CONSEIL CONSULTATIF POUR LES EAUX OCCIDENTALES SEPTENTRIONALES | NORTH WESTERN WATERS ADVISORY COUNCIL | CONSEJO CONSULTIVO PARA LAS AGUAS NOROCCIDENTALES

# NWWAC FOCUS GROUP ON SCALLOP

# MINUTES

Virtual meeting via Zoom

12 May 2025, 14:30 – 16:00 CET

## 1. Welcome and introduction by the Chair

The Chair, Mathieu Vimard, welcomed the participants. No apologies were received, and the agenda was adopted.

**Action points from the last meeting**

| |
|---|
| John Lynch will come back to the FG with a proposal on ring size once results of the second BIM trial have been discussed by Irish fishers. |
| Dimitri Rogoff will share with the FG the proposal by CRPMEM Normandie on management measures, especially regarding closures. |

## 2. Presentation of the Ava Ocean Project – Dagny Elise Anastassiou, Chief Impact Officer, Ava Ocean

**Dagny Elise Anastassiou**, Chief Impact Officer at Ava Ocean, joined the meeting to present Ava Ocean, a Norwegian company based in Ålesund, Norway. The company is both a fishery and a technology developer, founded in 2016 with the mission to reinvent how marine resources, in particular scallops, are harvested.

Anastassiou introduced Ava Ocean's flagship initiative: the reopening of the Arctic scallop fishery in the Barents Sea, which had been closed for 30 years. Traditional scallop dredging is banned under Norwegian law due to the past decrease of the stocks and the past poor fisheries management rules. For this reason, any reopening required a completely new technological approach. Ava Ocean developed a harvesting system based on precision and minimal seabed disturbance. They refer to this concept as "precision harvesting", adapted from agriculture, where technology enables better decision-making through observation, measurement, and targeted action.

To give context, she shared that the fishery originally opened in 1986 and quickly expanded. By 1987, 25 vessels were active and 40,000 tonnes of scallops were landed. However, this rapid growth led to a collapse by 1990, prompting the government to ban scallop dredging and close the fishery entirely in 1992. Initial stock assessments by the Institute of Marine Research (IMR) in 2006 showed some signs of recovery, and Ava Ocean re-engaged the IMR in 2020 to carry out new population surveys. Based on these findings, which indicated full recovery, the authorities granted Ava Ocean a five-year commercial research licence, with an annual quota of up to 15,000 tonnes (the maximum sustainable yield identified by IMR).

In 2022, Ava Ocean launched its first vessel, the Arctic Pearl, a converted 85-metre platform supply ship. Onboard were two harvesters equipped with cameras, lights, and sorting systems. In their first operational year, they also generated data needed to begin a five-year impact assessment required by the Norwegian authorities. This assessment will support decisions on whether the fishery can reopen commercially and under what management model.

The harvesting system operates above the seabed, avoiding physical contact and thereby reducing long-term ecological damage. A sorting mechanism on the seabed helps release undersized scallops and smaller bycatch, while the vessel's slower speed allows larger bycatch species to escape. Compared to traditional large offshore vessels in places like Canada, their system has shown up to 30% improved harvesting efficiency and a 40% reduction in fuel use. Real-time imagery enables operators to switch off the harvester when in low-density areas, enhancing both sustainability and operational efficiency.

Data collection is central to the project. The onboard video system and sensors are gradually being integrated into an AI algorithm designed to assess scallop size, density, and habitat suitability. This information not only guides fishing activity but is also shared with IMR and the Directorate of Fisheries to inform management decisions.

A unique strength of the project lies in its cross-disciplinary teamwork. Anastassiou described a typical scene on the Arctic Pearl, where engineers, fishers, vessel captains, and researchers work side by side, each contributing their expertise to refine the technology and methods. This direct, onboard collaboration ensures the tools are practical for those actually using them and allows constant feedback from the field.

Beyond scallops, Ava Ocean is already exploring other uses for the harvesting technology, including sea cucumber fisheries and urchin collection for kelp forest restoration. Their broader aim is to develop new, sustainable fisheries in Arctic and Norwegian waters, particularly targeting the 25% of species currently underutilised in Norway.

The five-year research licence obliges the company to monitor benthic ecosystems, bycatch levels, and scallop population dynamics. At the end of the period, the IMR and Directorate of Fisheries will determine whether to open the fishery officially.

Anastassiou concluded by expressing her openness to dialogue and collaboration. She is eager to learn from fisheries experiences in other countries and to share the lessons Ava Ocean is uncovering through this innovative and challenging endeavour.

