

MEETING REPORT

Joint PelAC-NWWAC Focus Group Spatial Dimension

Date: 31 January 2024

Time: 10:00 – 13:00 hrs CET

Type of meeting: Online

1. Opening of the meeting by the Chair

The Chair, Gonçalo Carvalho, opened the meeting and welcomed the participants to the first meeting of the joint NWWAC-PelAC Focus Group on Spatial Dimension. Both Advisory Councils agreed to the setup of this joint Focus Group last year, to address a series of issues in the spatial dimension that are expected to have particular implications on fisheries in the relevant areas. Through this Focus Group, stakeholders in both Advisory Councils wish to take stock of different processes and activities ongoing in the context of marine spatial planning, and define key areas to develop advice on to the Commission and Member States.

The Chair presented the meeting's agenda which included presentations on the Commission's Blue Forum workshop, the EU Wind Power Action Plan, the work of the ICES Working Group on Offshore Wind Development and Fisheries (WGOWDF) and the Greater North Sea Basin Initiative (GNSBI). These presentations would be followed by internal discussions on further scoping the work of the Focus Group moving forward and setting clear objectives and priorities.

The agenda was adopted without amends.

2. Update on the Commission's European Blue Forum activities

The Chair invited Pauline Caumont from the Commission for a presentation on the European Blue Forum. Pauline Caumont took the floor. Caumont is tasked with the implementation of the Blue Forum and Ocean Energy at DG MARE. The Blue Forum was launched in 2023 and she hoped her presentation would give a good overview of the current status and what the Commission wants for the future.

The creation of the Blue Forum stems from the Commission Communication on a new approach for a Sustainable blue economy in the EU, released in 2021, and aims to create and coordinate a dialogue across the 'blue' sectors in the maritime environment (shipping, ORE, fisheries, aquaculture, tourism etc) and scientists, with the objective to develop synergies within their activities and reconcile competing uses of the sea.

The Marine Spatial Planning Directive was adopted in 2014 and Member States have to draw plans for the different maritime activities. Through the Blue Forum, the Commission wants to create a pan-European stakeholder consultation process where stakeholders discuss amongst each other how the future of our seas should look like, and propose plans for the future. The Commission is looking into all sectors and different strands of activities, and wants the process to be inclusive and participatory.

The European Blue Forum is designed to gather input from all the stakeholders and to put it all together. Caumont underlined the Blue Forum is a long-term process and although it may seem intangible for some, it is important to bear in mind that the process has only just started. The Commission will look at change happening over the medium and long-term, and the Blue Forum gives the opportunity to jointly define the future EU Blue policies. She added that the Blue Forum is not a formal decision making platform, meaning it will not produce official recommendations, but it is producing position papers. When stakeholders do not agree, this is also noted to enquire on this further at a later stage.

The Commission wants to build a knowledge community about the sea, building bridges between sectors and breaking the silo-approach that has been ongoing for a long time. In this forum the objective is for sectors to engage together, in a light and informal governance structure, to seek synergies and to reach consensus on managing all the activities at sea. The sustainable blue economy strives to address issues such as how the multiplication of ORE can occur without impacting other activities.

The first step is about communication. Caumont invited stakeholders to visit the dedicated Commission webpage for the Blue Forum on the European MSP Platform, and become part of the community. The Commission considers it important to gather information ‘from the ground’ and Advisory Councils would be very useful vehicles to disseminate the Blue Forum discussions.

The Blue Forum was launched in May 2023 in parallel with the European Maritime Day (EMD) in Brest. The launch attracted a full room of interested stakeholders, resulting in fruitful discussions. Following the launch, a series of ‘deep-dive’ workshops were held in September and October 2023. One of the workshops was dedicated to decarbonisation, and how the blue economy could support this transition. These workshops served to gather concrete input, used to develop a position paper which is expected to be released early February 2024. An action was taken for the Secretariat to circulate the paper once published (**action 1**). The position paper will highlight shared observations as well as divergent views. There is also room for science to plug in and help define the way forward.

