limit for the Celtic Sea and Western Channel, and another for the Eastern Channel. He suggested that the comment about separating management areas reflects an outdated situation from previous years. Morgan commented that this could be possible.

Greater Silver Smelt Faroes and W Scotland (5.b; 6.a)

Advice for 2026, MSY: 18 441 t (-2.8%)

- F at FMSY
- SSB above MSYbtrigger
- Small decline in stock size
- 2018 – 2023 catch updated – minimal impact on the assessment
- SAM assessment
- Management measures are set independently by the Faroe Islands and by EU and UK

Black scabbardfish in the Northeast Atlantic and Arctic Ocean

- Benchmarked 2025 – WKBDEEP
- Examined
- Input data – landings, length frequencies, CPUE, length-weight
- Accepted rfb rule (previously could not assess status, did attempt some modelling)

Advice for 2026 and 2027, MSY: 1889 t (change n/a)

- F is above FMSY proxy
- Biomass is below Itrigger
- F proxy from whole areas, biomass index from south only – where most of the catches come from
- Rfb rule
- Used average last 3 years catch as basis – changes in fishery and assessment method

Rihan highlighted a key issue with Category 3 assessments, noting that if the baseline is set very low, it takes a long time for the stock status – and therefore the advice – to reflect improvements. He gave the example of Northwest Herring in 6A South, where the stock is actually increasing, but because the reference is based on the average of the last three years, when only a small scientific fishery took place, the starting point is unrealistically low. With the 20% annual cap on catch increases, rebuilding takes a very long time. He acknowledged the purpose of Category 3 assessments as a step toward Category 1 but stressed that in cases where the fishery was previously closed or minimal, the way the baseline is set has a significant long-term impact. He described this as a particular frustration in the case of Northwest Herring.

Morgan commented that Category 3 stocks have limitations. They are MSY based but are more precautionary due to data limitations. She referred to the annual WKLIFE workshop which continually works on the methods and how to improve them, for example by developing the SPiCT model.

Rihan commented that while the average catches and the RFP calculation are usually close, in the case of Northwest Herring the baseline is extremely low. He noted that the RFP estimate is about 7 to 8 times higher, meaning there is potentially a much greater fishing opportunity being

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missed. He acknowledged the importance of the precautionary approach but pointed out that the ±20% rule restricts increases and combined with an artificially low baseline, creates a significant problem from a fisheries perspective.

Morgan explained that the reason for these caps is because, in the absence of a full population model, the assessment relies on abundance indices, which can be quite variable. While these indices may track the overall population trend over time, the year-to-year fluctuations are more uncertain. Therefore, it's important not to base management decisions solely on these variable short-term changes.

Greater Silver Smelt subareas 7-10, 12 and division 6.b other areas

Advice for 2026 and 2027, MSY: Catch ≤ 61 t Landings < 12 t (-30%)

- F above FMSY proxy
- Biomass index above Itrigger
- Decreased advice: decrease in biomass, stability clause applied
- Survey doesn't cover whole stock area but is where most catch is taken
- 2024 survey incomplete and not used – index A only 1 year
- Rfb rule

Tusk subareas 4 and 7–9, divisions 3.a, 5.b, 6.a, and 12.b (Northeast Atlantic)

Advice for 2026 and 2027, MSY: Catch ≤ 5 336 t -23%

- F below FMSY proxy
- Biomass index above Itrigger
- Decreased advice: decrease in biomass
- Rfb rule

Ling subareas 3, 4, 6–9, 12, and 14 (Northeast Atlantic and Arctic Ocean)

Advice for 2026 and 2027, MSY: Catch ≤ 9332 t (-30%)

- F above FMSY proxy
- Biomass index above Itrigger
- Decreased advice: decrease in biomass, stability clause applied
- 2021 index not reliable, index B therefore 2029, 2020 and 2022
- Rfb rule

Nephrops: new advice in autumn; Management should be at FU level

ACTION: Members to send written queries for Joanne Morgan following her presentation to the Secretariat

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3. Updates on the VMEs socio-economic analysis

Bellomo welcomed Caroline Alibert-Deprez from DG MARE and Professor Ralf Döring from the STECF, and thanked them for joining us online today. We added this item to the agenda following their participation in the NWWAC meeting last October, where members expressed strong interest in continuing the dialogue on the socio-economic analysis of VMEs. The invitees provided us with an overview of the latest developments on this issue, presenting both the outcome of the STECF March Plenary and judgment of the General Court in the cases brought against the Commission's determination of areas to be protected in certain deep-sea fishing grounds where vulnerable marine ecosystems are known to occur or are likely to occur.

a. Outcome of the STECF March plenary – Prof Ralf Döring, STECF

Professor Döring introduced the work of the STECF Expert Working Group.

