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77th PLENARY REPORT (STECF-PLEN-24-03)

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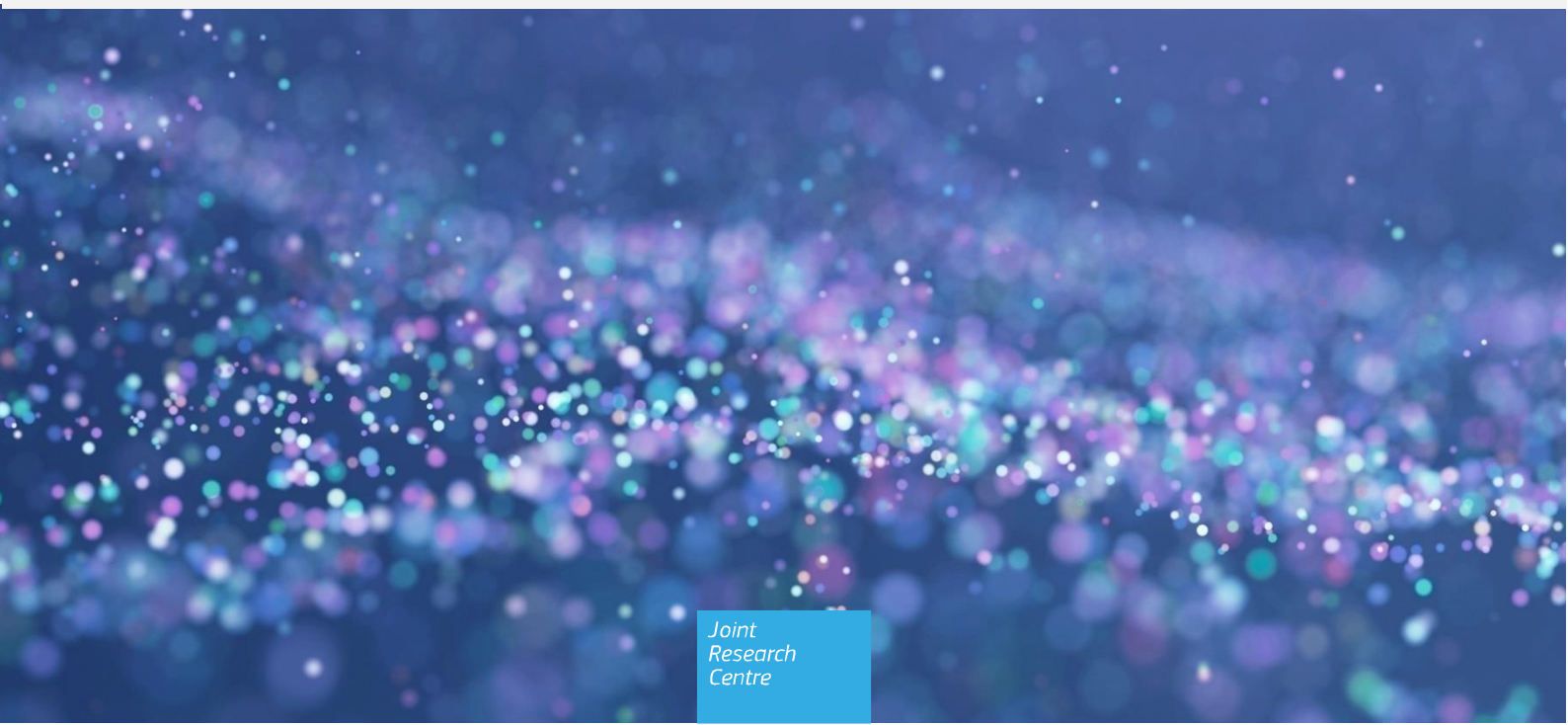
2024



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CONTENTS

Abstract

Commission Decision of 25 February 2016 setting up a Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries, C(2016) 1084, OJ C 74, 26.2.2016, p. 4–10. The Commission may consult the group on any matter relating to marine and fisheries biology, fishing gear technology, fisheries economics, fisheries governance, ecosystem effects of fisheries, aquaculture or similar disciplines. The Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries held its 77th plenary from 11 to 15 November 2024.

77th PLENARY REPORT OF THE SCIENTIFIC, TECHNICAL AND ECONOMIC COMMITTEE FOR FISHERIES (PLEN-24-03)

11-15 November 2024

1. INTRODUCTION

The STECF held its winter plenary on 11-15 November 2024 in the Centre Borschette, Brussels. The meeting was held as a hybrid meeting. The meeting was chaired by the STECF chair Jenny Nord.

2. LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

The meeting was attended in person by 23 members of the STECF, one invited expert and three JRC personnel. 8 STECF members and six JRC personell attended online. Several Directorate General Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG MARE) attended parts of the meeting physically or online. Section eight of this report provides a detailed participant list with contact details.

The following two STECF members did not attend the plenary meeting:

Leyre Goti

Nedo Vroc

3. INFORMATION TO THE PLENARY

Update of STECF meeting calendar.

- EWG-24-09 VMEs, 3-7 March 2025, virtual meeting, chair: R. Döring

4. STECF INITIATIVES

No STECF initiatives were addressed.

5. ASSESSMENT OF STECF EWG REPORTS

5.1 EWG 24-11: Evaluation of Fisheries Dependent Information (FDI) for EU Fleets

Request to STECF

STECF is requested to evaluate the findings of the STECF Expert Working Group meeting and make any appropriate comments and recommendations.

STECF was provided with the draft report of the EWG, including [3 electronic annexes (Annex 3 – Exemptions coding tables, Annex 4 – Exemptions data extract and Annex 5 - Maps of effort and landings)].

STECF comments

EWG 24-11 met in Ispra, Italy from 9 to 13 September 2024.

TOR 1. Review and document the completeness of the data set and feedback from Member States on the approaches used and problems encountered in responding to the data call.

STEC notes that the FDI data call requested data from the year 2023 with the possibility to resubmit the years 2013-2022. Time series further back than 2013 were not requested, although Member States were encouraged to submit them on a voluntary basis.

STECF notes that all Member States submitted data for all requested tables by the legal deadline of the data call. Some Member States re-uploaded data between the legal deadline and the operational deadline, and some Member States also re-uploaded data during the EWG. The internal consistency of the uploaded data, which includes consistency; i) with the data call specifications ii) between different tables of the FDI data call and iii) between years, was checked using the Qlik tool. A second cross-check was carried out with an external data source (EUROSTAT) to verify the completeness of the data sets submitted. STECF notes that the coverage of discard data remains low, with discards for 79% of total landings either not known or not sampled.

The EWG noted some improvement in data quality as Member States resubmitted data for the years 2013-2022. Of the data transmission problems identified in 2023, 17 were resolved with the resubmission of data in 2024 and 16 were still classified as pending. This year, 34 issues with low or medium severity and issue type quality or coverage were identified and registered in the Data Transmission Monitoring Tool (DTMT).

TOR 2. Provide landings and discards data for exemptions in discard plans.

STECF observes that the EWG was asked to provide percentage of landings and discards data for exemptions in discard plans based on the method adopted by EWG 23-10, 22-10, 21-12 and 20-10 and the outputs of ad hoc contract 2452.
The EWG provided the discard information for each exemption in two separate formats: with and without fill-ins and reported the shortcomings that should be considered for a proper interpretation of the results. STECF acknowledges that as a measure of quality of the discard estimates reported and fill-ins, the coverage as percentage of landings with discards is also provided in the data tables.

TOR 3. Review dissemination formats and produce dissemination tables and maps of spatial effort and landings by c-squares

STECF observes that the EWG used the same format for the dissemination of the data as applied in 2023.

STECF acknowledges that the EWG evaluated how confidentiality would impact various options for more aggregated dissemination tables at country level. The EWG identified tables aggregated by "*country*supra_region*vessel_length_range*gear*sub_region2"* as a first proposal to disseminate data at country level. The EWG also explored the spatial products that could be disseminated at country level without compromising the confidentiality of the data provided by Member States. Any potential proposal of a new format of dissemination tables needs to be decided and approved by National Correspondents.

STECF observes that the refusal information contained in Table B is still not disseminated and the possibility of dissemination will be studied during a next FDI Methodological meeting.

STECF observes that the EWG assessed the use of the FDI data and provided a list of ad hoc requests for which Member States had to grant data access to confidential data that is not disseminated publicly. However, the EWG could not access the number of users that downloaded the data directly from the dissemination website due to the recent changes in the dissemination website. STECF suggests that a method of tracking the data sets and maps produced in the EWG is established.

TOR 4. Discuss data submission results following recent changes in the data call and definitions, discuss further feasibility of other changes.

STECF notes that the "activity level", "fishery" and "gear" dimensions were included in the AER data call as non-mandatory variables. In 2024, only three Member States used activity level variable in the AER data call. After a thorough analysis of the pros and cons and considering current limited use of these indicators, the EWG concluded that currently it is not possible to include all three optional indicators in the FDI data call. The EWG also provided recommendations to follow RCG ECON guidelines on clustering

that, if followed, would not compromise correspondence between fleets' definitions in both data calls. Nevertheless, it is necessary to continue the comparison between FDI and AER data and this task has been proposed for the FDI Methodology workshop in 2025.

