

NWWAC WG2 – Celtic Sea and West of Scotland

10 March 2025

Paris and online

1. Welcome and introductions

Jean-Marie Robert led the discussions on behalf of Suso Lourido Garcia to ensure a smoother meeting, as Suso Lourido Garcia participated remotely via Zoom. The Chair 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 NWWAC will continue the liaison with STECF on VMEs and members will remain available to contribute to STECF analysis with data and interviews. Agenda item 4
2	The NWWAC should follow up on the Commission's response to the AC letter on technical measures in the Celtic Sea, taking into account the new ICES advice, discussion at STECF EWG 24-16 and the impact of vessels decommissioning. Letter on technical request to ICES on cod sent to COM on 20 Dec, waiting for response
3	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 delivered on 10 January
4	The NWWAC should draft advice to the Commission on stocks that urgently need their assessments improved through benchmark exercises. Letter sent on 6 December, response received on 4 March 2025
5	The management of the hake northern stock should be kept on the agenda of this Working Group. Agenda item 3

2. Update on EU-UK discussions – Norman Graham, DG MARE C.5

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

Norman Graham outlined several key priorities:

- **SCF Working Group:** The first meeting took place on 26 February, discussing priority issues in preparation for the annual consultation.
- **Spurdog:** ICES has provided advice, and TACs have been allocated across different areas, with Western Waters receiving the majority. The MCRS is set at 100 cm and marking issues

have been noted. A technical meeting with Member States has already taken place. Given the stock's historical decline and 20-year recovery, a joint request has been submitted to ICES to assess alternative MCRS options, considering BIM survey data from Ireland. Awaiting feedback from the WG on elasmobranchs. Open to alternative conservation measures.

- **Data-Limited Stocks:** Includes lemon sole in the North Sea (7h, j, k) and cod in the Rockall area. Some new data is available, though advice remains based on limited information. The EU and UK are collaborating on improving data collection to better support ICES and scientists.
- **Pollock:** Aware of the recent ICES benchmark meeting but did not participate, awaiting the report. Recreational catch has been addressed, and the issue will be on the agenda for the Specialised Committee on Fisheries.
- **Celtic Sea:** Challenges remain regarding selectivity, technical measures, and protection zones. Efforts continue to resolve regulatory issues. Zero-catch advice remains for whiting and cod, while haddock is also in poor condition. Coordination with the UK is ongoing to align technical measures.
- **Mixed Fisheries:** Progress is being made on refining granular data to understand which stocks are caught together, in which areas, with what gears, and in which period. This information will help the European Commission determine where technical measures can be implemented.
- **Channel WG on Skate and Rays:** Work is ongoing, including exploration for the Celtic Sea.
- **REM (Remote Electronic Monitoring):** The Scottish administration has introduced mandatory REM for pelagic vessels. The EU and Scottish authorities are working on technical specifications and interoperability between monitoring systems.

Patrick Murphy raised concerns about spurdog, noting that male and female aggregations are rarely observed together and asking whether this has been considered when implementing measures to protect females. He also expressed concerns about the long-term implications of the TCA.

Dominic Rihan questioned the differing ICES advice for whiting in separate areas of the Celtic Sea and asked whether there is a plan to assess stock dynamics. Regarding cod in the North Sea and Celtic Sea, he highlighted concerns about the stock split and the potential risk of reduced allocations. He also sought clarification on the current status and management of Rockall cod.

Emiel Brouckaert inquired about the availability of information on mixed fisheries that could be shared with the group.

Norman Graham replied as follows:

- **Mixed Fisheries:** Work is still ongoing, and no public information is available at the moment.

- **North Sea Cod:** A technical meeting with Norway is scheduled for the coming week.
- **Celtic Sea Whiting:** A response from Vitcheva is expected. Over the past few years, ICES has conducted benchmarks, but these all concluded that no revisions to the current stock structure definitions were needed. Changes in stock ID is an internal ICES issue and would need to be triggered by new data or information. The current stock split is based on historic tagging data, which shows no mixing between the two areas. ICES stock identification remains the basis.
- **Rockall:** there is ongoing work under the SCF to look at the available data and information to see if there is a possibility to improve the evidence underpinning ICES advice.
- **Spurdog:** Protecting mature females remains an important aspect of spurdog management, given the history of the stock collapse in the early 2000's. Spurdog management is a priority issue for the SCF and a joint request to ICES to support that work is being prepared. It's encouraging to see BIM's work on survivability and understanding the best times to catch them.

The **Chair** raised concerns about cod in the Celtic Sea, referring to the Advisory Council's letter to the Commission on 20 December requesting ICES expertise on the impact of climate change and offshore wind farm developments. The Chair sought clarification on whether the stock's recovery is still possible under current conditions, noting that management assumes recovery is feasible, but this remains uncertain. He expressed interest in further discussion and mentioned awaiting an official response to the letter, while welcoming any insights available at this stage.

