Report

NWWAC/PelAC Webinar

on EU fisheries and the impact of

Offshore Renewable Energy Developments

Tuesday, 25 February 2025

The webinar, organised by the North Western Waters Advisory Council (NWWAC) and the Pelagic Advisory Council (PelAC), focused on the impact of offshore renewable energy developments on EU fisheries. Gonçalo Carvalho (PelAC) opened the event, emphasising its continuation of collaborative efforts since 2020 on spatial factors affecting fishing activities. The programme featured presentations from various stakeholders, including the European Commission, who discussed the status of offshore renewable energies (ORE) and their effects on fisheries and fish stocks. These discussions highlighted both the challenges and opportunities of integrating offshore wind energy with fishing activities and marine conservation. The webinar also allowed ample time for participants' comments and questions.

1. EU Policy development on offshore renewable energy - Xavier Guillou, DG MARE A.2

After presenting the agenda, Mr. Carvalho gave the floor to Xavier Guillou from DG MARE, who provided an overview of the European Commission's relevant policy links to offshore renewable energy (ORE).

Mr. Guillou highlighted that the EU successfully met its 2020 target of deriving 20% of its energy consumption from renewable sources. Currently, efforts are focused on achieving the new goal of at least 42.5% by 2030, as outlined in the RePowerEU plan (2022). This transition entails a significant increase in electricity production, primarily from wind and solar photovoltaic energy. However, ORE remains marginal today, accounting for only 3% of the EU's electricity production. Despite this, it has vast potential and is expected to grow substantially over the next five years.

Compared to onshore wind, only a limited number of EU Member States have offshore wind installations. However, offshore wind has a significantly higher capacity factor—46.2% compared to 25.9% for onshore wind—meaning it can generate more electricity using the same turbines. Mr. Guillou noted that different offshore technologies are at varying levels of maturity. Bottom-fixed technology is currently the most widely used, but floating technology has also a great potential as it can be deployed in deeper waters, for example in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean Sea. Other emerging offshore technologies include tidal energy systems, which are at pre-commercial phase. Wave energy is progressing at European level with pilot farms projects, and tests of complementing within offshore wind farms.

The EU's ambition for offshore renewable energy is growing, with targets set at both national and regional levels. The goal is to reach 88 GW from offshore wind and 1 GW from ocean energy by 2030, and 300 GW from offshore wind and 40 GW from ocean energy by 2050. Mr. Guillou emphasised the importance of strategic planning to anticipate future offshore installations. He also highlighted the strong political support and shared commitment among EU countries to scale up offshore wind farms. Beyond addressing climate change, energy security is now a key driver of EU resilience.

Regarding the Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) Directive (2014/89/EU), 20 out of 22 countries have established plans and are actively consulting stakeholders. The European Commission is urging a shift from purely national plans with cross-border consultations to regional planning within sea basins. Greater emphasis is needed on co-existence, multiple uses of marine space, and best practices. The Commission also calls for early coordination with other economic activities, including fisheries, when allocating space for offshore wind. Additionally, it is crucial to assess and mitigate the environmental impact of offshore renewable energy installations, including cumulative effects at the sea basin level.

Mr. Guillou outlined key priorities and challenges for ORE development, including offshore grid expansion, industrial and supply chain capacity, competitiveness, permitting, maritime spatial planning, co-existence, regional cooperation, research and innovation, infrastructure resilience, and maritime security. On sea basin cooperation, he mentioned the North Seas Energy Cooperation and the Greater North Sea Basin Initiative (GNSBI), launched in 2023 and a ministerial declaration adopted in November 2024 (Antwerp declaration). The latter initiative brings together stakeholders to address key issues at the sea basin level, focusing on nature, food, and energy.

Concluding his remarks, Mr. Guillou stated that, from DG MARE's perspective, full stakeholder engagement and broad cooperation are essential for the successful development of offshore renewable energy.