As a final take-away, Caumont noted the discussions at the launch in May 2023 already helped to highlight what is important and take stock of the interest. The Blue Forum managed to gather over 600 members in less than a year. The ‘break the silo-approach’ proved very popular among stakeholders. The main messages from the first Forum discussions are currently being integrated in the position paper, which will feed the continued process for preparation of future Commission blue policies. Caumont underlined the discussion has a real impact as it will serve as a basis for future policy development and briefings to future Commissioners.

In terms of next steps, the Commission plans to release two position papers following the 2023 workshops, and will continue to develop its work programme for May 2024 – May 2025. In March 2024, there will be a joint session with SEARICA intergroup to present the position papers and the work programme in the European Parliament. The second year of activities will be launched in May 2024 during the next EMD.

The Chair thanked Pauline Caumont for the clear presentation. He proposed the Focus Group to wait for the release of the position paper, to analyse it and develop feedback or an advice from both ACs. An action was taken to discuss the paper during the planned joint PelAC/NWWAC Horizontal Focus Group in March in Dublin (**action 2**).

Alexandra Philippe asked what the difference was between a position paper or a recommendation.

Pauline replied that the Blue Forum does not have a formal status, but it produces position papers to capture the views from stakeholders in the discussions held and highlight points of disagreement. The

key difference is that the paper gives a reflection on what stakeholders think, it is not a proposition from the Commission on what needs to be done.

Mo Mathies said the NWWAC had participated in the two workshops mentioned, and she was pleased to hear there was an opportunity to provide further input during upcoming EMD. She noted the Blue Forum was difficult to find online and it was not clear how stakeholders could submit input. She suggested to look at how to better apply key words to enhance its visibility on internet search engines.

Pauline Caumont recognized the issue, the Blue Forum webpage is now part of the MSP platform, making it difficult to find online. She noted it was difficult to create a new website with an EU extension, but the Commission will look into possible improvements in this regard.

The Chair thanked Caumont for her contribution. The Focus Group would return to this point to decide on next steps.

3. ORE developments

- The European Wind Power Package

The Chair invited Céline Frank from the European Commission to present the recently released EU Wind Power Package.

Frank explained that offshore renewable energy currently contributes only marginally to the EU Energy mix, representing 15.8 % of the electricity demand. The sector has a high growth potential, expected to expand significantly by 2030 and even more by 2050. The EU is currently leading this development.

Different technologies for ORE are in play such as wind turbines at sea, either fixed or floating. Other technologies are also being developed, such as tidal energy. Wave energy also has good potential to connect to wind farm areas and are very complementary in terms of production peaks. The first arrays of technologies are being connected to the grid.

In 2020, the Commission released the renewable energy strategy with its policy objectives, and since then there has been a big push by Member States to increase. In October 2023, the Commission published the EU Wind Power Action plan, setting out ambitions and actions both for land and offshore renewable energy, with a Communication on “Delivering on the EU offshore renewable energy ambitions”¹. Offshore wind is now better reflected in the new national energy and climate plans submitted by Member States. Examples of more regional cooperation include the Greater North Sea Basin Initiative, which is looking into different aspects of these developments, such as governance and the interactions of ORE with other sectors. This initiative is widely supported by ministers of the concerned Member States (BE, DE, DK, IE, FR, NL) .

When looking into implementation, there is already a lot of space allocated to ORE in most Member States. The next step is to make this process more regional and better coordinated, and see how this will be connected to land as well. In the communication on “Delivering on the EU offshore renewable energy ambitions”, there is an emphasis on co-existence with multiple users of the sea. The seas are getting locally crowded and different activities are competing for the space. There are cumulative impacts to consider on the environment, from a growing number of activities at sea, hence the need to implement better the Marine Strategy Framework Directive. There are examples of pilot projects, such as one carried out in the Netherlands, that look into how certain types of fishing activities can

¹ COM(2023) 668

take place in ORE areas. Frank highlighted the example of the Belgium maritime spatial plan, which has examples of ORE in combination with nature protection. The Commission has published a guidance in 2020 on how to develop ORE in combination with nature conservation areas².