Franck Le Barzic raised two key questions. First, he asked why a maximum size limit for spurdog is maintained, despite ICES Category 1 recommendation not requiring it. While he understood the rationale of protecting large, fertile females, he questioned the need for this restriction given the stock's healthy status and underutilised TAC. He asked how the Commission justifies this limit in discussions with the UK without a clear fisheries management basis. Second, he addressed the poor condition of species like haddock, cod, whiting, and pollack in the Celtic Sea. Despite improved technical regulations, stock recovery has been minimal. Le Barzic asked what additional measures the Commission is considering improving sustainability without further economic hardship.

Norman Graham addressed Franck Le Barzic's questions, covering several key points:

- **On Maximum Size Limits and Economic Assessments:** He stated that there are specific discussions with the UK regarding spurdog management but the approach remains exploratory, but we are very open to candidate alternatives that alleviate the current concerns (under utilisation of the TAC) yet retaining the necessary protection for adult females.
- **On Celtic Sea Cod and Joint Management:** Regarding the state of cod stocks in the Celtic Sea, he noted that a response to the NWWAC letter had already been drafted. He highlighted that any request to ICES for stocks that are jointly managed with the UK should be based on

a joint EU-UK. Regarding impacts of climate change, ICES has already started considering how this may affect recruitment and, in some case, ICES now use a shortened time series of recruitment data to account for possible declines in productivity. He acknowledged the continued decline of the stock and referenced the detailed response provided to the NWWAC already in 2023.

- **On Spurdog Management:** Norman Graham recalled the historical context of its stock decline. He explained that the 100 cm size restriction was introduced around the early 2000s as a response to the rapid decline in stock levels. While open to discussions on future management, he emphasised concerns about the vulnerability of the stock, particularly the large individuals targeted by the fishery. Given that spurdog is a low-productivity shark species, he stressed the need for caution.

He concluded by stating that they continue to work on the issue, having requested additional data and modelling from ICES to explore trade-offs in stock protection while maintaining a viable fishery.

Murphy raised concerns about mitigating factors affecting fish stocks beyond environmental influences, specifically the movement of species into new areas. He highlighted observations of a significant increase in poor fish entering these areas and expressed worries that some of these species might be feeding during the spawning cycles of fish within designated spawning grounds. He inquired whether any research had been conducted on this issue or if there were plans for further study. However, it has been acknowledged that this question was more relevant to ICES rather than the Commission.

The **Chair** acknowledged the ongoing scientific work, noting that many studies are still in progress and will take time to analyse. He thanked participants for the quality of the discussions and reflected on the case of spurdog. While commercial aspects of large individuals were discussed, he stressed the need for an ecosystem-based perspective. He reminded that, in the early 2000s, there was a near ecological disaster, but currently, fishing mortality on spurdog is ten times lower than the maximum sustainable yield rate. He highlighted that spurdog, like all marine species, exist in a dynamic ecosystem influenced by predation and competition. The Chair questioned the assumption that overexploitation is always the primary issue, suggesting that under exploitation could also contribute to recruitment problems. He hoped future discussions would consider the consequences of under exploitation in stock management.

In conclusion, the Chair thanked Norman Graham for his clear responses and expressed hope that this level of engagement would continue in the coming weeks and months for further discussions.

3. Update on hake in the Celtic Sea – Dorleta Garcia, AZTI ([link](#))

The Chair welcomed Dorleta Garcia from AZTI, the Spanish scientific and technological centre. Garcia gave an update on the management and status of hake in the Celtic Sea. This report summarises the key findings from the presentation on Northern Hake stock dynamics, assessments, and future research under the VarMer project (EMFAF 2024-2026). The research aims to understand stock variability, productivity, and improve fisheries management.

- Stock Assessment Findings: both assessments and surveys indicate a significant decrease in the biomass of Northern Hake due to poor recruitment levels.
- Spatial Distribution of Catches: Variability in catch distribution was observed, with changes ranging from an increase of 81% in some areas to a drastic decline of 71% in others. The catches in the North Sea have decreased and are now in line with the catches observed before the high increased in the stock size. However, the catches in the Celtic Sea, the area with highest historical catches, are now lower and similar to those in the Bay of Biscay.
- Stock Productivity and Biological Factors: on density-dependence, higher biomass levels lead to lower individual fish weights and delayed maturity. The study also explores the role of environmental variables in stock productivity.
- Hake in an Ecosystem Context: The relationship between hake and other species, such as mackerel, is analysed to understand interspecies interactions and ecosystem impacts.
- VarMer Project objectives:
 1. Developing a spatial distribution model influenced by environmental variables.
 2. Identifying density-dependent processes affecting stock productivity.
 3. Understanding factors driving recruitment variability.
 4. Investigating the causes behind fluctuations in Northern Hake abundance.
 5. Enhancing stock assessment and fisheries management strategies.

