

NWWAC WG1 – Irish Sea

10 March 2025

Paris and online

1. Welcome and introductions

The Chair, John Lynch, welcomed all participants and thanked the Secretariat. No apologies were received in advance of the meeting. The agenda was adopted.

Action points from the last meeting (9 October 2024)

1	The Secretariat will share the updated choke spreadsheet and invite members to send their comments. The input received will feed the preparation of advice by the Focus Group Landing Obligation.
	Advice sent to COM on 10 January, awaiting reply
2	BIM will be invited to present on their recent trials on new gears in the Irish Sea at the next meeting of Working Group 1
	Agenda Item 2
3	The following topics should be looked at to feed the agenda of the next WG meeting: implications of EU-UK management in the Irish sea and fisheries displacement due to marine protected areas and ORE
	Agenda Item 3-4

2. Enlarged mesh in trawl top sheets in the Nephrops fishery – Matthew McHugh, Ronan Cosgrove, BIM

The Chair welcomed Matthew McHugh, Fisheries conservation technologist from BIM, who presented the results of a study conducted by BIM in collaboration with the fishing industry.

Matthem McHugh explained that the BIM study on enlarged mesh in trawl top sheets within the Nephrops fishery aims to evaluate the impact of increased mesh sizes on selectivity, bycatch reduction, and fuel efficiency. The research is driven by legislative requirements such as the Landing Obligation, Technical Conservation Measures, and Discard Plan for Western Waters.

Impact of Enlarged Mesh on Selectivity: Trials have been conducted to assess the selectivity of different mesh configurations. Results indicate that larger mesh sizes contribute to:

- A 39% reduction in undersized whiting, with high survival rates for escapees.
- No loss in Nephrops catches, ensuring economic viability.
- A 10% reduction in fuel consumption, improving operational efficiency.

Pre-2017 Trials: Various mesh configurations were tested, including the 300 mm SMP, SELTRA 300, sorting grids, and codends. Selectivity improvements were noted, particularly in reducing undersized whiting and Nephrops escape rates.

Post-2017 Trials: More advanced configurations were introduced, showing the following impacts:

- 90 mm codend: -60% whiting (<20 cm), -47% whiting (<27 cm), -31% Nephrops.
- Reduced circumference 80 mm codend: -15% whiting (<20 cm), -6% whiting (<27 cm), -12% Nephrops.
- 90 mm codend sensu stricto: -68% whiting (<20 cm), -45% whiting (<27 cm), -34% Nephrops.
- 90 mm SELTRA 300: -78% whiting (<20 cm), -75% whiting (<27 cm), -19% Nephrops.

Box Trawl Trials: A comparative analysis of the traditional two-panel trawl and a “new” four-panel ‘box’ trawl was conducted. A slight increase in Nephrops catches with the four-panel design was detected. As well as an enhanced fish escapement due to larger mesh sizes, showing potential for further development.

Further research is recommended to optimise mesh size and improve selectivity while maintaining catch efficiency. Proposed areas of focus include both comparing 80 mm vs. 160 mm mesh top sheets and testing smaller trawl doors for enhanced performance.

In conclusion, McHugh emphasised that the implementation of enlarged mesh in trawl top sheets presents a viable solution for improving fishery sustainability. The results indicate significant reductions in bycatch and fuel consumption while maintaining economic efficiency. Further trials and regulatory adjustments will enhance the overall effectiveness of this approach.

Patrick Murphy commented on the discussion about reducing carbon emissions for vessels and the potential for monetisation. He noted that an audit of vessel consumption is necessary to ensure accurate calculations. He then asked whether an audit had been conducted on the actual carbon usage of vessels and if the corresponding document was available.

Matthew McHugh responded that there is no exact audit of vessel carbon usage. However, he explained that there is a general understanding of their consumption. He elaborated that the focus is primarily on trawl systems, which account for around 60% of the system’s drag, with trawl doors contributing approximately 30%, and bridles and other components making up the remaining 10%. While there is a rough estimate for a single reconfiguration, variations occur with multi-rig setups. McHugh also noted that each fisher operates a slightly different system, meaning vessel configurations, such as net size and door dimensions, can vary. These differences make precise assessments challenging.

Dominic Rihan commented on the decline in the number of net makers in Ireland and questioned how different the current approach is from the standard design of trawl nets being produced today. He also asked whether the industry is approaching a stage where features like mesh in the top sheet are becoming a standard practice across all nets.