STECF notes that the EWG decided to postpone the introduction of AphiaID (unique taxonomic identifier provided by Aphia platform) and scientific name as new variables in the FDI tables until 2027, when the implementation of the ICES RDBES for the extraction of FDI will be feasible.

TOR 5. Access results of pilot IDs / Domain names submission to Med&Black Sea data call and discuss MS experience with the Med and Black Sea region data submission in 2024. Discuss development of RDBFIS – Integrated Fisheries Information System for the Mediterranean and Black Sea.

STECF notes that incorporating the Med&Black biological data into the FDI database would enhance its completeness, providing a more comprehensive overview of all EU fisheries in terms of landings, effort, capacity and biological information. Such a database could potentially reduce the number of data requests to Member States and provide a valuable tool for STECF; and if publicly disseminated a valuable tool for researchers, managers and society as a whole.

STECF notes that the possibility of incorporating the Med&Black biological data into the FDI tables was evaluated during the EWG. The concept of DOMAIN variable and its uses in the context of FDI have been explained, showing that DOMAIN column will not be an obstacle for the integration of Med&Black biological data with their specificities of sampling design and raising procedure.

In order to harmonize the Med&Black data calls with FDI, alternative options of procedure were described during the EWG. The two options that would allow the integration of the data in FDI with a lower impact on the Med&Black databases, consider change of the name of the ID column in the Med&Black Sea data call (option 1) or the inclusion of two new DOMAIN variables, one for landings and one for discard in the Med&Black Sea data call (option 2). That should be followed by transition of biological data from Med&Black Sea data base to FDI format when domains are consistently reported between two data calls. STECF observes that in the long-term, when the RDBFIS is functional, the data extraction process to respond to the FDI data call will be automated with the creation of the DOMAIN variable at the country level. And biological data in FDI format could potentially be extracted directly from RDBFIS in the Med&Black Sea region as from RDBES in the North Atlantic Region. STECF observes that the next step of the process should be confirmed by the Commission, Member States and Regional Coordination Groups.

TOR 6. Provide recommendations on protocol for the work done under the annual *ad hoc* contract that provides the catches, landings and discards, at a level of aggregation corresponding to the fleet, area and gear type as specified in each exemption of each delegated regulation specifying the details of implementation of the landing obligation with the aim to incorporate work done to the STECF EWG procedures, as this is one of the major deliverables of the FDI database for DG MARE as end user.

STECF notes that the work to extract information related to different exemptions was done during the EWG and the annual ad hoc contract that covered all preparatory work needed for this task. Moving forward, if the ad hoc contract is not available, the EWG provided recommendations to change the procedure to estimate the information on exemptions from the landings obligation to streamline the preparatory work required. These recommendations aim to reduce the time spent on this task during the EWG meeting, ensuring the data is ready for national checks on or after the fist day of the meeting. STECF observes that to streamline the procedure three R scripts have to be further developed to automate part of the work and to enable EWG to extract exemptions without preparatory work before the meeting:

- script 1: translation of the legal text to FDI definitions. Human verification of the results, or manual check/update of the coding tables is needed for data extract (see Annex 2 of the EWG 24-11 report). Script 1 is still being developed,

- script 2: used by the ad hoc contract to merge FDI Table A with Extraction code Table and to extracts the FDI data for exemptions,

- script 3: produces summary tables and plots as an alternative to the Excel files previously provided by the ad hoc contract. This output was developed by EWG 24-11 but requires additional resources to be finalised.

The whole process and the R scripts need to be finalised, reviewed and tested in the FDI Methodology workshop in 2025 to enable exemptions data provision without preparatory ad hoc contract in 2025.

STECF observes that the EWG propose that the relevant units of DG MARE fill the table of ´follow up the exemptions´ with changes or new exemptions introduced in the EU legislation.

Before the resources to finalise the process outlined above are allocated, the EWG considers that DG MARE should confirms the usability of the new approach and visualisation output produced by EWG 24-11. The script with relevant package and data could be obtained from the FDI Workspace and shared with DGMARE by JRC or EWG co-chairs.

STECF conclusions

STECF concludes that the EWG addressed all the ToRs appropriately and endorses the report and the related annexes.

STECF concludes that the resubmission of data of previous years (2013-2022) improved the data quality and enabled that half of the issues related to data quality or coverage identified in 2023, could be solved during the EWG this year. The number of new issues identified in 2024 was similar to previous year, however their impact was classified as low or medium.

STECF concludes that the dissemination of data at the country level could potentially be useful for end-users (scientists, managers etc.). However, dissemination of more aggregated data tables and spatial information would need to be defined during the next FDI Methodology meeting, incorporating the conclusions of the Workshop about data confidentiality concepts (recommended by RCG NANSEA & Baltic 2024 to the Commission), and then be validated by National Correspondents. STECF also concludes that the information of refusal rates, contained in Table B, cannot be disseminated and the guidance on how to disseminate needs to be elaborated in a FDI Methodology meeting.

STECF concludes that monitoring the impact of FDI data dissemination and the needs of FDI data end-users is essential to ensure both the accuracy and relevance of FDI outputs. STECF therefore suggests inventorying the number of downloads from the website and, during the FDI Methodology meeting, to define a method (e.g. DOI, creative commons licence, or citation) to track the use of the FDI data.

STECF concludes that the possibility of incorporating Med&Black biological data into the FDI was found to be feasible using a DOMAIN variable. The short-term option would involve maintaining the two data calls and the addition of two new DOMAIN variables, one for landings and another for discards to the Med&Black Sea data call. A long-term option, once the RDBFIS is operational, is to use this data base and to automate the process of data extraction for the FDI data calls. This would also include the creation of the DOMAIN variables at the country level and improving the efficiency. STECF further concludes that DG MARE needs to inform the EWG and outline the way to move further if it considers this process valuable.

STECF concludes that the recommendations and scripts under development by the EWG to facilitate the process of estimating landings and discards for each exemption of the landing obligation without ad hoc preparatory contract, have to be confirmed by the DG MARE and finalised by FDI Methodology meeting.

5.2 EWG-24-12: Fishing effort regime for demersal fisheries in West Med

Request to STECF

STECF is requested to review the report of the STECF Expert Working Group meeting, evaluate the findings and make any appropriate comments and recommendations, especially in regard with the results of the ad-hoc contracts reviewed in STECF PLEN 24-02 (ToR 6.10) and STECF PLEN 24-03 (ToR xx) as well as in regard with the recently adopted EWG 24-10 on the stock assessments of demersal fisheries in the western Mediterranean Sea. STECF should ensure that the executive summary and overview tables also tailor an audience of policy makers.

Additional request

Background provided by the Commission

Following the adoption of the West Mediterranean MAP, in 2019 STECF suggested that as a guide to progress towards FMSY in 2025 STECF would provide advice for F and catch based on a 6 year linear change in F from 2019 to 2025. The details of this approach are laid out in Section 4.4.1. Table 2.3 provides a summary by stock of progress to 2020, based on F2020 in the most recent assessment.

In EWG 21-11, STECF introduced the concept of F transition to enhance the monitoring of the progress towards the Fmsy or Fmsy proxy speed of achievement. Tables showing if the stock was ahead or behind transitions were thus incorporated in the advice. STECF concluded that the annual values of the advised catch based on FMSY Transition 2022 and the status of F in 2020 relative to the FMSY Transition 2020 provided important information for the follow up of the objectives of Multi-Annual Plans.

With the development of a STECF methodology for the estimation of Biomass reference points in EWG 22-03, Blim and Bpa became available for a number of stocks with analytical assessments. Subsequently EWG 22-09 started applying an F reduced for the stocks below Bpa and STECF wrote:

Of the 8 stocks estimated as below Bpa, STECF observes that in 2021, five are forecasted to be below Bpa at the start of 2023 and the catches for these stocks are therefore recommended to be reduced below catch at FMSY in order to increase the likelihood of biomass being above Bpa in the short term. The values in Table 2 include these reductions (Reduced F). STECF notes that all the assessments are based on short data series and some degree of uncertainty remains. However, STECF considers overall that the values presented in Table 2 provide robust guidance on the magnitude of changes in F and catches required to reach FMSY by 2023 and those provided in Table 3 provide guidance for a linear transition to reach FMSY in 2025.

Freduced B<Bpa is based on ICES advice rule when SSB in TAC year is less than Bpa, and has never been tested in Mediterranean fisheries effort regimes:

$F\ reduced = F_{MSY} \times SSB_y / Bpa$

and it had the overall aim of showing how to reach Fmsy earlier than 2025.

This approach has endured in 2023 as well as in 2024 and for the stocks below Bpa it has been the basis for the STECF catch and F advice (FMSY Reduce B<Bpa is based on ICES advice rule when B in TAC year is less than Bpa) in the stock assessment EWGs (23-09) and it was listed an option in EWG 24-10. While the Fmsy reduced provides indications on how to reach Fmsy and Bpa faster via F and catch reductions for a given stock, the West Mediterranean EU MAP does not operate on catch limits/TACs (with the exception of ARS and ARA) but on a fishing effort regime for the trawl fleets operating in a mixed fisheries context.