2. ICES introduction to Roadmap for Offshore Renewable Energy and overview of work related to ORE developments and impacts on fisheries – Andrew Kenny, ICES HAPI-SG Chair

After introducing ICES, Mr. Kenny explained that the purpose of his presentation was to provide an overview of the ICES ORE Roadmap and ORE-related advisory requests, as well as to address any questions participants had regarding the scientific priorities identified by ICES.

The ICES ORE Roadmap, launched in 2024, is a strategic plan designed to build the scientific evidence necessary to support management advice. It is structured around four interconnected goals:

1. Enhancing capacity for scientific research and advisory work by effectively coordinating expertise across ICES' network of expert groups.
2. Improving data coordination and management to ensure accessibility for assessment purposes.
3. Advancing scientific understanding of key processes through the development of ecosystem models.

4. Establishing guidelines for using the best available information, methodologies, and science to support advisory work.

Additionally, the Roadmap sets out four priority actions for 2024 and 2025, which are subject to annual review and updates:

1. Assessing trade-offs between ORE development and other sectors, particularly fisheries.
2. Coordinating research and data to facilitate regional assessments that support national governments and industry needs.
3. Developing and publishing guidelines and standards for monitoring and assessment in the ORE sector.
4. Evaluating the impact of ORE developments on fishery surveys, fisheries management, and ICES' recurrent advice.

The first and third priorities have been actively pursued in 2024, culminating in the WKWIND Report. This report provides guidelines for evaluating the ecological, economic, and social trade-offs between ORE and fisheries. Key findings include essential considerations for trade-off assessments, identifying critical ecosystem components, and establishing an initial "social-ecological systems framework" for such assessments.

Looking ahead to 2025, ICES has planned two workshops:

- WKOMO (26–28 May) – A workshop to develop harmonized regional monitoring schemes for assessing the impact of offshore wind farms on fish, pelagic and benthic communities, and ecosystem functions.
- WKDSIM (23–27 June) – A workshop to develop an ICES fishery-independent survey mitigation strategy.

Mr. Kenny also presented ICES' ORE-related advisory requests:

1. DG MARE: Assessing the socio-economic impacts of ORE on fisheries and developing methodologies to model cumulative impacts in the Celtic Sea, Greater North Sea, and Baltic Sea (ICES ecoregions).
2. GNSBI: Focused on cumulative impact assessment (CIA).

Regarding the DG MARE request, ICES' advice is scheduled for finalisation and publication by 11 April 2025. This work involves at least 11 existing ICES expert groups, with the request being structured into three distinct parts to provide clear areas of focus for experts. For the GNSBI request, the initiative serves as a regional platform to align maritime spatial planning (MSP) and cross-boundary management processes in the Greater North Sea and Celtic Seas. Its objective is to provide guidance on using CIA to evaluate management scenarios. This involves reviewing and defining common principles for existing CIA tools and applying recommendations for MSP

scenario evaluations, including offshore wind developments. The final advice is due by 05 November 2025, with ICES engaging primarily with WGCEAM experts.

ICES' work is informed by consultations with multiple expert groups, three of which specialise in offshore wind as a renewable energy source.

Concluding his presentation, Mr. Kenny welcomed further inquiries and offered to provide additional information via email if needed.

Q&A

Q: A question was raised regarding the Greater North Sea Basin Initiative and the ongoing implementation of environmental legislation measures. National proposals for implementation of Natura 2000 sites as well as offshore renewable energy developments are currently being implemented under national marine spatial plans. Will MSP also take into account fisheries when looking ahead at measures under the MSFD and Nature Restoration Law, as the former sits under national law whereas the latter fall under the remit of the Commission.

A: Member States are leading in the management and allocation of the of marine space. Regarding the Greater North Sea Basin Initiative, which is currently a voluntary non-binding initiative, all North Sea countries recognise that a lot needs to be done in common to reach a better ecological status. Fisheries is not yet fully included in this work, however, efforts are being made between the various Ministries to map fishing effort properly and to understand the constraints and issues at play. This two-way dialogue also includes energy experts who need to understand what is actually involved in fishing at sea. Regionalisation is a driver, and corridors should be built between restoration areas and marine protected areas to make them meaningful and impactful.