Introduction

- Request to STECF to do additional assessments on the socio-economic impacts of the closures of the VMEs
- Meeting of the Expert Working group held virtually March 3rd-7th, with 18 experts and 7 observers (from SWWAC and NWWAC)
- Substantial preparatory work for the EWG including interviews with stakeholders (from the ACs), collection of information from reports (e.g. regional reports from Spain) or extra data analyses and model runs
- **Be aware that the EWG report is the basis for the STECF advice but not the STECF advice/conclusion!**
- The EWG report is a summary of the available information plus some extra data analyses and DISPLACE model application.
- The STECF opinion/advice is at the top of the EWG report and in the PLEN 25-01 report.

Main conclusions of STECF

- This is a step in the process of a better understanding of socio-economic impacts of such kind of management measures (report provides preliminary results)
- Stakeholder involvement is crucial as it brings additional information and helps identifying the impacts of closures at different spatial and fleet levels
- Some information from the stakeholder interviews could be verified by the data analyses (e.g. move from longlines to gillnets in parts of the Spanish fleet)
- FDI data shows reduction in fishing effort in the polygons where VMEs are located – data is still not at the resolution level to only assess effort in closed areas
- DISPLACE model is the right tool to assess displacement effects of area closures but data input needs to be improved (see previous point).
- First EWG where ecosystem services and their economic valuation was discussed – see this as an important step but more work is necessary regarding economic valuation
- STECF proposes a way forward to overcome some of the data limitations – expects to discuss with MS and DG Mare on the way forward

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Stakeholder engagement

- Since PLEN 23-02 regular exchange with stakeholders from the SWWAC and NWWAC to be transparent on the process and where we are
- Asked for input from the stakeholders and received several documents from ACs or individual stakeholders
- Interviews conducted with 5 stakeholders (4 from fishers organisations, 1 NGO) – gave deeper insides into possible displacement effects and changes in fleet behaviour
- Some of the contents of the interviews could be verified by the data analyses
- Very valuable input from stakeholders during the EWG
- I believe that we could build trust in what we are doing, show what limitations we have (which was sometimes surprising for the stakeholders) and that it could be a model for future assessments

Role of observers in the EWG meeting

- Summaries of 5 interviews very valuable background documents to the EWG
- Observers during the meeting provided important additional information specifically on impacted fleet segments/gear types/targeted species
- Specific observer meeting during the EWG – another opportunity to receive valuable information for the experts (e.g. first time mentioning of the importance of preserving ecosystem services of VMEs to us from stakeholders)

Presentation of some results of the assessments - FDI

- FDI data analyses 2013-2023 with 2023 as the first year of the closures
- General trend of reduction in fishing effort in the polygons with VMEs 2023 to 2022
- Test of information on changes in SSF of Spain from stakeholder interview: longliners are switching to gillnets.

Presentation of some results of the assessments – DISPLACE model

- Overview on model results provided – e.g. problem to distinguish vessels fishing on deep-sea stocks from vessels fishing only on hake
- Discussion of the model assumptions to see where further work could improve the data availability etc.
- DISPLACE is the best model available and well-suited for this type of analyses
- However, an improvement in the available data regarding lower spatial resolution is necessary and the EWG proposes six steps to achieve this
    - *This would not only be relevant for the VME assessment but for all assessment of impacts of closures!*

Ecosystem services discussion

- Overview on ecosystem services of deep-sea ecosystems

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- Discussion of ecosystem services in this systematic manner first time within STECF
- Discussion of legal background of closures and role of deep-sea ecosystems (e.g. climate regulation, seamounts, etc.)
- Application of the classification of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment with four value categories: Provisioning, regulating, supporting and cultural services
- Limited discussion of monetary valuation of ecosystem services and its limits
- There are a few studies on economic values which show how people value those ecosystems

Outlook

- Discussed way forward to improve our possibilities for these types of analyses
- Main problem is the level of resolution of the available data, e.g. FDI data
- Propose an improvement for the data availability which needs to be discussed with Member States
- See stakeholder involvement also as essential for future assessments

Bellomo thanked Döring for his presentation and opened the floor for questions.