With the Fmsy objectives becoming legally binding in 2025, the newly defined Fmsy ranges and the safeguard measures from Art 6 of the MAP, the implementation of the MAP has entered into the long term phase. In this context, EWG 24-12 was requested to build management scenarios that would provide advice to reach Fmsy while accounting for safeguard measures and the EWG was requested to test as targets both the Fmsy and F reduced in line with the ICES/EWG 22-09 methodology outlined above.

In this exercise it became apparent that to build F reduced scenarios with the 4 models (IAM, ISISFIH, SMART, BEMTOOL), modelers had to update the value of F reduced for each year of the projection to account for the SSB variations in relation to Bpa, as this is in practice an harvest control rule instead of an F target. Overall, it is not clear how appropriate it is to use the ICES F reduced HCR in the context of the West Mediterranean MAP.

TOR 1

STECF PLEN is requested to assess if the methodology and HCR for deriving F reduced for the most vulnerable stock, as an alternative F target in the simulations for the West Med MAP effort regime, has been formally simulation tested for the EU West Med MAP effort regime regulating the mixed demersal fishery. STECF is requested to assess if the available information is sufficient to evaluate the performance of this HCR in terms of risk to the stock, stability of the fishery, probability of fisheries closure and economic performance to compare trade-offs in probabilistic terms.

In addition STECF should:

- Evaluate if the current F reduced HCR could be modulated in a different way (e.g. non linear) to account for the different nature of the management via effort to ensure a more progressive increase of SSB to reach Bpa, and what would be trade-off in terms of risks of fisheries closure, biological risk as well as socio-economic terms;
- Evaluate if the F reduced HCR can generally lead to a high probability of fishery closure and to underfishing of the other stocks in the fishery;

Evaluate if in the current context of the four models (IAM, ISIS-FISH, SMART, BEMTOOL), the trade-off between effort levels, risk of fisheries closure and stability of the fishery can be properly assessed.

STECF observations

Overview of EWG 24-12

EWG 24-12 met online from 30th of September to 4th of October 2024. The meeting was attended by 19 experts in total, including three STECF members and one JRC expert. EWG 24-12 was the 13th of a suite of STECF EWG dedicated to the evaluation of the implementation of the Western Mediterranean Sea multi-annual Management Plan (West Med MAP) since 2018. This plan refers to the Western Mediterranean geographical subareas (GSA) adjacent to Spain, France and Italy in GSAs 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11, grouped into two spatial EMU (Effort Management Units) - EMU1 for GSAs 1 to 7 and EMU2 for GSAs 8 to 11.

EWG 24-12 was requested to address four TORs with the final objective of exploring fishing effort scenarios, coupled with catch limits and other complementary measures, that will ensure achieving and maintaining MSY in 2025 and beyond for all Western Mediterranean demersal target stocks. The work was based on the stock assessments of demersal fisheries in the Western Mediterranean Sea conducted by STECF EWG 24-10 and recently adopted by STECF PLEN 24-10. In order to improve the estimates of fleet profitability, EWG 24-12 was also requested to incorporate data resulting from three ad hoc contracts on financial supporting measures in EMU 2 - Italy, EMU 1 - France and EMU 1 - Spain. However, the results of the ad-hoc contract for EMU 1 - Spain were not available by the time of the EWG.

STECF reviewed the report and notes that all the ToRs were addressed to the extent possible given the available time and resources. Specific comments on each of the TORs are provided below.

EWG TOR1 (Time series of fishing effort)

STECF notes that, based on the most updated FDI data, the EWG compiled and provided time-series of fishing effort for all demersal fishing gears from 2015 to 2023. Specifically, the EWG provided fishing effort data in terms of fishing days, days at sea, hours at sea, GT x fishing days, and kW x fishing days by Country (Spain, France, Italy), EMU (1 and 2), GSA (1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11), gear (OTB , OTT , GNS , GTR , LLS, OTHER), and length class (<12m, 12-18m, 18-24m, >24m).

STECF observes that EWG 24-12 compared the data retrieved from the 2024 and the 2023 FDI data calls. The records for the 2015-2022 period were equal or almost equal (differences < 1%) in 77% of the cases, while 11% of the cases had small differences (between 1% and 10%) and 12% differences greater than 10%. Overall, these differences led to a small loss of fishing days (minus 537 fishing days between the 2023 and the 2024 datasets) for the whole period 2015-2022. In addition, the new dataset

covered some past gaps and contained more records, resulting in approximately 9,600 additional fishing days for the entire period 2015-2022.

STECF observes that most time series showed decreasing or stable trends in fishing effort in terms of fishing days from 2015 to 2023 in both EMU 1 and 2. In line with the regulation implementation, the decreasing trend is especially apparent in trawling gears since 2020, the exception being OTT in GSA 7 which is stable due to a shift from the OTB gear in this area.

As last year, effort of trawl gears reported in the FDI data call for 2020-2024 were compared with effort thresholds contained in EU regulation 2019/2032, 2021/90, 2022/110, 2023/195 and 2024/259. The trawl gears corresponded to OTB1, OTM, OTT, PTB, PTM and TBB in EMU 1 and to OTB, OTM, TBB, and PTM in EMU 2. STECF notes that for most fleet segments, the fishing effort from the Regulation (EU) 2024/259 is greater than that estimated through the FDI database. This discrepancy may be explained by the fact that a maximum fishing days baseline rather than actual fishing effort baseline was used when calculating the Regulation thresholds. Further, possible difficulties in monitoring transfers of effort between fleets may also cause discrepancies between the data sets. STECF notes that, in this context, the maximum fishing days included in Regulation (EU) 2024/259 might not be as limiting as intended, as the overall quota per year has been consistently underutilised by several, although not by all, fleet segments.

EWG TOR2a (F-E analyses)

STECF notes that based on the most recent stock assessment results from EWG 24-10, the EWG updated the F-E analyses for EMU 1 and 2 and no linear relationship consistent across GSAs and stocks was found for any gear. In some cases, like hake in GSAs 1, 5, 6 and 7, deep-water rose shrimp in GSAs 5,6 and 7 and Blue and red shrimp in GSAs 6 and 7, the relationship was strongly linear when the analysis was carried out at stock level. However, when the analysis was conducted at GSA level, the F-E relationship was often found to be weak or even negative. STECF notes that for some stocks, such as red mullet and blue and red shrimps, additional analyses may be performed in the future checking the F-E analyses at a metier level where these stocks are target species.

STECF notes that these F-E analyses do not show the linear relationship between fishing effort and fishing mortality that is assumed in the bioeconomic models used to simulate management scenarios. STECF observes that the monitoring of these F-E relationships needs to be continued.

1 OTB: bottom otter trawl; OTT: otter twin trawls; GNS: gillnets anchored; GTR: trammel net; LLS: set longlines; OTM: Mid-water otter trawl; PTB: bottom pair trawl; PTM: Mid-water otter trawl; TBB: Beam trawl

STECF notes that to check if the estimation of partial catch at age, and thus partial F at age, was correct, the EWG compared the sum of the partial catch at age by year to the official total catch by year. For some stocks and years, the estimated partial catch at age did not sum up to the same value as the total official catch data, which may affect the subsequent F-E analyses. STECF observes that the causes of these differences should be further investigated, e.g. they may be due to the SOP (sum of product) corrections applied to the catch-at-age data. STECF supports the EWG suggestion that this issue could be overcome by standardizing the partial F estimation procedure. A standardised method with an associated script for the estimation of catch at age matrices and partial F could be developed by the JRC team or alternatively by an ad-hoc contract. The script would be run by the stock assessors during the stock assessment working group to ensure the catch at age matrices and the partial F at age estimates are consistently estimated for all stocks. STECF notes that stock assessment methods that provide partial F at age by fleet would still be preferred (if model convergence allows) compared to any ad-hoc estimation procedure.

EWG TOR2b (consequences of fuel-related situation)

STECF notes that the EWG described the fleets' evolution between 2020 and 2022 in terms of socio-economic indicators (employment in full time equivalent, fuel price, value of landings, average price of landings, total income, Gross Value Added and Gross Profit). Data for France and Spain were taken from the Annual Economic Report (EWG 24-03 and 24-07), while data for Italy were provided by the national correspondent. The results show that while the fishing fleets have been able to maintain some level of profitability, the financial strain from rising fuel costs and other operational expenses has led to a large reduction of the profitability of individual vessels in comparison to 2020. STECF observes that those observations are consistent with figures provided in the proposed Italian Management Plans (ToR 6.7).

STECF notes that the results of the ad-hoc contract on financial supporting measures in EMU 1 – Spain, were not available by the time of the EWG, but the EWG discussed and summarised the results of the ad-hoc contracts in EMU 2 - Italy (already reviewed by PLEN 24-02) and EMU 1 – France. STECF notes that specific comments and conclusions regarding these three ad-hoc contracts are provided in TOR 6.5 in the PLEN 24-03 report.