McHugh highlighted the challenges with gaining netmakers' support, explaining that they are cautious about new designs due to the risk of reputational damage if nets fail. Drawing from experience in Denmark, he noted that some trawl designs use mesh sizes up to 800mm in the top sheets, requiring additional floats to maintain lift. While this approach seems to be the future, engaging netmakers remains a complex issue. McHugh pointed out that there is growing interest in reducing fuel consumption, with larger mesh being the simplest solution. Despite concerns about cost, netting is usually priced by weight, meaning larger mesh doesn't increase the cost of new trawl construction. He also mentioned that Northern Ireland fishers have been experimenting with cutaway trawls and larger mesh to reduce unwanted catches and fuel consumption, signaling a shift towards these designs. With fewer netmakers remaining, McHugh suggested it might be easier to gain broader industry support as momentum for these changes builds.

Rihan acknowledged the ongoing struggle with adopting new trawl designs, emphasising that continuous trials are futile unless netmakers begin to routinely produce these designs, making them the standard for fishermen. He highlighted the need to find the right approach to encourage widespread adoption, with the ultimate goal of seamlessly integrating these improvements into the industry rather than relying on endless testing.

McHugh agreed and stressed the importance of involving netmakers in the process. He shared an example from previous trials with box trawls, where a netmaker initially resisted using large mesh in the top sheet, fearing it would collapse and cause catch losses. However, after observing the trawl in action on a vessel, the netmaker's stance changed, and he became eager to incorporate more large mesh. McHugh emphasised that adoption is often a social process, as if one fisher adopts a new method, others are likely to follow.

The Chair agreed with Dominic, stating that if the new approach proves to be economically viable or more efficient at catching nephrops while reducing unwanted catches, such as small or undersized whiting, it will likely gain rapid adoption within the fleet.

Rihan highlighted that carbon is already monetised, and vessels tracking their usage could benefit from selling carbon credits, providing a financial incentive for sustainability. However, he stressed that without an audit of a vessel's current carbon usage, it is impossible to assess potential reductions. He mentioned ongoing discussions with Ronan Cooney at BIM and suggested arranging a meeting to explore this further. Rihan emphasised that carbon credits are real and valuable, offering a potential secondary income for vessels adopting sustainable practices.

Ronan Casgrove agreed with Patrick and highlighted that BIM is actively working on related initiatives. He explained that their expertise lies in gear design and the work done at sea, focusing on assessing bycatch, energy use, and ensuring target species are not affected. He mentioned that BIM has been collaborating by sharing information on any developments that reduce drag or fuel usage. They are more than willing to share findings and contribute to wider discussions on this topic, given its broad importance for the organisation.

3. State of play EU-UK discussions - Norman Graham, MARE C.5

The Chair welcomed Norman Graham, from DG Mare C.5 (Management of Fisheries with UK, Norway and other coastal states) and thanked him for connecting online from Brussels. He presented the state of play of the discussions between EU and UK, in particular related to the Irish Sea.

Norman Graham noted that the first technical meeting of the Specialist Committee on Fisheries took place on 26th February. The meeting addressed various commitments, both new and ongoing, from last year's agreement and written record. Given the time and resource constraints associated with other key EU-UK issues, the focus so far this year has been narrowed to critical commitments that directly impact annual negotiations. The aim is to resolve certain issues outside of these negotiations to allow for a more streamlined approach to annual TAC setting.

Regarding the Irish Sea, Norman Graham highlighted the longstanding commitment to addressing technical measures, particularly in reducing unwanted juvenile whiting catches. Although a compendium of available technical measures was compiled last year through an ad hoc contract and shared with the UK, no further progress has been made on harmonizing measures.

A key area of ongoing work involves skates and rays, which impact multiple regions, including the North Sea, the Channel, and the Irish Sea. A technical meeting was recently held with Member States to explore options for single-species stock management within the broader group TAC. Another priority for the year is addressing regulations surrounding spurdog. The EU and UK have requested ICES' input on alternatives to the current 100 cm MCRS, as it affects marketability while recognising the species' slow recovery from past stock collapse.

On marine protected areas (MPAs), there are no specific developments for the Irish Sea. Any new initiatives with the UK will follow standard processes, but no active discussions are currently taking place. Offshore renewables were also briefly mentioned, though Norman Graham emphasised that this remains a national issue rather than an EU Commission competence.

In conclusion, Norman Graham stated that the SCF's work this year will be relatively limited in scope, with a focus on key fisheries management priorities rather than broader regulatory changes.

Emiel Brouckaert sought clarification on the post-2026 negotiations, noting that changes under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) are set for 1st July 2026. He asked whether a schedule for discussions had been established and if the UK had responded to the requested agenda. He also sought confirmation on whether the changes would take effect as planned or if discussions now focused on the post-2026 period.

Norman Graham clarified that management issues are prioritised, particularly those affecting TAC settings before annual consultations. He acknowledged uncertainty about the timing of post-2026 discussions, noting both parties are keen to start soon but no timeline is set. Preparations are underway for talks before summer, but no confirmed start date exists yet.

