



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR MARITIME AFFAIRS AND FISHERIES

The Director-General

Brussels
MARE/C1/CA/ms

Subject: Reply to the North-Western Waters Advisory Council letter on ICES advice on VMEs (14 January 2025)

Dear Mr Brouckaert, dear Ms Philippe,

Thank you for your letter on the ICES advice on Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems (VMEs) and for the acknowledgement of the Commission's efforts regarding the involvement of Advisory Councils in this matter.

I wish to take this opportunity to praise the engagement of the NWWAC representatives in providing expertise and feedback on the implementation of the Deep-sea Access Regulation, may it be NWWAC letters or individual contributions in the context of the STECF Expert Working Group for the analysis of socio-economic impacts of the VMEs closures more recently. I would like to express our sincere thanks for those inputs and contributions as they are precious for the scientific work of both ICES and STECF.

In your letter, you raise a series of issues linked to ICES advice, and I would like to address them. For that purpose, we have consulted ICES and replies are hence based on their feedback.

First, you will be pleased to know that the findings of the report of the Killybegs fishermen's organisation (KFO) have been part of the elements included in the review undertaken by benthic ecologists of the ICES Working Group on Deepwater Ecology (WGDEC), for the purpose of the 2024 advice ⁽¹⁾. As scientific work results from an iterative process, further review of VMEs historical records will be conducted in the future, with new ICES advice planned every two years from now on.

Equally, it is important to underline that each piece of advice represents, at the time of its release, the best available science. When a new scientific advice is published, it

⁽¹⁾ See Section 5 of the report of the Joint ICES/NAFO Working Group on Deep-water Ecology (WGDEC). ICES Scientific Reports. 6:77. <https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.27041425>

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supersedes the former (if not part of a regular/annual cycle). From the original 2021 ICES advice, two sets of ICES advice have been published as new development on data, knowledge and techniques improve. Changes in the polygons result from the addition of VME records to the VME database and from updates in the VMS time series according to the responses provided by each Member State to the ICES data calls for VME and VMS data. The fact that there are “different rates of submission of data by Member States” as you mention underpins certain results in the advice.

The best available scientific advice on the areas where VMEs occur or are likely to occur is now the 2024 advice ⁽²⁾.

With regard to the methodology including the scale of the spatial analysis, ICES has informed the Commission that a benchmark for the VMEs advice is planned to take place in 2027.

I am looking forward to our continued cooperation and dialogue. Should you have any further questions on this reply, please do not hesitate to contact our coordinator of Advisory Councils, Ms Julia Rubeck (MARE-AC@ec.europa.eu) or our policy officer Caroline Alibert-Deprez (caroline.alibert-deprez@ec.europa.eu).

Yours sincerely,

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⁽²⁾ ICES. 2024. Advice on areas where Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems (VMEs) are known to occur or are likely to occur in EU waters <https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.advice.26983726>