STECF notes that the EWG discussed how the additional economic information on subsidies from the ad-hoc contracts could be integrated in the models and concluded that the unknown level of future subsidies makes the integration in the model questionable. However, an integration in the modelling process could be attempted for temporary cessation. Such payments are issued to reduce fishing effort without scrapping of vessels. Alternatively, for high effort reductions, Member States may decide to scrap vessels instead of providing funds to fishers for temporary cessation.

Regarding the estimation of the consequences of fuel cost changes in 2022-2023, STECF notes that this would require running simulations for different levels of fuel

costs. The EWG was not able to do this assessment during the meeting due to the workload of an already large number of simulations. Furthermore, it would not be sufficient to include information on the fuel subsidies alone as these also vary in every Member State depending on the legal framework under which the payments are issued. STECF therefore notes that this would first require an in-depth analysis of the available economic data and subsequent incorporation of the fuel payments in the simulations.

EWG TOR3 (develop effort and catch management scenarios)

STECF notes that the EWG updated four bioeconomic models (IAM and ISIS-Fish in EMU 1 and BEMTOOL and SMART in EMU 2) based on the latest stock assessments. STECF notes that due to time restrictions, from the 14 management scenarios requested by the Commission, the EWG tested 9 out of the 10 priority management scenarios. The tested management scenarios aimed at estimating the effort levels needed to reach Fmsy or Freduced in 2025 after accounting for remedial measures (implementation of 45mm square mesh size and implementation of a closure area for trawlers between May and September up to 200m depth), effort reduction of longliners and the introduction of a quota for European hake catches by set nets (gillnets and trammel nets). Within all scenarios all the effort reductions, closure areas, maximum catch limits (MCLs) and compensation mechanisms introduced in the western Mediterranean MAP since 2020 were accounted for (Table 1).

STECF reiterates that the various bioeconomic simulation models have different pros and cons in relation to exploring the scenarios, with some bioeconomic models better handling the spatial aspects of the fisheries and others better accounting for socio-economic factors. STECF recalls that additional work to improve and further develop the models, together with the associated timeframes, were discussed during EWG 24-01 and PLEN 24-01. While some of these developments will need longer time frames and additional resources, STECF acknowledges that the bioeconomic models have continued to incorporate improvements inter-sessionnally following discussions at EWG 24-01, PLEN 24-01 and PLEN 24-02. In addition, STECF acknowledges that presentation of results using template tables continues to be enhanced in cooperation with DGMARE, which facilitates readability of the model outputs and comparison across case studies.

STECF notes that the bioeconomic simulation models were based on the stock assessments of demersal fisheries in the Western Mediterranean Sea provided by EWG 24-10. However, STECF recalls that the STECF PLEN 24-10 considered that the assessments of deep-water rose shrimp in GSA 1, deep-water rose shrimp in GSAs 5_6_7 and red mullet in GSA 7 were not robust for providing advice. Therefore, for consistency with the STECF PLEN 24-10, if time allowed, the dynamics of these stocks would have been modelled as static stocks in the bioeconomic models for EMU 1. STECF notes that these changes could affect the associated biological and socio-economic indicators in EMU 1.

STECF notes that the results of the SMART model in EMU 2 should be taken with caution as the number of simulations ran during the EWG was considered insufficient to produce robust results. This issue appeared particularly this year as the EWG aimed at covering all the scenarios with SMART, which resulted in less computation time available for each of the scenarios. STECF recalls that the computational burden is different for each the bioeconomic models, and therefore, they may require different time frames to provide robust results.

STECF notes that the EWG could not test the two additional remedial measures requested in TOR 3b. On the one hand, the effect of a spatial closure below 600 m for blue and red shrimps in EMU 1 could not be tested due to the lack of spatial data for the stock and for the fleet distribution. On the other hand, the effect of the implementation of a mesh size of 50 mm square mesh for the deep-water fishery targeting deep water shrimps could not be tested due to time constraints. Regarding this second request, STECF notes that the EWG conducted an analysis for the target species and the French fleet using IAM. The results indicated that compared to the current legal square mesh size of 40 mm, transitioning towards 45 or 50 mm mesh size would have positive demographic effects, either moderate (for red mullet, deep-water rose shrimp or blue and red shrimp) or strong (for hake and Norway lobster). The economic consequences of transitioning towards 45 or 50 mm mesh size were slightly detrimental the first year of implementation (2025) but were very quickly compensated after the next two years when transitioning to 50 mm mesh size. Transitioning to 45 mm mesh size only achieved half of the profit expected under a 50 mm mesh size transition. STECF notes that PLEN 24-02 had already discussed the increase in mesh size to 50mm. STECF notes at that time that ICATMAR (2021) had assessed the impact of using 50 mm mesh size on blue and red shrimp, and that it showed a decrease of the retention with limited economic impacts, while the L50 would remain below the 25 mm MCRS

Table 5.1. Management scenarios tested by EWG-24-12.

Scenario	Trawler effort levels in 2025 and beyond	Set nets (GNS&GTR) Catch Limit for HKE levels 2025 and beyond	Effort level (fishing days) LLS in 2025 and beyond	Catch Limit level for ARS and ARA in 2025 and beyond	Remedial Measures (Spatial)	Remedial Measures (Mesh Size)
SQ	Roll over effort in 2024	No	Roll over effort in 2024	Level of captures of 2024	No	No

SQ_remedial_SP	Roll over effort in 2024	No	Roll over effort in 2024	Level of captures of 2024	Yes	Yes
SQ_remedial_Mesh	Roll over effort in 2024	No	Roll over effort in 2024	Level of captures of 2024	No	Yes
SQ_remedial_SP&MESH	Roll over effort in 2024	No	Roll over effort in 2024	Level of captures of 2024	Yes	Yes
A1	Level of reduction that secures Fmsy in 2025 for all stocks	No	Keep 2024 level	Level of reduction that secures Fmsy in 2025 for ARA and ARS	Yes	Yes
B1	Level of reduction that secures Fmsy in 2025 for all stocks	50% reduction from 2023 level (starting from 2025)	Keep 2024 level	Level of reduction that secures Fmsy in 2025 for ARA and ARS	Yes	Yes
C1	Level of reduction that secures Fmsy in 2025 for all stocks	50% reduction from 2023 level (starting from 2025)	50% reduction from 2023 level (starting in 2025)	Level of reduction that secures Fmsy in 2025 for ARA and ARS	Yes	Yes
A2	Same as A1 but with F	No	Keep 2024 level	Level of reduction that	Yes	Yes

	reduced for stocks under Bpa			secures Fmsy in 2025 for ARA and ARS		
B2	Same as B1 but with F reduced for stocks under Bpa	50% reduction from 2023 level (starting from 2025)	Keep 2024 level	Level of reduction that secures Fmsy in 2025 for ARA and ARS	Yes	Yes
C2	Same as C1 but with F reduced for stocks under Bpa	50% reduction from 2023 level (starting from 2025)	50% reduction from 2023 level (starting in 2025)	Level of reduction that secures Fmsy in 2025 for ARA and ARS	Yes	Yes

Source: EWG-24-12 and own elaborations.

EWG TOR4 (simulation results)

STECF notes that the status quo scenarios, including those with remedial measures alone, did not achieve the management objective of all stocks reaching Fmsy by 2025 in neither of the EMUs. In addition, the SSB of the two hake stocks remained below Bpa in 2025 and 2027.

STECF notes that Fmsy for all stocks was only achieved under scenarios involving a reduction in effort. Trawlers' effort reduction to achieve Fmsy for all stocks in 2025 were over 70% in EMU 1, regardless the effort reductions of set netters and longliners that have a low catch share of hake in this area. Alternatively, the trawlers' effort reduction in EMU 2 was over 50% if passive gears were not limited and less than 30% when all passive gears were limited. Under these scenarios SSBs of the two hake stocks were above their respective Blim in 2026. In both EMUs, the effort reductions led to negative impacts on the socio-economic performance of several fleets.

STECF notes that when the spatial remedial measure was considered, the trawlers' effort reduction needed in EMU 1 was ~10-15% less and SSB reached Bpa by 2026

(one year earlier). In EMU 2 instead the reduction was much lower, but results should be taken with caution due to the number of simulations of the SMART model.

STECF notes that when the F target considered was Freduced instead of Fmsy or Fmsy proxy, the trawling fleet had to be shut down in 2025 in both EMU 1 and EMU 2 to reach the target. This led to much more negative socio-economic indicators in the short term. On the contrary, the status of hake stocks in 2027 was better under the Freduced target, which resulted in higher gross profit values in EMU 1 in 2027.

Additional TOR for STECF

STECF notes that Freduced consists in reducing linearly the Fmsy target for the stocks to be estimated to be below Bpa at the beginning of the advice year with the aim of increasing the likelihood of biomass being above Bpa in the short term. STECF recalls that this concept was introduced by the stock assessments of demersal fisheries in the Western Mediterranean Sea in 2022 (PLEN 22-03), after biomass conservation reference points were estimated for the first time by EWG 22-03 and has been used since then to provide catch options for demersal stocks in the Western Mediterranean Sea. However, STECF notes that the simulations carried out by the EWG on Fishing effort regime for demersal fisheries in West Med have always been based on Fmsy or Fmsy proxies. This is the first year the EWG was requested by DG MARE to carry out the simulations based on both Fmsy and Freduced.