Q: How can the dynamic aspect of fishing be included in this approach, for example fishing grounds are likely to change due to the impacts of climate change?

A: It is clear that fishing is a mobile activity with an uncertainty regarding the location of resources in the future due to climate change, seasonality and other elements. Long-term perspectives of fisheries in the North Sea will need to be specifically addressed for example via dedicated webinars. ICES is also beginning to look in more detail at the spatial dynamics of some core fishing grounds which may also overlap with offshore renewable energy areas in the North Sea. A key issue for MSP here is that fisheries may move from one area to another to let fished grounds recover making this also a trans-jurisdictional issue.

Mr Carvalho commented that the ACs have previously highlighted the cross-jurisdictional dimension of this issue, not only between different Member States and third countries, but also within national administrations, and even within the EU at least between environment and fisheries administrations. *“It is a complex jigsaw whose pieces keep changing and moving*

around." He felt it was encouraging to see to see the number of working groups within the ICES system that are trying to develop responses to these many challenges.

Q: Does the wind industry have the opportunity to contribute to ICES workshops?

A: There are opportunities in terms of monitoring and assessment which the industry stakeholders can make an active contribution to as there is a lot of work going on by industry and their consultants in terms of impact assessment work as well as possibly monitoring and assessment. Broad participation from a range of stakeholders in those 2 workshops mentioned earlier is strongly encouraged. Information can be found on the ICES website www.ices.dk.

Information is also available via the European MSP Platform.

3. European Green Deal – Challenges and opportunities for EU fisheries and aquaculture Sébastien Metz, Sakana Consultants

Mr. Metz presented a report drafted for the EU Parliament outlining the potential impact of the Green Deal on fisheries and aquaculture at the European level. His presentation focused specifically on the effects of offshore renewable energy (ORE) on fisheries.

To begin, Mr. Metz provided an overview of the European Green Deal policy initiatives, particularly the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and the EU Strategy on ORE. He also presented a table comparing national ambitions for 2030, highlighting that Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands have the most ambitious targets within the EU.

He then introduced various offshore renewable energy technologies, noting that floating wind farms are expected to play a major role in the future. However, there are currently no operational examples of floating wind farms. He also pointed out the significant challenges posed by integrating wind farms with other maritime activities and underwater caves.

Mr. Metz discussed the difficulties of balancing wind farms with fishing activities and marine protected areas, emphasising that floating wind turbines create particular challenges for coexistence with fisheries. He concluded that the Green Deal's ambitious targets will have a substantial impact on the fishing sector, potentially reducing available space for fishing vessels and introducing technical, institutional, and organisational challenges in combining fishing and wind energy production in the same areas.

He then addressed the role of technology in mitigating these challenges, particularly the trend of increasing turbine size to enhance power generation while potentially reducing overall environmental impact. He introduced the wake effect, explaining that when turbines are placed in a row, those positioned behind others absorb less wind energy. This means that large wind farms cannot be installed too densely, as the wake effect could result in a one-third loss of wind power.

Mr. Metz also examined the complexities of integrating offshore wind farms, spatial protection measures, and fishing activities within the same maritime areas. The impact pathways of offshore wind farms on marine biodiversity are often incompatible with conservation goals and may lead to:

- Changes in local conditions (wind patterns, temperature, noise levels, oxygen concentration).
- Habitat effects, where artificial structures create new habitats that may increase local biomass.
- Corridor effects, which could facilitate the spread of non-native species.
- Strong impacts on migrating seabirds due to altered flight paths and collision risks.
- Additionally, offshore wind farm installations severely restrict fishing activities, particularly active fishing techniques. Some EU Member States have implemented complete fishing bans within wind farm areas, primarily for security reasons.

In conclusion, the European Green Deal sets ambitious targets, some aligned with international commitments (e.g., the Convention on Biological Diversity) and internal EU objectives (e.g., Net Zero). However, key policy initiatives—especially the EU Strategy on ORE—will significantly impact the fishing sector. Some implementation scenarios indicate a substantial reduction in available fishing space, commonly referred to as the "spatial squeeze." The co-location of offshore wind farms and fishing activities presents major technical, institutional, and organisational challenges that will need to be addressed moving forward.