The **Chair** thanked Anastassiou for the presentation and began with a preliminary remark before posing his questions. He expressed concern about the level of external communication regarding this type of initiative, as it could unintentionally suggest that the current fishing gear—specifically dredges used for razor clams—is harmful to the seabed. Vimard noted that the industry already faces significant criticism from NGOs over the use of towed gear. He acknowledged the value of gaining new information and exploring emerging technologies and welcomed the opportunity to

test them. He then asked Anastassiou several technical questions about the fishery involved in the project: What is the typical size of the scallops caught? Is there a minimum catch size in place? What is the average size at capture? At what size do the scallops reach sexual maturity?

**Anastassiou** recognised the concerns raised and noted that their technology and approach are not directly comparable to the French fishing fleet's methods. She explained that their equipment is designed for large-scale industrial vessels, and is not suitable for smaller boats, which are more typical in the French fleet. She assured that this distinction is clearly communicated whenever the project is discussed. She further explained that the fishery in question targets *Chlamys islandica* (Arctic scallops), which are significantly smaller than those typically fished in European waters. These scallops usually range from 6 to 9 cm in size and reach sexual maturity at around 6 to 6.6 cm. It takes them approximately 6 to 7 years to mature. Anastassiou emphasised that this species grows more slowly and is more vulnerable compared to other scallop species. As a result, the dynamics of this fishery are very different from those seen in European scallop fisheries, where landings are often increasing annually. The slower reproductive and growth rates partly explain why the fishery collapsed and why recovery is more challenging.

The **Chair** asked if all the fishing grounds being exploited in the project are sandy seabeds.**Anastassiou** confirmed that the grounds in the Arctic are indeed very flat and sandy. The uniformity of the seabed is important for the method they use, especially since they rely on underwater cameras to observe the scallop beds. She noted that applying this method on muddy substrates would be more difficult due to reduced visibility and technical limitations

**Dimitri Rogoff** clarified that the species being discussed in the test fishery was not *Pecten maximus*, but rather an Arctic scallop species, referred to locally as "pétoncle arctique." He emphasized that this species behaves differently from *Pecten maximus*, as it lives partially buried beneath the seabed, creating a depression in the sediment, whereas *Pecten maximus* is typically found lying exposed on the seabed.

**Anastassiou** later confirmed that, unlike other scallop species, these Arctic scallops do not bury themselves but instead attach to surfaces using byssal threads, similar to oysters. They form compact clusters and exhibit very limited movement, in part due to heavy barnacle growth—sometimes two to three times the scallop's own weight. Anastassiou explained that the operation is conducted under a commercial research license in Norway, meaning it is a test fishery rather than a commercial operation. Only one vessel currently holds this license. The license allows for a five-year period to assess both the gear and stock sustainability. No decision has yet been made on expanding this license to other vessels. The vessel is equipped with an onboard factory that processes scallops at sea, producing individually quick frozen (IQF) products. This enhances efficiency and product quality by minimizing unnecessary sorting onshore. The gear used in the fishery incorporates a water flow-based selectivity system, which helps lift scallops into a sorting basket based on size and weight. Lighter and larger items like scallops are collected, while smaller or heavier seabed materials are left behind.

**John Lynch** asked a clarification concerning the MRCS. **Anastassiou** answered proving the following information: a) Minimum landing size: 60 mm; b) Maturity size: Approximately 66 mm; c) The gear is designed to sort and release undersized scallops on the seabed, improving both efficiency and selectivity.

**Rogoff** raised questions regarding the historic collapse of scallop stocks in the region, asking whether it could be attributed to previous fishing technologies, overfishing, or environmental factors such as climate change.

**Anastassiou** responded that, according to the Norwegian Institute of Marine Research and the Norwegian Directorate of Fisheries, the collapse occurred in the 1990s due to multiple factors:

- Lack of a fisheries management plan: The fishery operated as an "Olympic fishery," with no quota or sustainability limits.
- High fishing pressure: Up to 25 vessels were active in the area, removing large volumes of stock.
- Destructive gear impacts: Traditional dredging gear severely damaged the seabed habitat, particularly the empty shells that scallops rely on for recruitment.
- Slow growth rate of species: These scallops grow slowly and are vulnerable to overexploitation.
- Environmental stressors: Climate change may have also contributed, although the main causes were deemed to be lack of management and gear impact.

In response to a question from the Chair, Anastassiou explained that domestic consumption in Norway is limited, and most of the processed scallops are exported, primarily to Asia, the United States, and to a lesser extent, France. The onboard factory enables the vessel to meet market standards and maintain product quality during long transport.

The Chair thanked Anastassiou and introduced the following item of the agenda.

## 3. Contributions from Irish and French members following the last FG meeting

**The Chair** introduced the third agenda item, which followed up on discussions held during the previous FG meeting. The focus was on trials involving different dredge ring sizes conducted by John Lynch. The Chair recalled that the Irish vessels had previously tested dredge rings of 92 mm and 97 mm, and had shared the results both in a past presentation and via email. According to the Chair recollection:

- Both the 92 mm and 97 mm ring sizes—larger than the current 85 mm used by Irish vessels—did not result in commercial losses when tested in the Eastern English Channel, where the minimum legal size for scallops is 11 cm.