The first report of the MSP Directive, published in 2022, highlighted the increasing need to leverage MSP as a tool for achieving the European Green Deal objectives of decarbonisation and biodiversity protection, as well as digitalisation (notably by uploading their plans to EMODnet). The European Green Deal sets great ambitions, where the Biodiversity Strategy together with our international commitments under the BBNJ convention, asks for 30% of our seas to be protected by 2030. 20% of our seas will also need to be restored by 2030. These areas will nevertheless not be incompatible with sustainable activities. The biggest multi-use at sea will be with nature protection/restoration.

The Commission Blue Forum presented earlier, adds an additional layer on discussing how to share the maritime space. On regional level, the Greater North Sea Basin Initiative also generates this discussion and involves stakeholders.

A number of studies have been published in the last two years, looking into the impacts of ORE expansion on fish, such as the report from the European Environment Agency or the EMFAF study, with a focus on the development of mitigation measures. The PECH Committee of the European Parliament has also looked into these impacts. It is clear from these studies that more data and monitoring of operational wind farms is needed. The main findings from these studies indicate that the negative impacts from these wind farms are frequently studied and linked to birds and marine mammals. The main impacts identified occur during the construction phase of offshore wind parks, following which fish and marine mammals tend to return to the area. Mitigation measures are increasingly implemented, notably aimed at reducing underwater noise impacts (e.g. bubble curtains).

In terms of next steps, the Commission will work on the implementation of the EU Wind Power package and the Green Deal policies. Last year, the EU court of auditors published a report on the use of EU funds and EU support for ORE-related policies. Though most recommendations have been addressed, some gaps still remain. The Commission will strengthen research in these areas, notably through non-recurrent ICES advice on the knowledge gaps identified. The Commission will also ensure increased coordination between Horizon 2020 and Mission to Restore our Oceans and Waters by 2030 and the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership. The next report on the MSP Directive implementation is expected in 2026, where the Commission expects to have a more complete overview of the plans than in the first 2021 report.

The Chair thanked Céline Frank for the presentation and invited the next speaker in the interest of time. There would be time for questions after the presentation.

- ICES working group Offshore Wind Development and Fisheries (WGOWDF)

The Chair welcomed Andrew Gill, co-Chair of the ICES working group on Offshore Wind Development and Fisheries (WGOWDF).

Andrew Gill took the floor and said he would first explain the aim of the working group in the context of ICES before highlighting the specific strands of work. First, he noted this was not the only working group within ICES dealing with the expansion of offshore wind development.

² European Commission, Directorate-General for Environment, *Guidance document on wind energy developments and EU nature legislation*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2020, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2779/457035>

WGOWDF is an ICES expert group, working under the ICES Council mandate, providing input to the science and advisory committees. The group is currently co-chaired by representatives of the German federal maritime and hydrographic agency (BSH), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA, USA), Howell Marine Consulting (UK) and Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Sciences (Cefas, UK). The WG has around 55 members from 11 countries and interest is growing.

WGOWDF focusses on interactions of fisheries in the widest sense with ORE development, looking into co-existence of wind energy and fisheries (both the species fished for and the fishers). Co-existence of both activities is critical for the future of energy, food production and cultural traditions. Offshore wind activities both in Europe and the USA have been challenged to effectively address fisheries considerations including evaluating impacts of ORE on fishery operations and fishing communities, and securing data collection, of both fishery dependent and independent surveys as well as habitat alterations. A series of TORs have been developed for the working group to address these key issues, setting out deliverables in terms of publications, reports, reviews etc.

WGOWDF has five TORs:

- Review and report on fishing industry interactions with offshore wind developments, define and determine effects on fishing operations and communities.
- Develop and report on methodologies to assess and mitigate impacts of offshore wind energy on fishery data collections, including fisheries independent surveys and fisheries dependent data.
- Assess the effects of habitat alteration by offshore wind developments on fisheries resources.
- Review gaps and opportunities for cross-cutting links and communication between ICES groups in relation to renewable energy and marine ecosystems and sustainability.
- Evaluate and address the impact of strategic plan-level development of OWFs within a region on fishery operations and communities.