4. AOB – State of play with ORE in the Irish Sea and Seafood/ ORE working group

The Chair provided an update on Offshore Renewable Energy (ORE) developments in the Irish Sea, specifically within the Irish sector. Currently, all five wind farm projects have submitted planning applications to An Bord Pleanála for development in the Irish Sea. While the first decision was expected in December, it has yet to be announced. These wind farms are located within the 12-mile limit, meaning their impact on the Irish large scale fleet, particularly in the north, is relatively limited.

In Ireland, a dedicated Seafood-ORE Working Group has been established to address industry concerns. This group is currently drafting documentation outlining how the seafood sector will engage with ORE projects. Additionally, they are working on a framework for assessing compensation claims related to ORE development. However, this process remains in its early stages, with no substantial updates at present.

Looking ahead, future ORE projects will follow a "DMAP" (Designated Maritime Area Plan) or planned approach determined by the state. While areas off Ireland's south coast have been identified, no DMAP zones have yet been designated in the Irish Sea. Should future developments extend beyond the 12-mile limit, they could have greater implications for the UK and other EU member states.

The NWWAC has repeatedly applied to become an observer member of the Seafood-ORE Working Group but has been denied thus far. However, a recent meeting two weeks ago raised hopes for a more positive outcome. Membership would enable the NWWAC to share relevant information with Advisory Councils (ACs), helping stakeholders determine whether they might be affected.

The Chair concluded by inviting any colleagues to contribute additional insights, particularly regarding the application process. The Secretariat noted that the issue with the ORE Working Group is expected to be resolved but has not yet received a definite confirmation and is still awaiting a final response.

Rihan highlighted the NWWAC website contains a wealth of well-organised material, reflecting significant efforts in gathering data. He emphasised that considerable work has been done to assess the implications of ORE developments, exploring both the known and potential impacts on the affected areas, as well as the uncertainties that remain.

Murphy noted that government policy strongly supports the development of wind farms. He highlighted that recent discussions between Ireland and the UK suggest a willingness to accelerate this process wherever possible.

Adam Holland (Northern Ireland Fishermen's Federation) inquired about the working group on compensation, expressing interest in updates. He noted a similar approach in the UK, particularly regarding the current estate and Energy Act discussions with DAERA and DEFRA. Holland

highlighted that DEFRA focuses solely on compensation for marine protected area impacts, excluding industries like fishing and seafood, which he felt put them at a disadvantage. He stressed the need to push for fair compensation and suggested they might adopt a similar approach if the working group proved successful.

Murphy highlighted the UK's fisheries management activities and the need for area-specific plans. He noted uncertainty about their impact on Irish vessels in the Irish Sea and mentioned new monitoring technologies with unclear details. Murphy asked Adam Holland's team to share insights on potential technical measures or regulatory changes, such as Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM). He was uncertain about REM's timeline in the Irish Sea and suggested Adam provide updates. Given the cross-border implications, he stressed the importance of staying informed and collaborating.

Holland provided an update on Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs) and technical measures. He noted slight delays, but implementation is still expected by the end of 2026. The Irish Sea Commercial Fisheries Management Plan applies only to UK waters, excluding the Isle of Man, creating legislative inconsistencies. No technical measures have been proposed yet, but the focus is on improved stock management without shifting to functional management, which they oppose. The aim is to establish harvest control rules for potential stock issues. Regarding Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM), discussions are ongoing but remain in the early stages. The current priority is implementing Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS), with trials starting this year for scallop vessels and later expanding to potting vessels. Due to resource limitations, this will remain the focus for the next few years. While England and Scotland are leading REM trials, the expectation is to align with Scottish regulations, potentially implementing REM for some vessels by 2027–2028. Holland concluded that while progress is being made on FMPs and REM, there are no major updates yet, but further meetings in the coming months will advance discussions.

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

1	Follow up with BIM to keep the AC informed on the upcoming gear trials which will take place during spring/ summer this year.
2	WG to develop query to the Commission regarding the monetisation of carbon credits for the fishing industry.

The Chair concluded the meeting. He thanked members, interpreters and the Secretariat.



Participants

NWWAC members		
Emiel	Brouckaert	Rederscentrale
John	Lynch	Irish South & East Fish Producers Organisation Ltd
Aodh	O'Donnell	Irish Fish Producers Organisation (IFPO)
Patrick	Murphy	Irish South & West Fish Producers Organisation
Dominic	Rihan	KFO
Experts & Observers		
Ronan	Cosgrove	Bord Iascaigh Mhara
Norman	Graham	DG MARE C5
Eileen	Harmey	Seafood Policy and Management Division DAFM
Adam	Holland	Northern Ireland Fishermen's Federation
Matthew	McHugh	Bord Iascaigh Mara
Alexandra	Philippe	EBCD
Albers	Tetyana	France - DGAMPA
NWWAC Secretariat		
Ilaria	Bellomo	
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