- These larger rings also had operational advantages, such as a reduction in unwanted bycatch, including stones and other debris.
- However, when used in the Western Channel, where the minimum legal size is 10 cm, there were some commercial losses reported, estimated to be a few percent.

The Chair highlighted a potential regulatory issue:

- In UK waters, there is currently no legal requirement for ring size, whereas in EU waters, there is a possibility that a mandatory minimum ring size could be introduced for the first time.
- This creates a potential problem for Irish vessels operating on both sides of the maritime border, as they might need to carry two different sets of dredge rings if they are not willing to use the larger size in UK waters.

**John Lynch** was then invited to present the details of the Irish proposal to the Focus Group members.

### a. Proposal of the Irish Scallop Vessels – ISEFPO

**John Lynch** reported that there are currently seven vessels operating within the Irish Specific Scallop Fleet. This fleet represents only a small portion of the overall scallop fishing effort in the English Channel, where the majority of activity is carried out by French and UK vessels.

In partnership with BIM, the Irish fleet conducted scallop dredge trials in ICES areas 7e (2023) and 7d (2024), aimed at evaluating different ring sizes for improved selectivity. The trials compared 85mm, 92mm, and 97mm rings, with preliminary results indicating positive outcomes in reducing the capture of scallops below the Minimum Conservation Reference Size (MCRS).

According to Lynch, operators within the Irish scallop sector are open to a jointly negotiated EU–UK agreement on establishing a common minimum ring size for scallop dredges throughout the English Channel (areas 7d and 7e).

The Irish fleet has also proposed that the annual seasonal closure for scallop dredging in these areas commence on 15th June, allowing for a more consistent supply chain to processors and helping avoid market saturation, such as that seen in Q4 of 2024.

Lynch highlights that the current closure only applies to dredge fishing and does not extend to other fishing methods which may result in scallop by-catch. It is also proposed that the area south of 49°42’N in the Baie de Seine remain closed until at least 1st November each year. In addition, Lynch notes that the fleet supports limiting the maximum length of dredge bars to 12 metres, in line with existing restrictions on beam trawls.

The Irish scallop operators also back a comprehensive scientific review of the MCRS for scallops. This review should take into account the full range of regional stock structures and growth rates, which vary across different parts of the Channel.

Looking ahead, the Irish fleet, in collaboration with BIM, is committed to conducting additional trials during summer 2025, focused on identifying methods to reduce the environmental impact of bottom-contacting dredges.

Finally, Lynch emphasizes that the Irish scallop sector supports a collaborative, sustainability-based management approach, and is open to practical, evidence-based measures. To facilitate a unified strategy moving forward, it is proposed that a broad industry consultation be launched, ensuring representation from all scallop fleets operating in the English Channel.

**The Chair** queried if there are differences between Irish and French scallop dredging gear. **Lynch** responded by explaining that a physical inspection of both gear types had been necessary to understand the variations. He noted that French dredges feature a square frame and a heavy tipping bar on wheels at the back, which supports ring tightness and improves performance, especially with larger rings. In contrast, Irish dredges lack this rear bar and instead have a bar on top at the front. Fishermen involved in trials believed this difference could impact retention performance, a point included in the technical report despite not being a formal recommendation.

**The Chair** then raised concerns about potential bycatch from other gears, particularly beam trawls. He clarified that scallop bycatch is prohibited in French bottom trawling and that only a small French fleet targets Queen scallops, and not the Kind scallops. He suggested bycatch may come from British or Belgian fleets and asked whether FG Belgian members if they had data. Lynch replied that while no exact figures were available, anecdotal evidence from Irish beam trawl fishers suggested bycatch is possible in certain grounds.

Summarising his position, **the Chair** supported the idea of adopting a 92 mm ring size, noting that trials showed no commercial loss even with a 10 cm minimum size. He viewed 92 mm as a practical step between 85 mm and 97 mm and believed it could also be viable in British waters. He concluded that larger ring sizes benefit stock sustainability and proposed that 92 mm should be seriously considered.

### b. CRPMEM Normandie proposal on scallop management measures

CRPMEM Normandie, represented by **Dimitri Rogoff**, took a firm stance, stating that the French fleet would accept only 97 mm ring size, with no negotiation. This decision was justified by the need to prevent stock collapse, as seen in areas without regulation. Rogoff emphasised that the French model had maintained healthy stocks and warned that delays would lead to fishery closure. He insisted that gear differences were minimal and unrelated to ring size. A 97 mm ring size and common fishing dates in area 7d were non-negotiable for the 2025 season. He also highlighted the risk of inaction given rising pressure from opportunistic fleets and warned against future quota measures.