Regarding to the UK MPAs, Murphy referred to the UK assessment regarding ecosystem services value as part of the UK MPA consultation, he wondered how the UK was carrying out this work if the STECF does not have this information.

Döring responded that his assumption on the UK method is that a small group of the population is asked to put a monetary value on a very specific service in a specific area (e.g. cold-water corals) in order to arrive at an assessment of that specific service. He assumes that for the UK such a study was then extrapolated (economists call this 'benefit transfer') to all similar areas in UK waters and the values added together at the population level. He did not agree with this approach as he felt the numbers would not be reliable and STECF method is more robust.

José Beltran commented that his organisation carried out a series of scientific studies using longliners to demonstrate the low impact of longliners on VMEs. He added that vessels have been fishing in these fishing grounds for many years observing the impact which for longliners is minimal as the gear does not touch the seabed. So there is no impact. Regarding the economic impact, he commented that the profits of companies have fallen by 30% and displacement has taken place to other areas leading to crowding, target stocks suffering and additional costs to vessels due for increased fuel needs and changes to salaries for fishing operators. Fishing gear has also changed from longlines to gillnets which are less sustainable. This also has an impact on assessments and reports issued by ICES as data is used that is now outdated.

ACTION: Members to send additional queries for Prof. Döring to the Secretariat for written follow up if need be.

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b. Outcome of the European Court of Justice ruling on EU Deep-Sea Fisheries Regulation and longlining in VMEs – Caroline Alibert-Deprez, DG MARE

Caroline Alibert-Deprez provided an overview of the main elements of the European Court of Justice's judgment issued on 11 June 2023, concerning two cases brought before the Court in 2022 by the Kingdom of Spain and by fishers from Galicia and Asturias, supported by the Galician regional authorities and Spain.

The Commission welcomed the ruling, noting that the Court confirmed the proportionality and legality of the current designation of 87 closed areas under the EU Deep-Sea Fisheries Regulation. These areas were established in accordance with regulatory requirements aimed at protecting VMEs. The Commission emphasised the ongoing obligation to review and update the list of VMEs based on the latest scientific advice, in cooperation with Member States and stakeholders.

A key point highlighted was the Court's position that the Commission is not required to differentiate between types of fishing gear when assessing impacts on VMEs. The regulation mandates protection of VMEs from all bottom-contact fishing gears, regardless of their relative impact. This interpretation aligns with FAO guidelines, which define VMEs according to their biological and ecological characteristics, rather than vulnerability to specific fishing methods. The Court reiterated that ecosystem vulnerability is intrinsic and must be protected from all impacts.

While acknowledging that certain gears, such as bottom longlines, have a lower impact compared to others like trawls, the Court maintained that the critical issue is to prevent any impact. The 2016 decision to prohibit all bottom-contact fishing gear below 400 meters depth remains in effect. The Court also noted that Spain and the fishing sector have not demonstrated a complete absence of impact from these gears.

Caroline Alibert-Deprez mentioned that scientific research under the ISPAMER project is ongoing and promising, yet current scientific evaluations have not supported a revision of the protective measures.

Regarding the methodology applied for spatial management in ICES advice — including the use of "c- squares" and buffer zones — the Court found this approach proportionate and consistent with practices used by other regional fisheries management organisations, such as NEAFC. The buffer zones, applied below 400 meters depth, are intended to ensure effective protection of VMEs by mitigating risks posed by fishing activities and vessel movements.

In conclusion, the Court upheld the regulatory framework aimed at safeguarding VMEs, confirming the Commission's approach and the necessity of theadopted measures. The Commission is prepared to continue discussions and provide clarifications as needed.

Bellomo thanked Alibert-Deprez for her presentation and, due to time constraints, invited Members to send any questions by email to the NWWAC Secretariat, who will forward them to Alibert-Deprez.

ACTION: Members to send additional queries for Caroline Alibert-Deprez to the Secretariat for written follow up if need be.

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4. 2024 Nephrops survey in the Porcupine bank – Jonathan White, Jennifer Doyle, Marine Institute

Jonathan White presented an update on the biology, management, and stock assessment of Nephrops in the Porcupine Bank (Functional Unit 16), along with results from the 2024 underwater TV (UWTV) survey and Irish sampling data.

Nephrops, also known as Dublin Bay Prawn, Langoustine, or Norway Lobster, inhabit depths of 100–600 meters, typically living 5–10 years. ICES provides stock advice at the functional unit level, while management operates at the ICES Subarea level; FU16 falls under Subarea 7.