STECF notes that the Freduced concept was borrowed from the ICES advice rule for long-lived category 1 and 2 stocks (ICES, 2023). This advice rule is based on two reference points: Fmsy and MSY Btrigger (lower bound of SSB fluctuations when fished at Fmsy). When the stock is estimated to be above MSY Btrigger, the advice is based on Fmsy. On the contrary, when the stock is estimated to be below MSY Btrigger the fishing mortality is reduced linearly below Fmsy, the proportionality constant being the ratio between the SSB and MSY Btrigger.

STECF notes that the management framework in the Western Mediterranean Sea is different from that used by ICES (e.g., TAC vs effort regime, advice rule vs target F). Furthermore, the framework for the calculation of the reference points which forms the basis for the respective advice, is also different. For instance, MSY Btrigger is not defined in the West Med MAP and Bpa is used instead to trigger the fishing mortality reduction of Freduced. STECF acknowledges that this may raise some concerns on the application of Freduced in the Western Mediterranean Sea, but STECF considers that the principle of reducing F when biomass falls below a given threshold is of high relevance. STECF recalls that Article 6 (1) of the West Med MAP (EU Reg 2019/1022) establishes that when the SSB of any of the stocks concerned is below Bpa, “maximum allowable fishing effort shall be set at levels consistent with a fishing mortality that is reduced within the range of Fmsy”. STECF notes that Freduced is not restricted to be within the range of Fmsy. However, according to article 6(2) if a stock is below Blim further remedial measures should be taken, including adequate reduction of the maximum allowable fishing effort.

STECF notes that the regulation does not specify how the fishing mortality reduction is to be made. STECF observes that advice rules with a linear reduction in F, sensu ICES advice rule, are quite common and can be found worldwide, the main differences being the specific target and trigger points defining the rule that depend on the general framework of the Regional Fisheries Management Organization or the advisory body. STECF acknowledges that there are multiple options to modulate this reduction (either faster or slower reductions than the linear approach can be devised), but some guidelines would be required to search for alternative and meaningful options also depending on the management objectives.

STECF notes there has been substantial implementation bias in the West Med MAP associated with the use of the effort mechanism. While the bioeconomic models assume that fishing effort and F are linearly positive related, effort reductions do not appear to have reduced F proportionally during the first phase of the MAP. As a consequence, simulation results could be overly optimistic, which may subsequently lead to failing to reach the MAP objectives.

STECF notes that the impact of using Freduced as an alternative target in the simulations for the West Med MAP effort regime has not been formally simulation tested. Finally, STECF observes that a formal simulation testing of this or any other alternative HCR would require the development of an MSE (PLEN 24-01).

STECF notes that for hake there is little knowledge available to foresee stock dynamics at biomass levels lower than current levels. This leads to an extrapolation of the Stock recruitment relationship; consequently risks of stock collapse cannot be estimated with known certainty from simulations for situations under which biomass would decrease further.

STECF notes that the only available information to compare the performance of Fmsy and Freduced are the results of the simulations from the four bioeconomic models. Despite not being a long-term evaluation, STECF considers that the results provide some meaningful insights on the short-term trade-off between stock status, fishing effort, fishing mortality and socio-economic indicators (see earlier comments). Furthermore, even if additional scenarios with alternative ways of modulating the fishing mortality reduction when being below Bpa are not available, STECF considers that these two scenarios can serve as indicative of the limits of the indicators for all the range of possible reductions encompassed between them.

Additional comments

STECF reiterates that running all the requested scenarios within five days continues to be a challenge. Furthermore, STECF notes that the workload of the EWG has exceeded the available time and resources of the EWG. As a result, only prioritised ToRs could be addressed (except for one priority scenario that could not be run).

Furthermore, these limitations preclude the EWG to make progress in additional important issues like the integration of results from the different modelling frameworks.

Therefore, STECF agrees with the EWG that a different approach should be implemented within the STECF framework for the evaluation of management plans, where more time is dedicated to running the scenarios and testing optimization processes, while an STECF EWG could be dedicated to the discussion of results.

STECF conclusions

STECF reviewed the report and notes that all the ToRs were addressed to the extent possible given the available time and resources.

STECF concludes that most time series showed decreasing or stable trends in fishing effort in terms of fishing days from 2015 to 2023 in both EMU 1 and 2.

STECF concludes that for some fleet segments, the fishing effort ceilings prescribed in Regulation (EU) 2024/259 are greater than that estimated through the FDI database. Therefore, the maximum fishing days included in the Regulation might not be as limiting as intended, specifically in EMU 1.

STECF concludes that no linear E-F relationship consistent across GSAs and stocks was found for any gear which may lead to failing the MAP objectives as the results from the simulation could be overly optimistic. These relationships need to continue to be monitored.

STECF concludes that to avoid potential inconsistencies in the calculation of partial F at age, standardised method and scripts with an agreed procedure for the estimation of partial F should be developed by the JRC or alternatively by an ad-hoc contract.

STECF concludes that the estimation of the consequences of fuel cost changes in 2022-2023 would require running simulations for different fuel cost levels. Such simulations were not carried out during the EWG 24-12 due to time constraints.

STECF concludes that the incorporation of the results of the ad-hoc contracts on financial supporting measures could introduce a bias in the bioeconomic projections except for temporary cessation subsidies.

STECF concludes that the status quo scenarios, including those with remedial measures alone, did not achieve the management objective of all stocks reaching Fmsy by 2025 in none of the EMUs. The objective of Fmsy for all stocks was only achieved under tested scenarios involving a reduction in effort (trawlers' reduction over 70% in EMU 1 and between 30%-50% in EMU 2 for scenarios without spatial remedial measures). When the spatial remedial measure was considered, the trawlers' effort reduction needed in EMU 1 equated to 55-60%.

STECF concludes that when the tested fishing effort was set according to Freduced instead of Fmsy or Fmsy proxy, the trawl fisheries should be closed in 2025 in both EMU 1 and EMU 2. This would lead to important negative socio-economic indicators in the short term. On the contrary, the simulations suggested that status of hake stocks in 2027 would be comparatively better under the Freduced target.

STECF concludes that the impact of using Freduced as an alternative target in the simulations for the West Med MAP effort regime has not been formally simulation tested and is currently falling outside the Fmsy ranges estimated by EWG 24-02. Such a formal simulation testing of this or any other alternative would require the development of an MSE. However, STECF concludes that the results from the bioeconomic models can provide some insights on the trade-off between stock status, fishing mortality and socio-economic indicators development in the short term for the reduction of fishing efforts according directly to Fmsy or to a linear Freduced (if the stock is below Bpa).

STECF concludes that the EWG 24-12 workload was too large for a five day meeting. STECF considers that a different approach is required for similar future requests, so that more time can be dedicated to running scenarios and testing optimization processes, while an EWG could be dedicated to the discussion of results.

References

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5.3 EWG 24-13: Balance/Capacity

Request to STECF

STECF is requested to evaluate the findings of the STECF Expert Working Group meeting and make any appropriate comments and recommendations.

STECF comments

General comments

The EWG report essentially follows the structure of previous Balance/Capacity reports but because a separate stand-alone report on balance/capacity for the Outermost regions (ORs) has already been completed (EWG 24-17), the national chapters in the EWG 24-13 report do not contain any details on the OR fleet segments. However, information on the OR fleet segments is still included in Annexes I, III, IV and V of the EWG 24-13 Report.

STECF notes that moving the assessment of balance between fleet capacity and fishing opportunities of the OR segments to a separate working group created more room for the experts to discuss in more depth the interpretation of the indicators and the way they are computed. As a result of this discussion as well as of the outcome of previous balance/capacity EWGs (EWG 23-13, 22-15, 21-16 etc.), a cautionary note concerning the Stocks At Risk (SAR) indicator has been included as section 2.2 of the EWG 24-13 report together with a comment on clustering in section 2.3 and what additional information from Member States would be useful to help identify reasons for missing information (see details in specific comments of task 1, below).

STECF notes that, the terms “in balance” and “out of balance” (imbalance) and analogous terms, are used strictly in relation to the criteria given in the Commission guidelines (COM (2014) 545 Final). Such terms are used to indicate a favourable (in balance) or unfavourable (out of balance) situation based on the values computed for specific indicators in relation to the threshold specified for such indicators. Trends in indicator values are expressed over different time periods, which vary by indicator and Member States. Comparisons between indicator values as computed by the EWG and those in the National fleet reports submitted by Member States by 31 May 2024 are based on the reference year 2022 unless specifically mentioned in the report.

STECF highlights the fact that the change in the EWG timeline and the addition of the separated EWG for the OR created some constraints in the calendar to prepare the data and relevant tables especially between the preparatory meeting (3-5 September) and the EWG for the OR (11-13 September):

- Preparatory meeting (EWG 24-13), 3-5 September 2024
- Balance/capacity OR (EWG 24-17), 11-13 September
- Mini Plenary meeting (PLEN 24-17) to review the EWG 24-17 report, 18 September 2024,
- Main Balance/capacity meeting (EWG 24-13), 7-11 October.

Consequently, the data preparation work had to be done more rapidly than is desirable, putting pressure on a small number of key people preparing the data and it gave rise to a number of inconsistencies in the data the EWGs had to work with, which inevitably delayed the preparation of the EWG reports.