4. A vision for nature-inclusive offshore renewables - Ljuba Ferrario, Seas At Risk

Ms. Ferrario began by providing an overview of Seas At Risk, its mission, and its key areas of work. She then outlined major EU policy developments related to offshore renewable energy (ORE) since 2020, with a particular focus on the Renewable Energy Directive. Ms. Ferrario highlighted the mapping obligations introduced by the Directive which require Member States to map areas to achieve their national contribution to the EU 2030 targets and to identify, within this first set of areas, renewables accelerations areas (RAAs). RAAs are areas where the deployment of renewable energy installations is not expected to have significant environmental impacts and where projects can benefit from exemptions from environmental impact assessments.

Ms. Ferrario referenced the European Court of Auditors' Special Report 22/2023, which highlights key challenges in ensuring the sustainable expansion of offshore renewable energy:

- The deployment of ORE faces practical, social, and environmental challenges that remain insufficiently addressed.
- The impact of offshore installations on the marine environment has not been adequately identified, analysed, or mitigated.

- The social implications of ORE development have not yet been fully considered.
- One of the most significant challenges is assessing the cumulative effects of ORE expansion in combination with other human activities at sea.

She emphasised the need for policy coherence, particularly in aligning ORE expansion with EU biodiversity objectives, and strongly advocated against the installation of offshore renewable energy projects within marine protected areas and Natura 2000 sites.

Ms. Ferrario also highlighted the role of maritime spatial planning (MSP) as a critical framework for implementing ORE policies. She recommended that Member States integrate their plans for offshore renewable energy deployment in their MSPs or, at least, submit them for a strategic environmental assessment and opposed the designation of renewables acceleration areas for ORE where projects could benefit from an exemption from environmental impact assessments (EIA) and appropriate assessments. Additionally, she called for stronger cross-border cooperation to ensure coherence between national biodiversity and sectoral policies. Seas At Risk also advocates for the development of a maritime spatial plan for each sea basin, along with strengthened cross-border efforts to assess cumulative impacts.

She further emphasised the importance of nature-inclusive design and ecosystem restoration, promoting public participation and stakeholder engagement in ORE projects. Regarding restoration, she clarified that restoration within offshore wind parks should not count towards national and EU restoration targets. She suggested that non-price criteria should be integrated into project selection processes to prioritise those with the lowest environmental impact.

Ms. Ferrario also addressed the concept of "multi-use"—the integration of different activities in marine areas—to support EU marine protection and restoration goals while sustaining local communities. She highlighted that Seas At Risk recommends only considering low-impact activities, such as low-impact fisheries and low-trophic aquaculture, for multi-use in offshore wind farms. She stressed the need to improve data collection on the environmental and social impacts of multi-use approaches and to incorporate them into maritime spatial plans. She urged the European Commission to provide further guidance on multi-use implementation.

Seas At Risk advocates for stronger public participation mechanisms, calling for:

- Better resourcing and training for permitting authorities.
- Empowerment of energy communities to take ownership of ORE projects.
- Application of non-price criteria to facilitate public participation in ORE development.

In conclusion, Seas At Risk recognises the potential of ORE to contribute to EU climate neutrality objectives, but insists that this potential can only be fully realised if:

- ORE expansion aligns with EU biodiversity objectives and environmental legislation, including using nature-inclusive design.

- Development follows an ecosystem-based approach within maritime spatial planning that extends beyond national-level decision-making.
- Deployment respects public participation requirements, involving early and effective stakeholder engagement, particularly with local and energy communities.

Q&A

Q: Clarification was sought regarding the use of non-price criteria.

A: Belgium included in the tendering criteria for the Princess Elizabeth Zone a criterion on public participation, meaning evaluating whether a project would engage with local communities and facilitate the participation of energy communities in the project. Seacoop, a network of energy cooperatives in Belgium, has advocated extensively for the inclusion of this criterion in the tendering process. (see also useful links at the end of this document)

Q: Clarification was sought regarding on-site and off-site compensation.

