

## NWWAC Working Group 3 - Channel

10 March 2025

Paris and online

### 1. Welcome and introductions

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 FG Seabass will meet again to find a compromise solution on the advice while the AC Chair will also review the current draft to develop a more balanced version.
	<a href="#">Advice delivered on 28 Nov, waiting for response.</a>
2	The Secretariat will get in touch with UK authorities regarding observing the Bass Management Group.
	<a href="#">Email sent 24/10, reminder sent 15/01</a>
3	The Focus Group Scallop should meet again once results from the Irish trials are available.
	<a href="#">The group met on 25 November. New meeting to be agreed by this WG.</a>
4	The NWWAC should draft advice to the Commission requesting that the joint recommendation on squid is brought forward.
	<a href="#">The conclusion within the NWW regional group regarding this JR was not negative. Therefore, the Commission has considered that there is a base to launch the delegated act for the amendment of the technical measures regulation and has initiated the process for this elaboration to amend the regulation and maintain the case of the exemption of 40mm for some areas. The expected date for entering into force is June/July 2025.</a>
5	The Secretariat will share the updated choke traffic light spreadsheet for members to provide inputs and contribute to the preparation of advice.
	<a href="#">Advice delivered on 10 Jan, waiting for response</a>

### 2. Update on the work of the NWW MSG – Secretariat

NWW MS Technical Group gathered twice at the beginning of this year and NWWAC Secretariat (as well NWWAC Chair Emiel Brouckaert, Vice-Chair Alexandra Philippe) participated in the follow up meetings dedicated to the ACs. The main points from these two meetings have been presented to WG members.

#### 07/02 Meeting

- **Lemon sole:** The Commission provided an update on the JR, as the last information was from the STECF in November was not very positive. The STECF report advised that additional information was needed. The Commission mentioned that they will be in contact with

Belgium to better address what information is needed in order to progress the issue. It is hoped that this will be progressed in time for the STECF plenary in May.

- **Squid:** The conclusion within the NWW regional group regarding this JR was not negative. Therefore, the Commission has considered that there is a base to launch the delegated act for the amendment of the technical measures regulation and has initiated the process for this elaboration to amend the regulation and maintaining the case of the exemption of 40mm for some areas. The expected date for entering into force is June/July 2025.
- **Red mullet:** An update was provided by France regarding the introduction of a minimum size, but this still needs to be discussed within the regional group, and a more consolidated text is needed.
- **Queen scallop:** France mentioned technical issues regarding the Queen scallop fishery carried out by beam trawls in relation to the mesh size. Analysis is needed by the regional group to provide proposals. Further clarification is required regarding technical measures.

#### 26/02 Meeting

**Queen scallop fisheries** – clarifications on TMR (request by France): The Commission feels that beam trawls are considered to be part of the bottom trawl definition.

### **3. EU-UK update – 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 thanked him for connecting online from Brussels. Graham presented the state of play of the discussions between Eu and Uk under the Specialised Committee for Fisheries, in particular related to the English Channel and progress on supporting the scientific basis for ICES stock assessments for Plaice 7FG; Lemon Sole (3A, 4 and 7D) and sole 7HJK. Norman informed that there will be technical meetings between the EU and UK technical experts, together with ICES, to develop roadmaps for the three stocks with a view to support the improvement of the stock assessment. Norman committed to debriefing the WG following these technical meetings.

### **4. Decline of flatfish in the Eastern Channel – Raphaël Girardin, Ifremer**

The Chair welcomed Raphaël Girardin from Ifremer, the French Research Institute for Exploitation of the Sea. Girardin presented the status of flatfish in the Eastern Channel and an analysis of its decline as well the evolution of biomass and landings of these species in ICES 7d.

**Girardin** presented the latest stock assessment for plaice (*Pleuronectes platessa*) and sole (*Solea solea*) in Division 7.d (Eastern English Channel), based on ICES (2024) data. His

presentation provided an overview of stock status, catch statistics, and projections for 2025, highlighting key trends and ongoing research efforts.

Plaice (7.d) Stock Assessment: The assessment of plaice in the Eastern English Channel incorporated official landings, ICES catch submissions, and survey data. Missing discard information was estimated based on observed landing/discard ratios per fleet segment. A key point in the presentation was that 65% of catches in Q1 were assumed to originate from neighbouring stocks, with 50% from the North Sea stock (ple.27.420) and 15% from the Western English Channel stock (ple.27.7e).

