

DRAFT NWWAC MINUTES

FOCUS GROUP SEABASS

Online on Zoom, 5 September 2025 (11:00 – 13:00 CET)

1. Welcome and introductions

The FG Chair, Pauline Stephane, welcomed all participant to the meeting. Apologies have been received by John Lynch. The agenda was adopted.

- **Action points from the last meetings (2 July 2025, Vigo)**

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| 1. Secretariat to initiate restart of the FG seabass to develop advice on the ICES advice for 2026. |
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Agenda Item 2

2. Discussion of proposed ICES advice for 2026 and review of available information

The Chair invited members to share their views and highlight the key points to be considered in drafting the forthcoming NWWAC advice on seabass.

It was firstly repeated how the 2026 stock assessment included significant modifications compared to previous years, incorporating more parameters, particularly the summer migration of part of the southern population to the northern stock area. The Chair noted that some written questions from the July Working Group 3 in Vigo were addressed lately by Joanne Morgan (ICES), providing clarifications on the assessment methodology. Several scenarios were presented regarding potential catch increases, depending on whether only professional captures were considered, whether professional captures accounted for migration, and whether recreational fishing was included.

Concerns were raised regarding recreational fishing. Manu Kelberine noted that the assessment might not fully account for existing bag limits, such as the two-fish per day limit, and long-term management measures. Franck le Barzic added that the methodology for estimating recreational fishing is unclear, as the data may derive from national surveys without proper adjustment for regulatory limits, potentially leading to an overestimation of recreational catch. Members acknowledged that substantial uncertainty exists in these data, which makes it difficult to fully assess total removals. Despite these uncertainties, the general trend in the stock appears positive. Members agreed that a piece of advice should be provided to support upcoming EU consultations, even though some data remain uncertain.

The Chair and Kelberine indicated that IFREMER scientists are developing scenarios for gradual, multi-year increases in catches to ensure sustainable stock exploitation. These scenarios aim to

provide a multi-year perspective on stock recovery and guidance on maximum sustainable yield. Results will be delivered by IFREMER by the end of September.

Discussion then turned to management measures. Considering the positive evolution of the biological indicators, all members present in the meeting agreed to advise the Commission on transitioning from the current total fishing moratorium, which allows limited exemptions, to a strictly regulated fishing regime. Proposed measures include permitting limited use of currently unauthorised gear for bycatch only, transforming discards into landings to reduce waste, and ensuring long-term stock sustainability. Regarding recreational fishing, it was suggested to maintain existing bag limits and not introduce major changes, with ongoing monitoring and enforcement implied.

Participants also discussed the interaction between northern and southern stocks due to seasonal migration. It was agreed that measures applied in the northern area will impact the southern stock, though there was some disagreement regarding the reciprocal effect. Kelberine suggested that northern measures mainly affect the south, while Olivier Lepretre argued that the impacts are reciprocal. The group acknowledged that these dynamics must be considered in developing management advice.

The discussion emphasised the importance of transforming discards into landings without substantially increasing fishing mortality. Participants noted the lack of detailed data on recreational fishing and the potential for overestimation of total catches. Despite these uncertainties, it was agreed that providing provisional advice is essential due to the timing of EU consultations.

Geert Meun raised a question regarding Chair's earlier statement on the moratorium. He sought clarification on whether the proposal was about lifting the 10% maximum or about removing the February–March ban on landing sea bass. For the Dutch fleet, he explained, the main issue is the prohibition on landings during those two months. Although their vessels do not target sea bass, bycatches do occur, and currently these must be discarded entirely. He stressed the importance of advising the Commission and member states to lift this specific restriction.

Le Barzic supported the Dutch request, underlining that lifting the February–March moratorium had been a longstanding demand. He considered it common sense and framed it as a paradigm shift in bass management, moving from a situation of total prohibition with derogations to a general authorisation accompanied by management measures. He stressed that if such a shift is made, measures must cover all fleets in the area, not only those currently allowed to land seabass. He suggested putting in place minimal accessory limitations for those fleets, transforming bycatch into properly recorded landings. Regarding the February–March period, he noted that reopening could be considered, possibly under conditions such as limiting it to certain gears or trips, with safeguards to prevent abuse.

He pointed out that ICES advice refers to removals, not just landings, and therefore management should be based on total catches, including discards and recreational fisheries. If only professional landings were considered, the increase would be minimal, about 37%, which does

not reflect reality. He argued for using true removals (i.e. considering migration from the Southern stocks caught in the Northern zone), as the reference point, otherwise the framework would remain disconnected from actual catches.