Comments on specific ToRs

STECF reviewed the report of the EWG 24-13 and notes that all the ToRs were addressed. A summary of the work undertaken in relation to each of the tasks specified in the request to the EWG is listed below:

<u>EWG task 1: Compute values for the technical, economic and biological indicators specified in the European Commission Guidelines</u>

Values for the following indicators as specified in the Commission guidelines (COM(2014) 545) are presented for the period 2013-2023:

Biological indicators

- Sustainable harvest indicator (SHI). SHI values are not considered meaningful if the landing values that are included in the SHI / total landings value ratio is too low (according to the guidelines less than 40%). Only meaningful values of SHI are used to indicate whether a fleet segment may be in or out of balance with fishing opportunities.
- Stocks at risk indicator (SAR).

Economic indicators

- Return on investment (ROI) and/or Return on Fixed Tangible Assets (RoFTA).
- Ratio between current revenue and break-even revenue (CR/BER).

Technical indicators

- The inactive vessel indicator (IV). If more than 20% of the vessels in a length class have been inactive the whole year, the indicator is considered out of balance for the length class.
- The vessel use indicator (VUR). Average Days at Sea / Maximum Days at Sea.

STECF notes that the calculation of the inactive vessel indicator (Tables 3.2.2.1-3.2.2.3 of the EWG report) has been revised by the EWG following discussions on the interpretation of the guidelines (COM(2014) 545). STECF notes that the inactive vessel indicator was computed by the EWG as a proportion of the length-class specific fleet instead of the total fleet as was the case in previous Balance/Capacity reports. The indicator for the total national fleet as given in the traffic light tables in the individual National chapters of the report, was calculated as the total inactive fleet related to the total national fleet. Whether a vessel length class is found to be in or out of balance according to the guidelines is determined by comparing the indicator to a threshold.The way the indicator is computed (relative to the total number of vessels for the Member State or the total number of vessels in the length class category) is crucial as a threshold will be reached more often if the calculation is done relative to the number of vessels in the length class category.

STECF also notes that the EWG report currently only shows the IV indicator with respect to number of vessels by length group and Member State (Tables 3.2.2.1-3.2.2.3) while the guidelines also states that it should be provided for gross tonnage (GT) and engine power (kW). In addition, the number of inactive vessels expressed as a proportion of the total vessels in the fleet of each Member State is given in the traffic light tables in each national chapter of the report. STECF notes that the number of vessels alone is not a meaningful indicator as the fishing capacity of a vessel can vary greatly depending on its size (GT) and engine power (kW).

Regarding the SAR indicator, STECF notes that as mentioned in section 2.2 of the EWG report and as defined in the 2014 commission guidelines, there are several criteria to determine whether stocks are at risk. These include quantitative (B<Blim) or qualitative data (regulation, prohibition, CITES/IUCN listing). Based on these criteria, stocks at risk are selected for a given fleet segment if either: i) a dependency of the fleet is higher than 10% of the fleet's landings to the stock at risk or ii) a contribution of the fleet is at least 10% of the total landings of the stock. In the calculation of condition (ii) the total landings included are the EU landings of the stocks. For fleet segments fishing on shared stocks with third countries or highly distributed stocks, this means that the SAR indicator will be overestimated (i.e the total EU landings will be lower that the real total landings from the stock which makes the contribution of the fleet to the total landings artificially higher). Currently, it is unclear what the sensitivity of the SAR indicator is to that computation choice, and which fleets can have their assessment of balance affected by it. In contrast, underestimation could occur for segments for which the SAR values are calculated by condition i) in areas where a low number of stocks are assessed (eg. MBS, OMR) as values of B/Blim are not available. In addition, and as highlighted during EWG 24-06, this underestimation of the SAR indicator can also occur if a high number of stocks are harvested that may never reach the 10% threshold related to the total landings.

STECF also notes that the clustering of fleet segments may have an impact on the activation of the dependency or contribution rules (as explained in the previous paragraph) in defining the number of stocks at risk of a fleet segment. On one hand, aggregating segments to form a cluster may show a lower dependency of the cluster on a stock at risk (compared to individual fleets) and therefore underestimate the number of SAR. On the other hand, the contribution of the landings to the total landings of a stock at risk of a cluster may be higher than of individual fleet segments forming that cluster, thus overestimating the SAR for the cluster.

STECF notes that all required indicators for which relevant input data were available were computed by the EWG. Only the IV indicator in terms of GT and kW was not computed.

Overview of the European fleet and by region

Table 5.3.1 presents the number of segments in each supra region (North Atlantic Ocean, Mediterranean and Black Seas and Other Fishing Regions) and for each indicator, the number of segments for which an indicator value could be computed for the year 2021. It also includes the numbers of segments that according to the criteria in the Commission guidelines (CG), are indicated to be in balance or out of balance, together with an assessment of the trend of the indicators, as reported by EWG 24-13.

For the EU as a whole, out of 619 active fleet segments in 2022, 84% had landings by weight and value available (523 and 519 fleet segments, respectively). Of these 619 active fleet segments, a meaningful value for the SHI could be computed for 45% of them (276 fleets segments), and a value for the SAR could be computed for 73%. Economic indicator values (CR/BER and RoFTA) were available for 61% of the total active fleet segments, while, for RoI, this percentage was only 13% (an improvement from the 9% of last year).

For segments with a meaningful SHI value, the majority were indicated to be in balance (68%) and for the SAR, the majority were indicated to be out of balance (54%). With regard to each of the economic indicators, a majority of the segments were indicated to be in balance according to CR/BER and RoFTA (66%, 60%, respectively) and for the 13% of the fleet segments with a ROI only 49% were in balance. Finally, for the segments for which the technical indicator VUR could be computed, 58% were indicated to be in balance and 42% out of balance. The total EU fleet comprised 18,156 vessels representing approximately 26% of the total vessels.

The main results by region are as follows:

North Atlantic Ocean (NAO)

- A meaningful SHI value could be estimated for 40% of the 355 active fleet segments, with 80% of them in balance.
- The SAR was estimated for 72% of the total segments in the region, 49% of which were indicated to be in balance and 51% out of balance.
- Economic indicators values (CR/BER and RoFTA) were available for 61% of the total active fleet segments in this area, while for RoI this percentage was 16%.
- The majority of the fleet segments considering CR/BER and RoFTA were indicated to be in balance (72% and 61%, respectively), however, RoI indicator indicates that 47% are out of balance.
- For the VUR technical indicator (available for 82% of the fleet segments of this area), 46% of the segments were indicated to be in balance and 54%, out of balance.
- The EU inactive fleets in the North Atlantic (NAO) represented 35% of the total vessels registered in the area.

Regarding the trends in indicator values:

- No clear trend could be observed in the SHI for 45% of the fleet segments in the NAO.
- 29% of the fleet segments had an improving trend, 5% a deteriorating trend, 1% were considered to have a flat trend and for 20% of the segments no trend could be calculated.
- The three economic indicators show contrasting trends, for CB/BER 35% of the fleet segments are improving while 27% are deteriorating, for RoFTA 31% are improving and 44% are deteriorating and for ROI only 12% are improving while 44% are deteriorating.
- No clear overall picture could be depicted by the technical indicators as for the majority of the segments (64%), there was no clear trend and a further 27% where no trend could be calculated.

Mediterranean and Black Seas (MBS)

A meaningful value for the SHI could be computed for 47% of the 201 active fleet segments in this region, 55% of which were indicated to be out of balance and 45% in balance.

- The SAR was estimated for 76% of the total segments in this region, 42% of which were indicated to be in balance and 58% out of balance.
- Economic indicator values (CR/BER and RoFTA) were available for 66% of the total active fleet segments in this area, while values for RoI could be computed for only 9%.
- According to the economic indicator values, 57% of fleet segments were indicated to be in balance for CR/BER and RoFTA and 47% for.

- According to the VUR technical indicator, 52% of the segments were indicated to be in balance and 48% out of balance.
- The EU inactive fleets in the Mediterranean and Black Seas (MBS) represented 19% of the total vessels registered in the area.

Regarding the trends of the indicators above:

- For the SHI, the trend was improving for 49% of the fleet segments in the MBS, 4% had a deteriorating trend, 4% a flat trend, no clear trend for 23% of the fleet segments and for the rest (19%), the trend could not be calculated.
- For the three economic indicators, an improving trend was observed for 32%, 31% and 37% of the fleet segments, considering the CR/BER, RoFTA and RoI, respectively, while it was deteriorating for 46%, 56% and 53%, respectively.
- For the majority of the remaining segments there was no clear trend, or no trend could be calculated.
- No clear overall picture could be depicted by the technical indicators, as for the majority of segments there was no clear trend (49%), or the trend could not be calculated (17%).