Possible consequences of ORE development to the fishery include displacement of species from their spawning/nursery areas, reduced reproduction and survival, trophic level changes, consequences to the stocks and displacement from survey areas. Data are needed to fully understand these consequences. The working group looks into alternative methods to collect data, for example using other autonomous approaches, determination of the priority data needs, gaps and interactions of ORE development with fishery surveys.

The wider ICES communities have activities closely linked to this working group, which is important considering the number of advice requests. Other ICES groups look into ORE activities, such as the working group on marine benthic and renewable energy developments (WGMBRED) and the working group on offshore renewable energy (WGORE). ICES holds an annual science conference (ASC), and the topic of ORE and interactions with ecosystems is very high on the agenda. A theme session was organised in the 2023 ASC addressing how ORE installations affect both the marine ecosystem and society across large geographical areas. This year, a particular session will be organised that will focus on the outcomes of co-existence between ORE and marine and coastal ecosystems.

ICES took the initiative to organise a workshop on offshore and marine renewable energy (WKOMRE) held in March 2023. The workshop was an ICES-focussed in-person meeting, where ICES sought to understand where it was at, how it can address the knowledge gaps and how best to apply ICES science to these gaps. The workshop TORs aimed to develop a roadmap for ICES to provide leadership in this domain in the context of ecosystem-level changes. The workshop report outlined the need to better coordinate data, science and advice on offshore renewable energy development in an ecosystem-based management context. It focussed on overarching themes in the marine ecosystem structure

and functioning (effects on marine resources, data collection and analysis, ICES advice and communication). It sets out challenges and opportunities for ICES and potential outcomes and proposed a strategic approach to take forward the ORE roadmap. The roadmap has recently been presented and is now available.

Gill mentioned that a new workshop (WKWIND) was planned in the coming year set to draw from the available expertise and to look specifically at ecological, social and ecosystem trade-offs. The workshop reflects a special request from the EU, and ICES will address the context of trade-offs.

The Chair thanked Andrew Gill for the presentation, and invited Mo Mathies for an update on the ACs application to the Irish ORE subgroup, the consultation body for fisheries stakeholders in the Irish ORE designation process.

- Update ORE subgroup

Mo Mathies explained that under the Irish Maritime Area Planning Act, a consultation process is ongoing for the designation and licensing of marine areas for ORE development in the Irish EEZ. The ORE Seafood Subgroup is a consultation body comprised of seafood stakeholders to provide input into the designation process. This group has been in existence for two years and both the NWWAC and the PelAC have actively pursued membership to ensure consultation of international fisheries stakeholders that are users of the shared space on this area planning process. Unfortunately the request by the ACs has been declined due to opposition from the ORE fraction. While some members of the ACs are already sitting in this group, it is not up to them to report back on these discussions to the ACs. Mathies felt it could be worthwhile to ask the group for the opportunity to give a presentation at one of their next meetings on the work and function of the ACs, as well as the rationale for seeking membership of the subgroup. This might be a way to resolve the blockade that is now in place, as it is important that the international stakeholder community is informed of this process as it could impact their activities. She added that for AC members this platform would be a much more efficient vehicle to keep members informed of developers' plans. She asked for a mandate from the Focus Group to approach the ORE Subgroup with this proposal. If agreed, she would hold this presentation and report the discussions back to the ACs.

The Chair welcomed the suggestion and indicated the Focus Group would come back to this request later during the meeting when listing the action points for the FG. He didn't expect issues in terms of signing off this proposal.

He opened the floor to questions on the presentations.

The Chair asked Andrew Gill whether the WGOWDF also planned to look into oceanographic impacts of ORE on fisheries, such as sedimentation, referring to the listed possible impacts on populations and ecosystems. Gill replied that the impacts in terms of ecosystem changes as a result of the activities was the critical point of focus. The group is also identifying types of impacts from abiotic factors, on early life stages of fish to adults. Hydrographic changes need to be included as well, and this will be recommended internally to ICES. There is also a need to identify larger scale changes driving the dynamics of the system. Reviewing the available literature on this will help answer questions or identify knowledge gaps, that will help define research areas for the future.