In conclusion, the report highlights the urgent need for improved stock assessment methodologies and a deeper understanding of recruitment variability. Future research will contribute to the sustainable management of Northern Hake through enhanced modelling and ecosystem-based approaches.

José Beltran raised concerns about declining capture data from key fishing grounds, noting that closures of vulnerable marine ecosystems may not have been fully accounted for. He explained that these historically important areas are now closed to fishing, preventing data collection and creating gaps in stock assessments. He questioned whether a Spanish research campaign in the Porcupine Bank had access to these zones, as previous requests for entry were denied. As research is limited to areas outside the closures, current data may not reflect the true fishing potential, and fleet displacement has likely contributed to underreporting.

Murphy, referring to his earlier question to the Commission, discussed stock performance variations, highlighting that some stocks show low recruitment despite increased biomass. Since

recruitment cycles can span over a decade, he warned that excessive fishing in a short period could deplete aging stocks and cause long-term damage. He raised concerns about predation in spawning areas, where fishers increasingly encounter fish preying on larvae. He questioned how ICES accounts for this in stock assessments, suggesting that if predation is limiting recruitment, even low catch recommendations may be insufficient for recovery. Using hake as an example, he pointed out that despite years of underfishing, expected recruitment levels have not returned. He also highlighted shifts in fleet sizes, fishing activity, and spawning grounds as key factors. Murphy concluded by advocating for a broader stock assessment approach, urging ICES to consider not only spawning stock locations but also the impact of other species in these areas.

Le Barzic highlighted that the stock experienced a significant biomass peak between 2002, 2012, 2013, and up until 2019. He drew a comparison with mackerel, noting that during this period, biomass levels were well above the MSY. As a result, he suggested that these elevated levels may have been perceived as the norm compared to the current situation. He then questioned whether there is sufficient historical ecological and ecosystem data to understand why biomass levels were so high during those years. Furthermore, he asked whether biomass is expected to stabilise at an MSY level or if the decline will continue unchecked.

Suso Lourido Garcia expressed concerns about the potential link between hake stocks and horse mackerel fisheries, particularly regarding juvenile fish movement patterns. He questioned whether the reproductive cycles of hake, discussed in previous years, remain consistent, and suggested reviewing changes in pelagic fisheries to assess their impact on juvenile hake. He also noted differences between the Bay of Biscay and the Celtic Sea, where fixed-gear fisheries are experiencing noticeable changes. Suso stressed the need for further research into juvenile stocks and the decline of certain pelagic species.

To respond to the comments above, **Dorleta Garcia** addressed several key issues regarding hake stock dynamics and fisheries assessments:

1. Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems (VMEs): Garcia acknowledged that the potential impact of closed areas on fish stocks hadn't been fully considered due to lack of fine-scale data. She highlighted that the ongoing project may provide such data, which could help understand stock declines. While technical issues affected the Porcupine Bank research campaign, these were unrelated to VMEs.
2. Predator-Prey Interactions and Ecosystem-Based Fisheries Management: Garcia agreed on the need to explore predator-prey dynamics and ecosystem factors. ICES is progressing towards ecosystem-based fisheries management, though challenges remain in integrating these interactions into models. The project aims to go beyond stock-specific analyses and consider broader environmental influences.
3. Stock Biomass Trends and Variability: Garcia explained that stabilising biomass under MSY conditions is difficult due to natural recruitment variability. While hake stock fluctuations had

been within expected MSY variability, the recent decline in 2024 goes beyond expected ranges and raised concerns about future trends.

4. Hake and Horse Mackerel Interactions: While no formal analysis has been done, Garcia confirmed that the ongoing project will investigate the relationship between hake and horse mackerel, focusing on the Celtic Sea and Bay of Biscay.
5. Collaboration and Future Research: Garcia encouraged input from stakeholders, welcoming further discussions and insights from the industry to improve research and findings.

In conclusion, Garcia emphasised the complexity of hake stock dynamics, the need for ecosystem-wide analysis, and ongoing efforts to improve understanding and adaptability in fisheries management.

The **Chair** expressed appreciation for the valuable contributions made during the discussion, noting that they also served as an informal conclusion to the meeting. He confirmed that the presentation from the session would be shared and encouraged the submission of specific questions through the secretariat, which would then be distributed to the relevant members. He emphasised the importance of engaging in an iterative process, where participants contribute insights, raise questions, and seek responses to advance the discussion effectively. He assured that the final proposal would be given due consideration.