Other Fishing Regions (OFR)

- A meaningful SHI value could be computed for 62% of the 63 fleet segments from this area, with 85% of them indicated to be in balance and 15% out of balance.
- The SAR was estimated for 74% of the total number of segments, 44% of which were indicated to be in balance and 56% out of balance.
- Economic indicators values (CR/BER and RoFTA) were available for 49% of the total active fleet segments in this area, while for RoI this percentage was 5%.
- The majority of the fleet segments considering these three economic indicators were in balance (68%, 65% and 100% for CR/BER, RoFTA and RoI, respectively).
- For the VUR technical indicator (with a coverage of 94% of the fleet segments of this area), 97% of the segments were in balance and 3% out of balance.
- The EU inactive fleets in the Other Fisheries regions (OFR) represented 24% of the total vessels registered in the area.

Regarding the trends of the indicators above:

- For SHI no clear trend was observed, or it was not possible to obtain a clear trend for 67% of the fleet segments in the OFR, 5% had an improving trend, 5% had a deteriorating trend and for 21% of the segments the trend could not be calculated.
- For the three economic indicators, the majority of the segments had an improving trend (39%, 52% and 67% for CR/BER, RoFTA and RoI, respectively).

A deteriorating trend was assessed for 32%, 39% and 33% of the fleet segments (for CR/BER, RoFTA and RoI, respectively).

- No trend in the VUR could be calculated for 14% of the fleet segments and no clear trend could be detected for 53% of them.
-

Table 5.3.1. Summary table of balance indicator values for 2022 and trends over the period 2018-2022 at regional level (NAO, MBS and OFR). The number of fleet segments in balance, out of balance with improved, worsened and no trends are shown.

Area			Nº active segments	Indicators						
				Biological		Economic			Technical	
			Total	SHI[1]	SAR	Cr/BER	RoFTA	RoI	VUR	IV[2]
EU	**Coverage**	Total	619	**276**	**454**	**380**	**380**	**79**	**544**	**26%**
	Balance	In balance		189	209	252	227	39	291	
		Out of Balance		87	245	128	153	40	253	
NAO	**Coverage**	Total	355	**143**	**254**	**217**	**217**	**57**	**291**	**35%**
	Balance	In balance		114	124	156	132	27	134	
		Out of Balance		29	130	61	85	30	157	
	Trend	Trend deteriorating		7		59	95	25	4	
		Trend improving		41		76	67	7	13	
		No clear trend		65		28	1	0	186	
		Flat trend		1		0	0	0	10	
		Could not be calculated		29		54	54	25	78	
MBS	**Coverage**	Total	201	**94**	**152**	**132**	**132**	**19**	**194**	**19%**
	Balance	In balance		42	64	75	75	9	100	
		Out of Balance		52	88	57	57	10	94	
	Trend	Trend deteriorating		4		61	74	10	14	
		Trend improving		46		42	41	7	39	
		No clear trend		22		13	0	0	95	
		Flat trend		4		0	1	0	13	
		Could not be calculated		18		16	16	2	33	
OFR	**Coverage**	Total	63	**39**	**48**	**31**	**31**	**3**	**59**	**24%**
	Balance	In balance		33	21	21	20	3	57	
		Out of Balance		6	27	10	11	0	2	
	Trend	Trend deteriorating		2		10	12	1	6	
		Trend improving		2		12	16	2	14	
		No clear trend		26		7	1	0	31	

	Flat trend	1	0	0	0	0
	Could not be calculated	8	2	2	0	8

[1] Data relate only to fleet segments for which meaningful values for the SHI could be computed i.e., the value of landings from stocks that are fished at rates greater than FMSY account for more than 40% of the total value of the landings by fleet segment.

[2] IV expressed as the % of vessels inactive in the area

Source: EWG-24-13 and own elaborations.

EWG Task 2: Based on such indicators, provide country chapters

EWG 24-13 considered that 14 of the 22 fleet reports submitted by Member States were prepared fully in line with the Commission guidelines (Table 5.3.2). The other eight Member States followed the guidelines to varying degrees (reported in Table 5.3.2 as a "No" in accordance with the "in line CG column"). The extent to which these Member States followed the guidelines, as extracted from the EWG 24-13 report, are listed in Table 5.3.2 below. The specific reasons vary by Member State but can be summarised as follows:

- Use of fleet segmentation deviating from the fleet segmentation in the DCF. The use of DCF segmentation is specified in the Commission guidelines.
- Omission of segments (not even capacity data is reported by some Member States).
- Calculation of an indicator(s) with data from the year prior to the year the fleet report is submitted (e.g., stock status from the previous year in the case of the SHI).
- Indicators not reported.
-

Table 5.3.2. Summary of the assessment made by the EWG 24-13 of whether annual national fleet reports follow the Commission Guidelines (CG).

Member State	In line with the CGs	STECF Comments based on the EWG assessment
Belgium	Yes	-
Bulgaria	Yes	-

Croatia	No	SAR provided for 2023 instead of 2022
Cyprus	No	Not all the indicators are provided for all fleets
Denmark	Yes	-
Estonia	No	The segmentation of the fleet segments under 12m differs from the DCF segmentation
Finland	No	Almost all the indicators missing.
France	No	Not all indicators are provided according to the guidelines
Germany	Yes	-
Greece	No	Not all the indicators are provided, some provided for different segmentation
Ireland	No	Not all the indicators are provided, some for different years, some calculated differently
Italy	No	Not all the indicators are provided, some for a different segmentation, some for different years
Latvia	No	One indicator is missing
Lithuania	Yes	-
Malta	No	Biological indicators not provided
Netherlands	Yes	-
Poland	No	Not all indicators are provided according to the guidelines
Portugal	No	Not all indicators are provided according to the guidelines
Romania	Yes	-
Slovenia	No	Not all the indicators are provided for the correct year

Spain	Yes	-
Sweden	Yes	-

Source: own elaborations.

Comparison of indicator values

For each fleet segment, the biological, economic and technical indicator values as computed under task 1 were compared with the equivalent values and trends in the fleet reports submitted by the Member State under Article 22.2 and 22.3 of Regulation (EU) 1380/2013. Discrepancies between such values were highlighted and where possible the reasons for such discrepancies were identified.

A summary of the differences found by Member States and indicators used was prepared by STECF and is presented in Table 5.3.3. The categorisation of the differences in the indicator values between Member States' fleet reports and those calculated by the EWG is based on the following criteria decided by STECF in the PLEN 22-03 report:

- Equal (Equal): If the indicator values calculated by the EWG and those provided by the Member State are the same.
- Similar (Sim). If the indicator values calculated by the EWG and those provided by the Member States differ, they indicate the same balance/imbalance assessment.
- Discrepancies (Discr). If the indicator value calculated by the EWG and those provided by the Member States differ and they indicate a different balance/imbalance assessment.
- Not Provided (NP): If the indicator value is not provided in the Member State's fleet report.
- Not Comparable (NC): If the fleet segmentation used by the Member State differs from the one used by the EWG; and/or if the indicator provided is not that computed by the EWG.
- Not Undertaken (NU): There were issues relating to data concerning inactive vessels and especially regarding the calculation of inactive GT and kW, which meant that comparisons between the EWG estimates and those provided by Member States in their fleet reports could not be undertaken.

Table 5.3.3. Summary of differences in indicator values between those calculated by EWG 24-13 and the Member States' fleet reports for 2022.

	Biological		Economic			Technical		Comments from the EWG
MS	**SHI**	**SAR**	**CR/BER**	**RoI**	**RoFTA**	**VUR**	**IV**	
Belgium	Sim	Sim	Discr	NP	Discr	Sim	NU	Discrepancies in CR/BER and RoFTA in one segment.
Bulgaria	Discr	Equal	Discr	NP	Sim	Sim	NU	SHI discrepancies for 2 segments probably due to difference in stocks used. Discrepancies for 5 segments for CR/BER possibly due to different clustering
Croatia	Discr	NC	Discr	NP	Equal	Sim	NU	SHI discrepancies for 2 segments probably due to difference in stocks used. SAR provided for 2023 instead of 2022. CR/BER discrepancy for 3 segments
Cyprus	Discr	Discr	Discr	NP	Discr	NC	NU	SHI and SAR discrepancy for one segment, CR/BER and RoFTA not calculated for 2 segments by MS and discrepancy for one segment. The maximum number od seadays used to calculate the VUR was not provided.
Denmark	Discr	Discr	Discr	Discr	NP	NC	NU	Discrepancies SHI: one segment; SAR: 5 segments; CR/BER: 6 segments; ROI: 2 segments. Different fleet segmentation for VUR.
Estonia	Sim	Equal	Sim	NP	Sim	NC	NU	SHI only comparable for 2 of the 6 segments
Finland	NC	NP	NP	NP	NP	NP	NU	The fleet report has calculated SHI on a stock basis rather than a fleet basis, therefore we are not able to make any comparisons. No

								values for the rest of the indicators.
France	Sim	Discr	Equal	NP	Equal	NC	NU	SAR discrepancy due to difference in stocks used. VUR provided is in many cases higher than 1, which is non sensical
Germany	Discr	Discr	Equal	NP	Equal	Discr	NU	SHI discrepancy for one segment, SAR in two segments and VUR for most segments
Greece	NC	NP	NP	NP	Sim	Discr	NU	SHI and VUR provided is for different fleets
Ireland	NC	NC	Discr	NP	Discr	NP	NU	SHI and SAR provided for 2021 not 2022. CR/BER and RoFTA show large discrepancy
Italy	NC	NP	NP	NP	NP	NC	NU	SHI and VUR provided by GSA so not comparable. CR/BER and ROI/RoFTA not provided for 2022.
Latvia	Sim	NP	Sim	Sim	NP	Sim	NU	SHI for different number of segments. SAR not provided.
Lithuania	Discr	Discr	Discr	Equal	Equal	Discr	NU	SHI and SAR discrepancy for 1 segment, CR/BR discrepancy for 3 segments. VUR discrepancies for most segments
Malta	NP	NP	Sim	Sim	NP	Discr	NU	SHI and SAR not provided, VUR provided per cluster
Netherlands	Sim	Discr	Equal	Equal	Equal	Equal	NU	Discrepancies for SAR for 5 segments.
Poland	Sim	Discr	Sim	Sim	NP	NC	NU	Discrepancies for SAR for 2 segments. the max seadays used to calculated VUR was not provided
Portugal	Sim	Discr	Sim	NP	Discr	Discr	NU	SAR discrepancies on many segments due to the number of stocks included in the calculations. Minor