Alexandra Philippe raised a question to the Commission, noting that the Nature Restoration Law contains an exemption for Member States to continue the development of ORE when carrying out nature restoration plans, since it concerns an overrating public interest. Even though this is up the Member States to decide, she asked what the views of the Commission were on this and to what extent this was being looked at.

Céline Frank replied that there will be priority areas for renewables, and Member States were asked to revise them in their maritime plans, and identify areas at sea for offshore wind. The Commission might provide guidance for nature protection and ORE, with a view to restoring areas already built. She noted the Commission has not yet received restoration plans from Member States, but the Commission is conscious of the exemption and will probably address this in their recommendations.

The Chair asked if the planned ICES workshop WKWIND in 2024 was open to observers.

Andrew Gill replied that ICES workshops are usually open to observers. In the context of the roadmap there is discussion on the setup and stakeholder engagement to ensure the wider stakeholder interest can be drawn in. Depending on the number of registrations and available spaces there may be a limit to the number of stakeholder participants, and since it will be a 3-4 day workshop it may be difficult to ensure full participation. It may be an idea to hold a separate event/session for stakeholders where the main outcomes and discussion points are summarised.

The Chair noted the interest of the AC members in the work of the ICES working group and asked for the possibility to invite Gill or other co-chairs to provide regular presentations at this Focus Group. He noted it was especially interesting how the working group brings in different expertise groups from ICES into its work.

Andrew Gill agreed and was willing to provide updates at regular intervals moving forward (**action 3**).

4. Marine Spatial Planning Processes – Greater North Sea Basin Initiative

The Chair invited Quinten Mensing from the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water management in the Netherlands to present the Greater North Sea Basin Initiative (GNSBI). Mensing took the floor and said he would walk the Focus Group through the initiative, where it stands and what the plans were moving forward. Jérôme Chladek (German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture), co-chair of the GNSBI Work Track Long-Term perspective fisheries (together with Isabelle Perret, Direction Générale Des Affaires Maritimes, De La Pêche Et De L'Aquaculture, Secrétariat d'état chargé de la mer, France) would then zoom into the content of the fisheries work package.

Quinten explained that nine countries were involved in the GNSBI, a cooperation body that deals with spatial and ecological challenges faced by energy transition. The aim is to try and address these challenges by working more internationally and through a more integral approach. The GNSBI explored a shared problem analysis, to determine what is needed in terms of improving cooperation. The analysis resulted in the setup of six work tracks, that state what each track does, with what aims and outlines the allocation of the work. The work tracks cover the following areas: governance, nature restoration and protection, multi-use, long-term perspective for fisheries, cumulative impacts and knowledge sharing. Ministers of the nine countries signed off on the need for an integrated and international cooperation in the spatial use of the Greater North Sea area, and the GNSBI will try to build a platform for communication, stakeholder involvement and shared work.

Priorities for 2024 include developing the content for the different work tracks, and securing commitment from the Nature and Fisheries Ministers as well. There will be two physical or online calls at ministerial level before the summer, and at the end of the year the GNSBI hopes to have a clear vision in place for its future development at an Integral Ministerial Meeting in November in Belgium. Finally, the GNSBI will focus on stakeholder participation and increased political commitment. The GNSBI hopes to start a process this year to secure long-term stakeholder engagement and create more connections with other groups, to avoid duplication of work. This will be facilitated by High-Level

events. The GNBSI wants to make the best and most informed decisions, and for this expertise and knowledge from stakeholders is needed, also to increase the chance for a smooth implementation.

The initiative will be pitched at the WindEurope event Bilbao and during the European Maritime Days, to expand the network to include key stakeholders from communities of all sectors who can be involved in the work of the work tracks.

Jérôme Chladek took the floor to present the Fisheries work track current project– a multi-stressor spatial analysis of European fisheries in the North Sea.

The Fisheries work track is one of the six work tracks from the GNSBI and aims to establish long-term perspectives. It stems from the consensus that spatial pressures on fisheries is continuously increasing. More activities are expanding the use of the ocean and the GNSBI wants to describe how and where these maritime uses are competing with fisheries, where are fisheries occurring and how much are/will they be affected by other uses.