The CRPMEM proposal has been circulated to the FG members.

**Discussion**

**Lynch** expressed willingness to negotiate ring size, closures, MCRS, and potentially quotas. He stressed the need for a level playing field and pointed out the difficulty of competing with fleets using significantly different gear. While recognising technical differences in dredges, he maintained an open approach to discussion. However, he warned that imposed measures would challenge the value of continued participation in such forums.

**The Chair** proposed two possible strategies: working with the UK to promote larger mesh size or unilaterally applying it in EU waters. He suggested the latter would effectively force adaptation by UK vessels due to practical constraints.

**Rogoff** later reiterated that EU measures should be decided independently of UK input. He highlighted past frustrations with UK dialogue and argued for unilateral action via the Specialised Committee. He defended the French model and suggested a phased implementation of 97 mm in EU waters, starting in the south of 49°42' in 2025, and extending to full compliance by 2026 or 2027. Rogoff also emphasised that UK vessels benefit from EU rules without applying reciprocal measures, calling for fairness and stronger enforcement.

**Lynch** warned against a rigid unilateral approach, stating that only a phased, strategic, and negotiated process with the UK would produce sustainable results. He called for renewed engagement and stressed that shared goals could best be achieved through mutual agreement.

**Olivier Leprete** fully supported the French position and rejected negotiations with the UK, criticising the lack of reciprocity and calling the current imbalance unjust. He acknowledged the need for future talks with the UK but insisted the time was not now. He noted the sense of injustice felt by EU fishers and urged stronger cooperation among EU states, particularly Ireland and France.

**Alannah Gourlaouen** reinforced the French position, describing Irish trials as valuable and supporting the proposal to escalate the matter to the Executive Committee and European Commission. She viewed the technical groundwork as complete and recommended submitting a formal proposal. Harmonising ring size in the Channel was the main objective, with 97 mm as the first step. She believed further debate would be unproductive and called for political action.

**Lynch** reiterated Ireland's commitment to finding a way forward but made clear that Irish vessels could not yet move to 97 mm. He opposed regional discrepancies in gear standards and highlighted complications posed by UK vessels operating in Irish waters. He emphasised Ireland's willingness to work collaboratively and suggested future engagement, including involving fishermen directly.

A reflection on a past meeting in Port-en-Bessin noted positive discussions but disappointment with limited French participation. Irish delegates had hoped for broader engagement with French industry representatives but felt the opportunity was missed. Despite this, Lynch reaffirmed their commitment to continued dialogue, expressing a strong willingness to meet again. He welcomed

the possibility of hosting a meeting in Ireland or convening at a more accessible location for all parties, such as Brussels or Paris, to facilitate efficient travel and full participation.

**Mo Mathies** clarified that the NWWAC was not directly involved in the recent discussions that took place between Irish and French fishermen. As a result, she stated she could not comment on the substance of those exchanges. However, she expressed strong support for continued and direct engagement between fishermen on the ground, emphasizing the importance of face-to-face dialogue among those most affected by fisheries policies. She reiterated that EU fishermen themselves need to be at the forefront of such discussions, and that repeated, focused meetings among industry representatives would be beneficial.

Mathies also recalled the EU–UK scallop workshop held the previous year in Brussels, noting that a follow-up meeting had been recommended at that time. Regarding the outcome of the current meeting, Mathies advised caution in considering whether a formal submission to the Commission could be made at this stage. She observed that the discussions reflected two national positions (Irish and French) rather than a unified NWWAC consensus, which would limit the AC's ability to present a consolidated recommendation to the Commission.

Mathies stressed that the issue was best addressed through direct dialogue between industry representatives in Ireland and France and encouraged further bilateral engagement.

## 4. AOB - none

## 5. Next steps and closure of the meeting

In conclusion, FG members agreed that a follow-up meeting between Irish and French fishermen and their representatives would be the most effective way to determine a path forward and work towards a common position.

The Chair thanked the participants, interpreters and the Secretariat, and closed the meeting.

– END –

## PARTICIPANTS

| | |
|---|---|
| Alannah Gourlaouen | CRPMEM Normandie |
| Arthur Yon | FROM NORD |
| Coline Giraud | CRPMEM Normandie |
| Corentine Piton | France Pêche Durable et Responsable |
| Dimitri Rogoff | CRPMEM Normandie |
| Dominique Thomas | OP CME Manche Mer du Nord |
| Falke De Sager | Rederscentrale |
| Olivier Leprete | CRPMEM Hauts de France |
| John Lynch | ISEFPO |
| Mathieu Vimard | OPN |
| Pauline Stephan | CNPMEM |
| Ludovic Thieulent | Fisherman |
| Dagny Elise Anastassiou | Ava Ocean |
| Mo Mathies | NWWAC Secretariat |
| Ilaria Bellomo | NWWAC Secretariat |