The Chair confirmed again with those present to agree on requesting the end of the moratorium in the upcoming advice. Meun expressed agreement with Le Barzic's explanation, and there was no objection from others.

The discussion then turned to the "Seabass Tool". Le Barzic recalled that in earlier instances it had not been operational and had been released too late to be useful. He warned against relying on it unless it became fully functional and available in time to be properly assessed. The Chair noted that their understanding was that the tool would not necessarily be operational this year. Le Barzic and others agreed that if it is to be used, stakeholders must have the chance to test and critique it in advance, rather than being confronted with it at the last minute. The conversation upon this item concluded with agreement that while the Seabass Tool might have potential, it should not form the basis for management decisions until it is proven reliable. The group reaffirmed its support for requesting the lifting of the February–March moratorium, alongside appropriate safeguards and a shift towards a management framework based on removals rather than only on landings.

Etienne Dachicourt and Dominique Thomas joined the conversation and clarified that no proposal had been made for increasing trawl tonnages, and no specific figures had been put forward. The sector had instead asked the administration to provide gradual catch scenarios over several years before taking a position on concrete numbers. While there was agreement on principles, precise measures would have to wait for these technical inputs. Arthur Yon joined the discussion and confirmed his support. Thomas stressed once again the need to rely on the administration for precise proposals, as this would be essential for building a solid position.

Le Barzic then raised the issue of the terms of reference and the calendar for consultations. He noted that deadlines had been shifting but underlined the importance of delivering input before the upcoming EU-UK consultations, recalling that the annual cycle was already under way, with a plenary scheduled for September. Kelberine underlined that it was necessary to await the Commission's proposal (non-paper) before being able to position themselves more clearly, and expected that simulations would be available by the end of September at the latest, after which a further focus group could be held.

Lepretre then raised the idea of increasing the minimum landing size of seabass in the Southern waters as a way to demonstrate responsibility towards the resource and strengthen their credibility. He saw this as a potential complementary measure. Kelberine opposed raising the size, stressing that it would seriously affect fishers in the Bay of Biscay and that for them it was a "red line". He insisted this was not the place to decide on such a measure, which was outside the competence of the NWWAC Focus Group. The Chair agreed that it did not fall within the remit of the group, though Le Barzic added that within producer organisations, some discussions had taken place on whether a limited decrease in the North could be envisaged, to match the current

Southern size for the fish migrating from there. However, he underlined that these were only preliminary exchanges, not a proposal.

Meun reacted by noting that the discussion on minimum landing size was new for the Dutch sector, and he would need time to consult his fishers. For now, there were no arguments in the Netherlands to support such a change. Le Barzic clarified once more that this was not a firm position but only an idea raised in the context of the new ICES advice.

3. AOB – None

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

The focus group agreed to provide NWWAC advice to support upcoming EU-UK consultations and the Negotiations on EU Fishing Opportunities.

Members acknowledged existing uncertainties, particularly regarding recreational fishing. Members supported moving from the current moratorium framework to a regulated fishing regime, with the following principles:

- Requesting the lifting of the February–March moratorium, with safeguards to prevent misuse.
- Allowing the transformation of discards into landings, ensuring proper recording without increasing fishing mortality.
- Maintaining existing recreational bag limits, with continued monitoring and enforcement.
- Basing management on total removals (landings, discards, and recreational catches), rather than landings alone.
- Seabass Tool might have potential, but it should only be used if released in time for thorough testing and validation

There was consensus that IFREMER's forthcoming multi-year catch scenarios will be essential for shaping sustainable exploitation strategies. At the same time, it will support the recommendation on the proposal to increase on landing limits.

Action points

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| 1. Secretariat and Chair working on a draft advice for comments within the agreed timeframe. |
| 2. Monitoring the Commission's process and timing of its proposal (non-paper). |
| 3. Integrating IFREMER's scenarios once available. |
| 4. Continuing internal consultations to finalise advice ahead of the EU negotiations. Another FG meeting could be set up if necessary. |

The Chair thanked members, the Secretariat and interpreters before closing the meeting.



Participants

Name	Organisation
FG Members	
Etienne Dachicourt	OP CME MMN
Manu Kelberine	CRPMEM de Bretagne
Franck Le Barzic	Cobrenord
Olivier Lepretre	CRPMEM HDF
Geert Meun	VisNed
Pauline Stephan	CNPMEM
Dominique Thomas	OP CME MMN
Arthur Yon	FROM Nord
Observers	
Patricia Saiz Valle	Subdirección General de Caladero Nacional y Aguas de la Unión Europea – Dirección General de Pesca Sostenible
Secretariat	
Ilaria Bellomo	
Mo Mathies	