The goal for the first year of this work track involves identifying overlap areas to allow for a more targeted approach in addressing these challenges. A scientific analysis is currently being conducted at the Thünen institute in Germany to establish a knowledge base and link areas to indicators such as catch volumes, values, jobs connected to activities, or landing areas connected to volumes or values. From this basis, a forecast of other activities can be developed.

To analyse the data, the Thünen institute has created a standardised R-code which is restricted to national institutes of participating countries, which can all process their own data and map the usage of the data. Each national institute analyses and aggregate their vessel's data and sends back to Thünen to be compiled in order to create maps with national fleets or segments. There is no transmission of raw data, only aggregated data. GDPR is taken very seriously. An example of a map was shown with a perimeter of analyses, the exact perimeter will depend on the data from participating countries.

The Chair thanked Jérôme Chladek and Quinten Mensing for their interesting presentations and opened the floor for questions.

Ed Farrel thanked the PelAC for the interesting line of presentations and was particularly pleased with the last one. He asked Jérôme Chladek what resolutions the analysis were applying. Jérôme Chladek replied that c-square resolution was used, as established in ICES. Ed Farrell asked if he considered the resolution fine enough given the patterns of certain fishing areas.

Torsten Schulze (online participant from the Thünen institute) replied that in his view the resolution should be fine enough for the purpose of this analysis. In addition, there was also VMS data available with a 2-hour time resolution. He did not think there was added value to use a finer resolution with a VMS frequency as a backup solution. Jérôme Chladek added that this was the first time such an analysis was being done at such a large scale. The analysis tries to get an entire overview of the fleet, so the resolution should be enough for this purposes. Some fisheries representatives have emphasized the sensitivities in relation to GDPS and do not want their fishing area to be depicted too precisely. Torsten clarified that the resolution for the map and the final presentation will be shown in the c-square, but VMS points will be used for the analysis only.

The Chair commended the work and noted that this type of exercise was very needed. He asked if similar exercises were being done in other sea basins.

Ed Farrell replied that a project had recently started in Ireland (Cork) aiming to map fisheries activities to as high a level as possible. He suggested that it might be useful to secure a presentation on this

project at a future Focus Group meeting. Falke de Sager mentioned that a project in Belgium was developing a map of the North Sea that captured Belgian activities.

Jérôme Chladek added that DTU Aqua in Denmark already has developed an online bottom-fisheries map as a [tool for MSP](#). On a national level he was aware of several exercises. It was key for the members of the working track to have a complete picture of what is happening when combining all fleets, wind farms, flag vessels fishing in different areas etc. GNSBI works to combine input from these countries.

The Chair noted that the exchange of information between Member States was key. He thanked all the speakers in the interest of time and suggested to move forward with the agenda and discuss priorities for the Focus Group.

5. Defining Focus Group scope and priorities

The Chair noted that in the context of this Focus Group there is a strong emphasis on ORE – but the aim of the Focus Group is to look at it from every MSP angle, not just from an ‘activity-by-activity’ angle. He was pleased with the amount of information received through the presentations today, especially with now having a better view on work being done by ICES on ORE.

On the agenda, specific strands of work fitting into the scope of the Focus Group were listed, that members had identified as important.

Fisheries data are being used and in his view it should be fairly possible to have real time data on shipping and shipping routes as well. He felt this would also be very relevant to this discussion. He noted the lack of tools which the GNSBI is trying to pull together to get a full picture. The Chair saw an interest in developing an advice to Member States on what the ACs would like to see in terms of joint initiatives and developing full maps.

He asked for views of FG members for a way forward.

- Marine Protected Areas

On MPAs, he noted Member States are supposed to provide their pledges on restorations and MPAs soon to the Commission in the context of the marine Action Plan. There was no clarity on how or when these plans would be made public, but he expected the Commission will eventually want a broad oversight. The Chair felt it was important to work on MPAs in this Focus Group but it would be good to have more clarity first from the plans from Member States.