A: Looking at compensation measures in terms of biodiversity measures, such as restoration or protection, there are approaches where developers tend to compensate the environmental impacts they have on site with measures off site to protect relevant habitats that possibly are more in need of restoration. This is something that Seas At Risk supports. However, it should be complementary to then avoiding, reducing and mitigating the impact on site and not an excuse to offset the impact on site because by default the offshore wind installations will have impacts on site.

Q: Maps are really useful for presenting the potential hotspots of risk in relation to marine spatial planning and cumulative activities. But there is a question of how the information is being accurately presented in terms of areas of effect, i.e., either the actual activity itself or the pressure associated with an activity. Getting drawn into broad scale maps that represent an activity as a polygon presents an exaggeration of the actual physical activity itself. A paper published back 2017[1] actually showed what the footprint was in real terms of hard structures in the North Sea. At the scale of maps at ecoregion level, these structures could not be seen at all. This raises questions regarding the assessment tools that should be used to inform MSP and cumulative effects. Assessments are carried out at different spatial scales, and finer resolution can show that the behaviour of different sectors in using that space becomes much more important. There may be opportunities in terms of recognising how fishers, for example, can modify their fishing practices to accommodate a lot of these activities on fairly fine spatial scales.

[1] A.J. Kenny et al 2017: Assessing cumulative human activities, pressures, and impacts on North Sea benthic habitats using a biological traits approach (link)

A: ICES has looked at a framework which deals with the issue of scale and matching assessment tools which are appropriate at the scales to which they are most suited, a conclusion which came out of WKCOMPORE. This requires engagement with the fishing sector in particular to better understand the modalities of fishing, i.e., not just the types of gear that are used, but how those gears are being used, and how those gears are dependent or not on environmental conditions, including other users.

Q: Clarification was sought regarding the designation of renewable acceleration areas, specifically also in the Irish context, and how it would be determined that these do not need an environmental impact assessment.

A: There is a German example with an interesting dynamic as they wanted to waive environmental impact assessments for offshore renewable energy. However, wind developers and environmental NGOs joined forces to oppose this attempt. The decision to establish renewables acceleration areas has not yet resulted in a legislative change. There were also discussions in Portugal where renewable acceleration areas were considered. The architecture of the Renewable Energy Directive requires Member States to develop a strategic environmental assessment and also a screening procedure which should be a last opportunity for authorities to identify where whether some impacts have not been identified during the strategic environmental assessment. If at the end of this exercise, the screening shows that there are impacts that were not foreseen in the 1st stage of the process, then an environmental impact assessment actually is required.

The designation of Renewable Acceleration Areas in Ireland is at the moment under the draft bill for transposing the Renewable Energy Directive amendments. This falls under the remit of The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and seemingly not currently included. It will ultimately be a decision of the Minister. Looking across Europe it is clear that Renewable Acceleration Areas are a challenge, as requirements to consider transboundary impacts must consulted under the MSP Directive. It is unclear if an EIA is or is not required.

In their recent advice the NWWAC and PelAC expressed concerns jointly shared between the fishing community and NGOs regarding the potential risks of ORE installations while recognising the need to deploy offshore wind and other alternative energy installations. However, environmental safeguards should not be bypassed.

Q: How can the ACs be more involved in the design of wind farms to ensure inclusiveness, environmental protection, but also multi-use specifically regarding fisheries?

Q: Clarification was sought regarding compensation measures. Reference was made to the UK Marine Recovery Fund.

A: The Seas At Risk presentation refers to compensation measures in general. For example, in Denmark, one project encouraged the developer to take measures off site to restore specific habitats on top of their measures to reduce and avoid the impact on site. This is not specifically in relation to Article 6 of the Habitats Directive.