4. VMEs: follow up on STECF EWG on 3-7 March

The Chair briefly introduced the next agenda item on vulnerable marine ecosystems, explaining that he was under embargo from the CSTEP and therefore could not disclose details of last week's discussions until the report was officially published. He noted that a public meeting had taken place where the findings were presented. He reminded attendees that this year, CSTEP must conduct a socio-economic impact study. While some preliminary work has already been done, several issues were identified, such as the scale of analysis being too broad. Ideally, assessments should be conducted at the vessel level for greater accuracy. Last week's discussions aimed to refine the impact analysis and provide better insights for the review process of the delegated act. He stated that all reports would be published around two weeks after the CSTEP plenary, in line with the usual schedule, and anticipated further discussions at that time.

The Chair proceeded to summarise key action points from the meeting, acknowledging that they might not follow the exact order of discussions.

1. **Potential agenda item for the July meeting** – While a particular issue had not been included in today's agenda, the Chair suggested it could be addressed at the next working group in July if new elements emerged. He encouraged a participant to prepare a presentation if relevant and assured that it would be added to the agenda.
2. **Collaboration between Scientists and Members** – He praised the scientific presentation, stating that it exceeded expectations and brought forward critical topics. He highlighted the

willingness of scientists to collaborate on fundamental questions and expressed his desire to strengthen working relationships between AZTI and NWWAC members.

3. **Declining Biomass Trends** – the Chair proposed addressing a broader issue concerning the general decline in biomass across various stocks. He noted that while the MSY framework had initially been presented as a promising solution, its long-term outcomes were proving problematic in the context of quota setting. He called for deeper reflections on the causes of these declining trends, whether due to under exploitation, density-dependent mechanisms, or cannibalism. He suggested that these discussions should be elevated to the Executive Committee and potentially be addressed to the European Commission and ICES, as the issue extended beyond a single working group.
4. **Discussion on the Porcupine Nephrops fishery in July** – Lastly, he proposed revisiting the Nephrops (*langoustine*) fishery campaign in Porcupine Bank at the next meeting in July.

He concluded by opening the floor for comments on these proposed action points.

Patrick Murphy expressed appreciation for Garcia presentation, but he noted that a key issue raised was the lack of resources available to conduct thorough assessments. Murphy stressed that when requesting validation of ICES' work, it is equally important to ensure that the necessary resources are provided. Without adequate funding and support, ICES may not be in a position to complete the required assessments effectively. He proposed that the Commission include this concern in its request, ensuring that resource availability is taken into account alongside the validity of the work being undertaken.

In response to Patrick Murphy's comments, the **Chair** acknowledged that the issue of resources is closely linked to broader concerns regarding recruitment and scientific analyses. The Chair highlighted the importance of understanding marine food chains, particularly in relation to predator-prey dynamics. A key question raised was whether sufficient stomach content analyses are still being conducted, as this data is essential for determining "who eats whom, when, and in what quantity." Without such studies, it becomes difficult to assess ecosystem dynamics effectively. Furthermore, the Vice Chair noted that the issue of resources and funding ties into a larger discussion on sustainable fisheries management. Specifically, concerns were raised regarding the limitations of the MSY approach, suggesting that it does not always provide the expected outcomes. Acknowledging Murphy's point, the Chair agreed that this is a significant issue that warrants further attention.

In conclusion, the Chair expressing appreciation for participants' engagement and adherence to the schedule. Logistical details for the next gathering were also provided, with confirmation that attendees had received relevant information from the Secretariat.

6. AOB – none

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

1	Further engage with AZTI following the presentation and dissemination of the Northern Hake Stock dynamic
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.
3	Include a presentation of the Nephrops Porcupine Survey by BIM during WG2 meeting in July.

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



Participants

NWWAC members		
José	Beltran	OPP-7 BURELA
Emiel	Brouckaert	Rederscentrale
Kenatea	Chavez-Hey	ANOP
Manu	Kelberine	CRPMEM de Bretagne
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
Irene	Prieto	OPPF4
Erwan	Quemeneur	CDPMEM 29
Jean-Marie	Robert	Pêcheurs de Bretagne PO
Dominic	Rihan	KFO
Pauline	Stephan	CNPMEM
Arthur	Yon	FROM Nord
Experts & Observers		
Tetyana	Albers	France - DGAMPA
Enda	Conneely	IIMRO
Juan Carlos	Corras Arias	FREMSS
Dorleta	Garcia	AZTI
Norman	Graham	DG MARE C5
Eileen	Harmey	Seafood Policy and Management Division DAFM
Adam	Holland	Northern Ireland Fishermen's Federation
Gérald	Hussenot Desenonges	Blue Fish
Julien	Lamothe	ANOP
Suso	Lourido	Puerto de Celeiro SA OPP 77
Alexandra	Philippe	EBCD
NWWAC Secretariat		
Ilaria	Bellomo	
Mo	Mathies	