Alexandra Philippe confirmed that Member States have to provide their pledges on how to achieve 2030 targets and MPAs. She felt it would be interesting to know where the MS were at with this, since they are due in March. The new framework of the Nature Restoration Law possibly adds another layer to this work.

If working on MPAs, the Chair thought it would be good to point out other conservation measures and ask for guidance from the Commission. On MSP more in general, it would be useful to ask the Commission on the envisaged cooperation between Member States on a sea-basin basis. Alternatively, the Focus Group should try to analyse marine spatial planning activities of individual

Member States and advise Member States on MSP. The Chair did not think the Nature Restoration law was stalling the MS plans as it hasn't been formally adopted yet, but this could be a question to pose to the Commission and Member States.

As a way forward on MPAs, the Chair suggested drafting a letter to the Commission asking for an update on the Member State pledges on MPAs and the timelines (**action 4**).

Ed Farrel shared that at the moment there was legislation in Ireland which was about to go to government, but there are delays to ensure effective stakeholder participation and alignment of laws on that. He expected the new law to be scrutinised by the end of the year, which should give a good indication what the Irish MPA process would look like.

The Chair suggested that the two ACs could engage in a bookkeeping exercise keeping track of Member State work on MPAs and their progress, managed by the Secretariats and that members can provide input to. It might also be useful to let official institutions know that the ACs are keeping track (**action 5**).

- Sensitive habitats

The Chair informed the Focus Group that the PelAC had hired an intern last year working on the mapping on sensitive areas for pelagic fish stocks, for her MSc thesis at Wageningen University. The conclusion from her work was that there is a lot of information available, but it is not fully compiled. The realities between demersal and pelagic stocks may differ in terms of sensitive habitats, but the information is not compiled together for the moment.

Ed Farrell shared that last year an ecological sensitivity analysis was carried out in the Irish Sea, prior to planning applications, as an information exercise for the mapping and designation of sensitive habitats. He noted this could be useful work to follow that could feed into this Focus Group.

The Chair agreed this could be an interesting starting points for the Focus Group to develop further questions or advice in relation to this topic.

- Deep-sea mining

The Chair highlighted the recent announcement by Norway that it will soon start commercial seabed mining in the Arctic, was currently high on the political agenda. There is a resolution in the EP for a specific decision on this. Several ACs have drafted an advice on deep-sea mining in the past, perhaps this could be an angle to follow-up on this advice. He asked FG members what the next piece of AC advice could be produced by this group. The ACs could choose to support the public moratorium or wait further developments. The Chair took an action to reflect on possible advice from this group on deep-sea mining.

Anne-Marie Kats remarked that as a first meeting of this Focus Group, these topics were tabled to get a sense from members where the priorities for this group should lie, given that there are many relevant topics that fit into the scope but limited available resources. Developing ideas for future advice could be done as a second step once these priorities are set.

The Chair suggested to keep a watchful eye on this topic, and felt it was not as urgent as others on the agenda. He suggested to keep monitoring the developments over the coming months as the political agenda evolves, and if needed the ACs can re-evaluate if their positions need any further work.

In terms of MPAs, the processes in the context of MSP are a key priority but it is needed to develop a full picture of all the national developments in the context of MSP. Initiatives such as the GNSBI were very useful and needed in other sea basins. The Chair thought there might be a role for this Focus Group to conduct an activity mapping of ongoing initiatives, such as research projects, national initiatives, or initiatives at the regional cooperation level. As a potential basis for a recommendation from this group, the Chair suggested to underline the need to have an activity mapping in every sea-basin towards the Commission and Member States (**action 6**).

In terms of the priorities for this group, the Chair suggested the broader activity mapping from an MSP angle should be the first priority for this Focus Group, followed by the MPA designation processes with the sensitive areas aspect tied to this. ORE developments should be monitored as a continuous priority and sea-bed mining can be kept in the background while awaiting further developments.

Ed Farrell agreed with the listed topics as well as their level of prioritisation. It would be a good first aim for the FG to follow what is happening where and highlight the gaps where relevant.