Looking ahead to 2025, assuming average recruitment and a continuation of the 2024 fishing pressure, the catch advice is set to increase by 9.8% (2,600 tonnes). This is largely due to the incoming 2021 year-class and shifts in selectivity patterns for age groups 1-2.

Girardin also outlined ongoing work, including an ICES benchmark scheduled for February 2025, which aims to refine the assessment model, update maturity estimates, and review reference points. Additionally, further research is being conducted on stock identification and migration patterns using otolith analysis.

Sole (7.d) Stock Assessment: The assessment of sole in the Eastern English Channel followed a similar approach, integrating official landing data, ICES catch estimates, and survey indices. As with plaice, missing discard information was estimated based on observed landing/discard ratios.

For 2025, Girardin reported a 19.6% reduction in catch advice (1,209 tonnes). This decline is attributed to a lower stock size, weaker-than-expected recruitment in 2023, and a reduction in target fishing pressure ( $<F_{msy}$ ). The assessment is based on average recruitment from the past 10 years, with fishing constrained by the 2024 TAC.

A notable research finding presented was the low connectivity between three sub-populations of sole within the Eastern English Channel. This has led to discussions on the potential development of a new recruitment index to improve stock assessments.

In conclusion, Girardin's presentation highlighted the contrasting trends in plaice and sole stocks in Division 7.d. While plaice stocks appear to be in a stable or improving state, allowing for an increase in catch advice, sole stocks are facing a significant decline, requiring more cautious management. The ongoing ICES benchmarking process, along with continued research into stock migration and recruitment dynamics, will be essential in guiding future fisheries management strategies.

**The Chair** thanked Girardin for his detailed presentation and opened the floor to questions.

**Olivier Lepretre** raised concerns about the discrepancy between scientific stock assessments and the reality observed by fishers. He acknowledged the complexity of the calculations but pointed out that those working at sea have been witnessing different trends for years. Referring to the Eastern English Channel (Manche), he noted that while fishers have long reported a decline

in sole stocks, this year they are seeing an unexpected increase in catches. Boats are performing significantly better than in the past five to eight years, contradicting previous assessments. He questioned why this change has occurred despite the accuracy of scientific calculations. Highlighting the Boulogne fish market, he remarked that it had been a long time since such quantities of sole had been seen, yet this year, they are observing notable landings. He stressed the importance of considering real-world observations alongside scientific models and asked: *What has changed? What is the reason behind this unexpected improvement in sole catches?*

**Dimitri Rogoff** wanted to expand on the previous question by highlighting that the rejection rate has increased from 10% to 20%, indicating a significant rise in discards despite a collapsing biomass. He asked what could explain this trend. Additionally, he pointed out a shift in the fishery dynamics, with Belgian vessels now landing the largest share. Given this change, efforts will be required from all parties, and the key question remains: what form should these efforts take?

**Franck Le Barzic** raised a question regarding the application in relation to fish migrations. Specifically, he referred to the catches in the English Channel, the Western Channel, and the North Sea, where the catches recorded in the Channel are reallocated to adjacent stocks. His question was: are these migration percentages considered in any other indicators, apart from the catches themselves?

**Arthur Yon** asked if today there is a clear understanding of the influence of environmental factors on the recruitment of sole and the application.

**Xavier Tetard** raised a concern about the application, seeking to understand the dynamics behind the situation. He questioned why recruitment remains relatively high despite the complete collapse of catches, asking: what could explain this discrepancy?

**Brouckaert** noted that Belgium doesn't fish much near the French coast and hasn't experienced the same issues. Since mid-February, there have been no problems, though quota shortages limit their catches. Belgian landings have declined due to reduced TACs and quotas, but they have adapted by fishing more efficiently. He clarified that the rise in reported discards is due to exemptions, not an actual increase, and reiterated Belgium's opposition to the landing obligation. He also highlighted research efforts to avoid catching small fish. Finally, he suggested forming a working group to investigate whether an environmental issue is affecting recruitment on the French side, as no similar problems are observed on the English side.