The 2023 ICES advice (for 2024 fishing) suggested catch levels between 2,813–3,488 tonnes under the EU Multi-Annual Plan, with a precautionary approach. Stock size reached a record high in 2023 (just over 2 billion individuals) before slightly decreasing in 2024. Fishing pressure was below FMSY in 2023.

2024 UWTV Survey: The 2024 Porcupine Bank survey covered 68 stations across the main Nephrops grounds (depths 340–570 m). The standardised UWTV methodology used HD sled-mounted cameras and quality-controlled analysis. All survey stations were completed successfully in June 2024; data processing was ongoing at the time of the presentation.

Survey trends showed a persistent hotspot of Nephrops abundance in the northern area of FU16, particularly strong in 2023–2024. Despite a slight decrease from 2023, stock abundance in 2024 remained the second highest in the time series.

Irish Catch Sampling: White also reported on improvements in biological sampling of Irish Nephrops landings. Since 2020, a self-sampling scheme (alongside Marine Institute sampling) has filled important seasonal data gaps, especially during summer closures when little or no data were previously collected. Sampling has improved understanding of male-female population dynamics and weight trends. Notably:

- The male portion of the population shows slower recovery than previously thought.
- Mean individual weight has declined since 2011, stabilising in recent years.

In conclusion:

- FU16 Nephrops stock remains in good condition, with abundance at historically high levels and fishing pressure below FMSY.
- Continued robust survey effort and improved sampling coverage are critical to refining stock assessments and management advice.
- Industry collaboration in self-sampling has provided valuable data, especially for summer months.

ACTION: Members to send queries for Jonathan White to the Secretariat for written follow up.

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5. AOB & Summary of actions agreed and decisions adopted by the Chair

1	Members to send written queries for Joanne Morgan following her presentation to the Secretariat
2	Members to send feedback on the fishing opportunities advice to the Secretariat.
3	WG2 to follow up in more detail on the validity of the 2004 regulation relating to hake fishery in the Celtic Sea at the October meeting.
4	From March meeting: WG2 to further engage with AZTI following the presentation and dissemination of the Northern Hake Stock dynamic
5	From March meeting: Declining SSBs while MSY-fished : members agreed to further dig in regarding the causes of the bad recruitments that several stocks are facing, leading to decreasing SSBs for several important stocks. Though not very specific at this moment, the idea would be to further look at inter-specific predation (boarfish, bluefin tuna..), intra-specific mechanisms (cannibalism), and should include analysis regarding the data collection for food stomachs analysis, that we could encourage to be funded if necessary. Asking the EC to organize a specific request to ICES could be developed.
6	Members to send additional queries for Prof. Döring to the Secretariat for written follow up.
7	Members to send additional queries for Caroline Alibert-Deprez to the Secretariat for written follow up.
8	Members to send queries for Jonathan White to the Secretariat for written follow up.

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Participants

NWWAC members		
José	Beltran	OPP-7 BURELA
Emiel	Brouckaert	Rederscentrale
Manu	Kelberine	CRPMEM de Bretagne
Franck	Le Barzic	OP COBRENORD
John	Lynch	Irish South & East Fish Producers Organisation Ltd
Patrick	Murphy	Irish South & West Fish Producers Organisation
Aodh	O'Donnell	Irish Fish Producers Organisation (IFPO)
Patrick	Murphy	Irish South & West Fish Producers Organisation
Irene	Prieto	OPPF4
Erwan	Quemeneur	CDPMEM 29
Dominic	Rihan	KFO
Pauline	Stephan	CNPMEM
Arthur	Yon	FROM Nord
Experts & Observers		
Caroline	Alibert-Deprez	DG MARE
Guillermo	Bravo Téllez	NWW MS TG - Spanish Representative
Noelia	Cuervo Álvarez	NWW MS TG - Spanish Representative
Ralf	Döring	STECF
Gérald	Hussenot	BlueFish
Joanne	Morgan	ACOM Vice-Chair -ICES
Michael	Park	SWFPA
Alexandra	Philippe	EBCD
Jean-Marie	Robert	Pecheurs de bretagne
Dirk	Van Guyze	Departement LV ABCO dienst zeevisserij
Jonathan	White	Marine institute
NWWAC Secretariat		
Ilaria	Bellomo	
Mo	Mathies	

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