The Chair added that the engagement with ICES on the WGOWDF work should also be kept on the agenda as a continuous priority, and suggested to invite the (co)-Chair of the group to this meeting on a regular basis to provide updates.

The Chair suggested to present this list to the joint Horizontal Working Group in March (**action 7**).

Alexandra Philippe remarked that gathering an overview of different initiatives at MS level on Marine Spatial Planning would be useful, and that her 'dream' would be to build an overarching view on how MSP and MPA processes interact in order to provide advice on a broader MSP level and how the different activities interact with one another. The development of ORE has pushed this need further up on the agenda.

The Chair thought the FG could ask the Commission to consider our advice from an integrated marine policy angle, with MSP at the heart of it. The starting point for a first advice from this group could be the identification of gaps. This could be further discussed in March during the Working Group.

An action was taken to invite speakers to the next Working Group in March to address how the different MPA processes on a national level fit in the broader MSP agenda (**action 8**).

Alexandra Phillippe asked if the TOR for the Focus Group would be re-circulated for members to update.

Anne-Marie Kat suggested to develop the report of this meeting to take stock of the different elements discussed and prioritised, and to present them as recommendations to the Horizontal WG in March. The FG TOR could then be further refined following the subsequent discussion by the Working Group (**action 9**).

6. End of meeting

The Chair thanked the participants and the speakers for their contributions and closed the meeting.

7. Action points

Action #	What	Who
1	Circulate the Blue Forum position paper to FG members once published	Secretariat
2	Discuss the Blue Forum paper during the planned joint PelAC/NWWAC Horizontal Focus Group in March in Dublin	PelAC/NWWAC Members
3	Co-Chairs of the ICES working group WGOWDF to provide regular updates on their work at future Spatial Dimension FG meetings.	Andrew Gill, Secretariat.
4	Develop a recommendation from both ACs to the Commission asking for an update on the Member State pledges on MPAs under the marine Action Plan and their timelines – and present this as a recommendation to the joint Horizontal WG in March	NWWAC & PelAC Secretariats, FG Chair.
5	FG Secretariats to keep track of Member State processes on MPAs and their progress, fed by input from members.	NWWAC, PelAC Secretariats, FG members
6	Develop a recommendation from the two ACs underlining the need to have an activity mapping in every sea-basin towards the Commission and Member States – and present this as a recommendation to the joint Horizontal WG in March	NWWAC & PelAC Secretariats, FG Chair.
7	Present recommendations on FG priorities to the joint Horizontal WG in March in the following order of importance: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Broader activity mapping from an MSP angle 2) MPA designation processes with the sensitive areas aspect tied to this. 3) ORE developments should be monitored as a continuous priority 4) Sea-bed mining monitored in the background while awaiting further developments. 	NWWAC & PelAC Secretariats, FG Chair.
8	Invite speakers to the next Working Group in March to address how the different MPA processes on a national level fit in the broader MSP agenda	NWWAC & PelAC Secretariats
9	Present FG recommendations to the Horizontal WG in March and refine FG TOR could following this discussion.	NWWAC & PelAC Secretariats, members.

8. Meeting participants

First name	Surname	Organisation
Alexandra	Philippe	European Bureau for Conservation and Development (EBCD)
Andrew	Gill	Cefas
Anne-Marie	Kats	PelAC Secretariat
Bettina	Käppeler	BSH
Celine	Frank	Commission
Edward	Farrell	Killybegs Fishermen's Organisation
Falke	de Sager	Rederscentrale
Gonçalo	Carvalho	Sciaena
Irene	Prieto	ANASOL
Isabelle	Perret	French Ministry of Ecology, Sustainable Development and Energy
Jérôme	Chladek	German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture
Jonathan	Loubry	CNPMEM
Kenatea	Chavez	ANOP
Matilde	Vallerani	NWWAC Secretariat
Mo	Mathies	NWWAC Secretariat
Pauline	Caumont	Commission
Quinten	Mensing	Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water management
Rigas	Giovas	Commission
Sean	O'Donoghue	Killybegs Fishermen's Organisation
Tim	Heddema	Pelagic Freezer Trawler Association
Torsten	Schulze	Thuenen institute