**Girardin** replied that for the 2025 catch assessments, Ifremer works with a one-year delay, meaning the current data was not included in the presentation. The advice for the 2025 catch opportunities will primarily be based on past recruitments. If past recruitments were weak, they are likely to remain weak in the forecast. If small soles are being caught, it may indicate that the current recruitment is being captured, but this will need to be confirmed by further data checks. Regarding migration, the plan is to reallocate first-quarter catches from 7D to adjacent stocks and to develop a time series of migration rates that change year by year, rather than relying solely on the outdated 65% figure from studies conducted in the 2000s. Any changes in migration patterns could have an impact on stock assessments. While there are no current studies on the environmental impact on recruitment in zone 7D, studies on the sole in the Bay of Biscay have

shown a link between river input and stock productivity. Similar studies in the North Sea have looked at the environmental impact on growth. As for the 2021 recruitment of the application, the 2025 forecast was revised upward because last year's stock assessment suggested the 2021 recruitment was higher than previously thought. Whether this revision is confirmed will be determined as further data is reviewed.

**Brouckaert** highlighted that Maximum Sustainable Yield is based on quality assessments using all available data, with a benchmark ongoing and results expected by March. These will determine if any action is needed. He noted an unexpected increase for the 7D application and a decline in sole stocks since 2021, contradicting observations. He stressed that the working group should focus on benchmark results, especially given the 20% reduction in the sole TAC.

**Le Barzic** asked if similar declines in plaice and sole seen in 7D were occurring in the Western Channel. He noted potential recruitment issues due to nursery area disturbances and inquired about trends on the English side.

**Brouckaert** responded that Belgium's fleet in the Channel has a small sole quota and no recent exchange opportunities with France but hasn't faced major fishing issues. He noted that sole in the Western Channel are larger than in the North Sea. In 2024, there has been little plaice activity due to quota limits, and last year, the fleet stopped fishing in April after exhausting its sole quota. In 2023, they considered requesting more plaice quota due to increased catches, but 2024 activity remains low.

**Olivier Lepretre** then asked if sole numbers in 4C and northern 7D had changed. Brouckaert confirmed a recent improvement near the northern 7D border, but data remains limited. A major benchmark for North Sea sole was conducted last year, though it's difficult to compare with the 7D area. Belgian fishers have reported more small soles in the North Sea, but the stock has not fully returned to previous levels.

## 5. AOB – None

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

1	Secretariat to contact ICES to present the seabass benchmark results to the FG seabass and discussion on the implications for advice and future management of stocks.
2	Secretariat to organise next meeting of the FG Scallop to discuss technical measures
3	Working Group to follow the Member States Group's discussions on lemon sole and red mullet
4	Working Group to follow the results of the Benchmark on flatfish in the Eastern Channel and the related advice

**Further Comments:** **Xavier Tetard** highlighted the need to revisit the whelk topic in the future, though it's not an urgent matter. **The Secretariat** postponed the discussion of Focus Group Whelk during July Meeting.

In conclusion, the Chair closed the meeting and thanked members for the discussion.



## Participants

NWWAC members		
Emiel	Brouckaert	Rederscentrale
Kenatea	Chavez-Hey	ANOP
Manu	Kelberine	CRPMEM de Bretagne
Franck	Le Barzic	OP COBRENORD
Olivier	Lepretre	CRPMEM HDF
John	Lynch	Irish South & East Fish Producers Organisation Ltd
Aodh	O'Donnell	Irish Fish Producers Organisation (IFPO)
Corentine	Piton	France Pêche Durable et Responsable
Erwan	Quemeneur	CDPMEM 29
Jean-Marie	Robert	Pêcheurs de Bretagne PO
Dimitri	Rogoff	CRPMEM Normandie
Pauline	Stephan	CNPMEM
Xavier	Tetard	CRPMEM Normandie
Arthur	Yon	FROM Nord
Experts & Observers		
Tetyana	Albers	France - DGAMPA
David	Curtis	EAA
Raphaël	Girardin	Ifremer
Norman	Graham	DG MARE C5
Louis	Gustin	CRPMEM HDF
Eileen	Harmey	Seafood Policy and Management Division DAFM
Gérald	Hussenot Desenonges	Blue Fish
Llibori	Martinez Latorre	IFSUA
Alexandra	Philippe	EBCD
Dominic	Rihan	KFO
NWWAC Secretariat		
Ilaria	Bellomo	
Mo	Mathies	