



CONSEIL CONSULTATIF POUR
LES EAUX OCCIDENTALES
SEPTENTRIONALES

NORTH WESTERN
WATERS
ADVISORY COUNCIL

CONSEJO CONSULTIVO PARA
LAS AGUAS
NOROCCIDENTALES

MINUTES

NWWAC FOCUS GROUP SEABASS

Virtual meeting via Zoom

Friday 6 September 2024

10:00 – 11:30 CET

1. Welcome and introductions

Matilde Vallerani (NWWAC Secretariat) welcomed all participants to the meeting. Apologies were received from Arthur Yon (FROM Nord), replaced by Solene Prevalet (FROM Nord), and from Geert Meun (VisNed).

The agenda was adopted as drafted.

2. Chair election

Members agreed to elect Pauline Stephan as the Chair of this Focus Group.

3. Terms of reference

Members reviewed the draft terms of reference prepared by the Secretariat. It was agreed to aim to produce advice by October. Since ICES is organising a benchmark on 25-29 November 2024, the Focus Group will review the resulting report and, if relevant, update the abovementioned advice or produce a separate recommendation on the outcomes of the benchmark.

Members also agreed that the Focus Group should keep in consideration the work carried out by the UK in terms of management measures for seabass. Vallerani mentioned the upcoming meeting by the UK administration on Fisheries Management Plans on 18 September and the meeting of the Inter-AC Brexit Forum on 19 September, whose outcomes might feed the advice to be prepared by the FG.

David Curtis

4. Discussion on measures for 2025

Members started with a discussion on the ICES advice for 2025.



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David Curtis mentioned a question on recruitment which he plans to ask to CEFAS in a meeting on 19 September. The recruitment graph in the ICES advice shows 2020 and 2021 as being quite good recruitment years. The advice sheet notes that the reason for the 14% increase is the good recruitment in 2020 and 2021. However, his understanding is that the data comes from the Solent survey, conducted by CEFAS in the UK, which does not show 2020 or 2021 as being good recruitment years. Thus, it's unclear where the ICES data come from.

Stephan added that the CNPMM also had a presentation by Ifremer on the French data that go into the assessment, mentioning a survey in Bay of Seine where seabass recruitment is looked at. Data from that survey showed good recruitment.

Curtis mentioned the ICES WKREBUILD2 and its outcomes. In particular, the WK report stated that the ICES advice rule, which operates to reduce FMSY when a stock is below Btrigger, is not working very well in recovering stocks and should be revised. "How do we want fishery managers to respond to this? It would take probably a few years before ICES comes up with a new advice rule and starts using that in its advice".

Olivier Lepretre commented that this year's ICES advice seems to be disconnected from reality on the ground for many stocks, not just seabass, and felt this should be raised in the advice.

Franck Le Barzic agreed that the ICES advice cannot be the only source on which to develop NWWAC advice. It is clearly the best scientific advice available, but it needs to be used with caution.

Dominique Thomas commented that it will be very complicated to improve the stock assessment until recreational fisheries are properly monitored and data on their catches, which constitute a relevant amount of the overall removal, become available. She hopes that, with the benchmark in November, the new reference points will bring to figures that are closer to reality on the ground as experienced by fishers.

a. Proposal for commercial fisheries

Manu Kelberine agreed with the other members that there are many uncertainties in the assessment, for example in relation to commercial discards, which were underestimated in the past. "We should be reasonable and cautious, especially in relation to the 14% increase in the advice for 2025". He added that discards continue to be a huge problem, as already highlighted in previous advice, because they are a loss for both fishers and the stock biomass. Instead of this fish being wasted, effort should be made to transform discards into commercial landings without changing the fishing mortality.

Curtis asked for evidence to support this proposal and ensure fishing pressure doesn't increase.



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Stephan explained that a data analysis was carried out with data on seabass landings and discards. Results gave information on discards during the closing period and if landings were to be allowed in February and March keeping the 5% catch limit, this would only transform discards into landings without incentivising targeted fishing.

Le Barzic agreed that an increase in fishing mortality is not acceptable. In his view, it would be wise to wait for the benchmark before considering the adoption of other measures about targeted fishing. “Transforming discards into landings has been something we have pushed for in the last few years and as Pauline said, we have documents and data about discards for professional fishing especially for the winter period”. The closure in February and March is based on common sense, but of course it's going to produce more discards, especially for trawlers. Fish will be discarded even though they have the commercial size. The 5% percentage provides a safeguard as it is underestimated in comparison to the size of commercial catches that could be landed throughout the year. “Even if we have that 5%, we could have discards turned into landings. We would ask to put an end to the closing period in February and March, even though we need to keep that percentage to avoid targeted fishing”.

Vallerani asked French members to share this information on discards with the group.