Q: The word coexistence should not be confused with early engagement which is the most important thing. In Scotland, there are four commercial-sized offshore wind farms with fixed foundations. While certain methods of fishing have returned, they have not returned to the same levels as before, but much reduced. Certain mobile gear for example for scallop has returned, as well as passive, static gears. This is not coexistence. If the two industries were fully coexistent, they would be working to the same level. There is a need to change the narrative. In addition, it is vital to address how to bring the power from the offshore arrays onshore. The next 20 years will see a big expansion of export and interconnector cables. If done properly, these will be buried. But in certain areas where the seabed is mobile this cannot be done. This will also be the case for floating offshore for which the actual size an impact is currently underappreciated, not only regarding fishing but also commercial shipping.

A: Research has been carried out regarding the disturbance and impact on benthic habitats for example in the Benefits project, which worked on modelling the responses of benthic habitats to types of physical disturbance caused by bottom fishing. Through those studies one can extrapolate to other types of physical disturbance, for example cable laying and dredging. ICES also has a working group on marine benthos and renewable energy developments (MBRED).

Discussion

The meeting concluded with a discussion during which participants primarily discussed the challenges faced by the fisheries sector and the need for stronger cross-sector cooperation in the planning of offshore wind farms. The discussion emphasised the importance of considering all dimensions, particularly the fishing activity and the protection of marine ecosystems. Participants explored possible solutions and existing examples of coexistence between offshore wind farms and fisheries. However, there was a consensus that a deeper, more structured discussion is necessary, ensuring that stakeholders are actively involved in both institutional and scientific dialogues. It was agreed that the ACs would organise a deep dive session on the WKCOMPORE workshop outputs and results for the Focus Group, with follow-ups planned with Mr Kenny to schedule this session. Additional details about the upcoming WKOMO and WKDSIM workshops will be shared with interested stakeholders. Future discussions and mapping exercises for the Greater North Sea Basin Initiative will seek to involve representatives from the fishing industry, ensuring that the dynamic nature of core fishing grounds is considered in marine spatial planning assessments.

Participation in upcoming ICES workshops on offshore renewable energy impacts is encouraged, alongside efforts to publish the WKCOMPORE workshop report and its corresponding advice. Further guidance will be provided on multi-use approaches for offshore renewable energy and other maritime activities. Continued coordination between Member States on maritime spatial planning remains a priority.

A follow-up webinar will be organised to focus on Member States' practices for offshore renewable energy deployment and its interaction with fishing activities. Best practices from Member States regarding non-economic criteria for engaging fishers in offshore renewable energy projects will be compiled, and recommendations will be developed to enhance stakeholder engagement in the planning process.

Efforts will be made to foster dialogue with offshore renewable energy companies on wind farm designs that take fishing activities into account. Additionally, cross-border cooperation and coordination will be explored to better address the cumulative impacts of offshore renewable energy. Suggestions shall be sent to the Advisory Councils on improving discussions with fishing operators and other stakeholders during the design phase of wind farms.

To ensure continued communication, interested participants can be added to the observer mailing lists for future meetings and webinars.

Useful links:

- https://seas-at-risk.org/publications/powering-the-future/
- Network of energy cooperatives in Belgium - https://seacoop.be/en/citizen-offshore-power/
- Advice submitted by the NWWAC and PelAC to the NWW Member States Group on 17 February regarding among other things RAA - https://www.nwwac.org/publications/joint-nwwacpelac-advice-to-the-nww-member-states-on-renewable-energy-developments-in-the-marine-space.5409.html
- https://www.courts.ie/view/Judgments/c6e01981-1045-4571-af0c-06d260290823/ef6f4957-3e77-41bb-945e-ca3adf49b287/2025_IEHC_1.pdf/pdf
- https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/uksc-2022-0064
- https://www.owic.org.uk/news/offshore-wind-industry-supports-new-marine-recovery-fund-to-protect-biodiversity-at-sea/
- https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strategic-compensation-measures-for-offshore-wind-activities-marine-recovery-fund-interim-guidance/strategic-compensation-measures-for-offshore-wind-activities-marine-recovery-fund-interim-guidance
- Latest report from WGBRED group - Working Group on Marine Benthal and Renewable Energy Developments (WGMBRED)

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