Olivier commented the overall approach implemented through the obligation to land all catches. “We know that we have unavoidable catches. It's impossible to avoid them. Even with these months of closure, there are other elements that come into play”. The only solution would be to authorise landings and the selling of fish because there would then be a turnover and the fishing activity could be limited on the basis of the turnover generated because of the discards. This would be a smart solution because by throwing discards at sea vessels would continue removing fish from the stock. However, if they had the authorization to land the fish they would no longer go at sea. “I believe that fishers would be favourable to this system for seabass but also for other stocks.” In his opinion, the general landing obligation rule should be reviewed and modernised.

John Lynch pointed out that Irish vessels are forbidden to land any seabass according to national legislation, causing great difficulties for fishers. He felt it was important to point out that 100% of the commercial seabass catches in Ireland are discarded because of a national prohibition on commercial landing of seabass. Every seabass caught as bycatch on an Irish fishing vessel is dumped at sea. “This is an absolute example of waste of good fishery product”. While he's aware that the AC cannot provide advice on national legislation, in his opinion it is relevant to point that this is still ongoing as it is an extremely wasteful practice.

Going back to Le Barzic's comment on turning discards into landings, Kelberine felt that there are other safeguards than the mere percentage: “We do not ask to increase the threshold compared to last year, using the 14% increase in the advice. We would use last year's catch advice as reference”.



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Le Barzic agreed with Lynch on the need to flag the issue in Irish fisheries, as the aim of the advice is to turn discards of commercial European vessels into landings that could be marketed and turned into resources produced.

Curtis asked if the proposal to open the fishery in February and March associated with a 5% limit was including all métiers.

Stephan replied that indeed that is the case.

Curtis then pointed out that there is an issue in the UK as it seems that some fixed netters are targeting seabass as they migrate to and from spawning areas starting in November. “We have some vessels just repeatedly landing 100% or near to 100% of their catch as a seabass. The UK has consistently blocked the idea of having a percentage of catch for fixed netters and we believe that’s because the UK has never agreed that fixed nets shouldn’t be allowed to target seabass”. He then asked to French members what levels of catch they would expect seeing if there were to be a targeted fishery again.

Kelberine repeated that there is no intention to lift the ban in February and March to allow targeted fishing in those months. This would be prevented by the 5% catch limit per haul. Catches in February and March are unavoidable.

Referring to Curtis’ comment, Thomas felt it could be considered to ask DG MARE that the issue of seabass management provisions in the UK is raised in the Specialised Committee on Fisheries. The importance of this subject is especially related to the difficulties created by having different management measures between EU and UK. This item should be addressed as a priority.

Vallerani agreed with the proposal by Thomas and added that the Secretariat will add this topic to the agenda for the upcoming Inter-AC Brexit Forum on 19 September.

Curtis highlighted that in its domestic legislation for fixed netters, the UK has deleted the word “unavoidable”. Therefore, although they are not allowed to target it, they are under no obligation to avoid seabass. “This is an unhelpful distinction between the UK and the EU”. Furthermore, in 2021 the UK agreed with the EU to introduce catch reporting for shor-netters in Wales, but nothing seems to be moving forward and there is also no discussion ongoing in the SCF.

Vallerani replied that the issue will be raised again with DG MARE at the Inter-AC Brexit Forum.

ACTION: The Secretariat will ask for updates regarding discussions on seabass in the Specialised Committee on Fisheries, especially in relation to harmonised measures between EU and the UK and regarding UK catch reporting for commercial shore-based netting.

Kelberine added that representatives of the industry will send the Focus Group a proposal for commercial fisheries to be included in the advice.



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ACTION: French industry representatives to share data on discards and proposal for commercial fisheries with the Focus Group.

b. Proposal for recreational fisheries

Curtis explained that there is no consolidated proposal from recreational fisheries representatives, however the idea would be to hold limits at previous levels. He will come back to the Focus Group with a proposal.

Llibori Martinez Latorre added that the EU is currently developing a tool for compulsory reporting of recreational catches that should be operational in 2026. Hopefully this will bring more knowledge and more data in the future.

ACTION: AC members representing the recreational sector will provide their proposal for recreational measures for seabass to the Focus Group.

ACTION: The Secretariat will prepare a draft advice based and share it with members for comments.

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

1	French industry representatives to share data on discards and proposal for commercial fisheries with the Focus Group.
2	The Secretariat will ask for updates regarding discussions on seabass in the Specialised Committee on Fisheries, especially in relation to harmonised measures between EU and the UK and regarding UK catch reporting for commercial shore-based netting.
3	AC members representing the recreational sector will provide their proposal for recreational measures for seabass to the Focus Group.
4	The Secretariat will prepare a draft advice based and share it with members for comments.

6. Participants list

Name	Organisation
David Curtis	EAA
Manu Kelberine	CRPMEM de Bretagne
Franck Le Bazic	Cobrenord
Olivier Lepretre	CRPMEM Hauts de France
John Lynch	ISEFPO
Llibori Martinez Latorre	IFSUA
Solene Prevalet	FROM Nord



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Pauline Stephan	CNPMEM
Dominique Thomas	OPCMEMMN
Matilde Vallerani	NWWAC Secretariat