								RoFTA discrepancy for 1 segment. VUR discrepancies for 9 segments due to the use of a different max seadays
Romania	Discr	NP	Discr	Equal	NP	Discr	NU	SHI discrepancies for 6 segments. SAR not provided because Romanian catches below 10% of stock at risk. CR/BER Discrepancy for 1 segment. VUR discrepancies for 3 segments
Slovenia	Equal	Discr	NC	NP	NC	Discr	NU	SAR discrepancies for 2 segments. Economic indicators provided for 2021 instead of 2022. VUR discrepancies because EWG calculated by cluster
Spain	Discr	Discr	Discr	NP	Discr	Discr	NU	Discrepancies in SHI for 2 segments, SAR for many segments, CR/BER for 2 segments, RoFTA for 1 segment, VUR for 2 segments.
Sweden	Discr	Sim	Equal	NP	Equal	NC	NU	SHI discrepancy for 2 segments. VUR discrepancy for 2 segments.

Source: EWG-24-13 and own elaborations.

STECF notes that often indicator trends were not provided in the fleet reports which prevented the EWG to make comparison between the trends calculated by the EWG and the provided trends.

STECF notes that as for past years, for many fleet segments discrepancies between the SHI values computed by the EWG 24-13 for a given year (in this report the year 2022) and those provided by Member States in their fleet reports for the same year, are likely to occur. Such occurrences arise because the values for F/FMSY used in computing the SHI will in most cases, be derived from the results of stock assessments undertaken at different times. For example, a Member State preparing its fleet report for 2023, which it will submit by 31 May 2024, is likely to base it on F/FMSY values for 2022 and stock assessments carried out in 2023. However, the EWG 24-13 derives its F/FMSY values for 2022 from stock assessments carried out in 2024, which is likely to deliver an

updated and often different value for F/FMSY for 2022 than in the previous year's assessment.

STECF further notes that the Commission guidelines specify that Member States may provide the Vessel utilisation indicator (VUR) based on the maximum number of days at sea for a fleet segment or an alternative provided by the Member States. If the "maximum" number of days provided for a fleet is lower than the average effective number of days at sea for a fleet, the VUR indicator can reach values higher than 1 and can not be interpreted as the rest of the VUR.

Overview of action plans

The EWG was asked to provide their opinion as to the effectiveness of the proposed measures provided in new or revised action plans submitted by each Member State with the most recent fleet reports in addressing the imbalance in the fleet segments concerned.

In 2024, new Action Plans (APs) were presented by Lithuania and Malta. In addition, an update of existing APs was provided by Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Spain. Croatia continued its Action Plan. The remaining Member States did not submit any new or updated APs.

STECF notes that the EWG 24-13 has produced a table summarising the main elements of the APs, for the years 2023 and 2024 which is reproduced below (Table 5.3.4). In particular, the new or revised APs were assessed by the EWG based on the (1) timeframe presented, (2) the precise measures to be implemented (tools described) and (3) their objectives and targets, for reducing the perceived imbalance in the fleet segments concerned, as requested by the Commission guidelines (appropriately targeted).

In 2024, for the Member States presenting a new or updated AP, the APs from Cyprus, Croatia, Germany, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal and Spain were considered by the EWG as sufficiently detailed regarding these three requirements. For the other APs submitted by Member States, the information provided was not sufficient for the EWG to quantitatively assess whether such measures would be sufficient to address any perceived imbalance or whether the stated objectives are likely to be met in the defined time frame. A summary of the Action Plans including the assessment of the EWG regarding the effectiveness of the measures proposed by the Member States is presented in table 5.3.4.

Belgium, Estonia, Finland and Sweden did not present any AP because these Member States considered all fleet segments to be in balance.

Table 5.3.4. Summary of action plans submitted in 2023 and 2024 as reported by the EWG.

MEMBER STATE	Year*	Action plan presented?	Status	Appropriately targeted?	Timeframe described	Tools described	EWG comments
Belgium	2023	No	NA	NA	NA	NA	The MS considered all segments to be in balance. No action plan presented.
Belgium	2024	No	NA	NA	NA	NA	The MS considered all segments to be in balance. No action plan presented.
Bulgaria	2023	yes	unclear	No	No	No	The provided action plan is not based on the MS's overall assessment in fleet report and comparison of technical, economic and biological indicators for 2019-2021. The explanation provided about the planned measures is general and does not give enough information about specific MS actions to balance fleet capacity.
Bulgaria	2024	yes	update	No	Yes	No	The updated action plan is partly targeted because there is no information about the share of capacity that will be reduced. The measures were added to the AP related to the EMFF activities and does not have a link to the segments considered out of balance in the MS Fleet report. However, it is still not clear how the proposed measures will improve the balance of the fleet.
Cyprus	2023	yes	Update	yes	yes	yes	A renewed action plan has been proposed for the fleet segment DTS VL2440. The proposed measure is the permanent cessation of fishing activities for two trawlers from a segment total of 4 trawlers operating in the territorial waters of Cyprus should the vessel owners volunteer to decommission their vessels. A time frame of 2 years (until 2023) was given for reaching the target for permanent cessation. In case of no volunteers on permanent cessation, certain fisheries areas will be closed and gear selectivity improvement applies since 2024
Cyprus	2024	yes	Update	yes	yes	yes	Updated from 2023. Nevertheless, the time frame target for permanent cessation has been shifted from 2023 to 2024, due to delays in the preparation of the methodology to be used for compensating the owners for the permanent cessation. The related time frames for replacing the diamond meshed trawl net at the cod end, and for closing an area for trawling, have been moved from 2024 to 2025. The MS identified the concern regarding one fleet segment.
Croatia	2023	yes	Updated and Strengthened	Yes	Yes	Yes	MS presented an updated action plan concerning the imbalance fleet segments, based on temporary and permanent cessations and completed with supplementary measures. The timeframe is defined and was extended for the permanent cessations The targets are also defined, but not always quantifiable. An adjustment of the expected result has been established.
Croatia	2024	yes	Continuation	yes	yes	yes	MS will continue to implement the actions prescribed in the 2023 action plan concerning the imbalance fleet segments. The actions are based on temporary and permanent cessations and completed with supplementary measures. The timeframe and targets are also defined for main actions.
Denmark	2023	yes	update	yes	yes	yes	The action plan proposed the previous year is still ongoing and ends at the end of 2023.
Denmark	2024	yes	update	no	no	no	No new action plan with with a clear timeframe or targeted to specific imbalanced fleet segments was proposed. Only very general measures are included.
Estonia	2023	no	/	/	/	/	The MS considered all segments to be in balance. No action plan was presented.
Estonia	2024	no	/	/	/	/	The MS considered all segments to be in balance. No action plan was presented.
Finland	2023	no	/	/	/	/	No action plan proposed by MS. The MS considers its fishing fleet to be in balance with fishing opportunities, with no identified structural overcapacity.
Finland	2024	no	/	/	/	/	No action plan proposed by MS. The MS considers its fishing fleet to be in balance with fishing opportunities, with no identified structural overcapacity.
France	2023	yes	update	yes	yes	yes	The AP was updated with new segments in Outermost regions. The actions for these segments do not relate to fleet capacity reduction. The new actions added for the vessel's segments (operating in Mediterranean and Atlantic) provided in previous AP. Time frame was extended to 2024.
France	2024	yes	update	yes	No	yes	The new AP was updated with the 4 new segments (Area 27, Area 37 and Other regions). The plan contains a wide range of general as well as more-specific measures for imbalanced fleet segments. Objectives are clearly described.

MEMBER STATE	Year*	Action plan presented?	Status	Appropriately targeted?	Timeframe described	Tools described	EWG comments
Germany	2023	yes	Update	yes	yes	yes	Updated from 2022. The AP proposes specific measures for some fleet segments and clearly indicate baseline for targets and measures to be set for the fleet segments concerned.
Germany	2024	yes	Update	yes	yes	yes	Updated from 2023. The AP includes a range of general measures (i.e., shifting relevant fishing opportunities to coastal fisheries, marketing support, suspension of fishing to protect cod stocks in the western Baltic Sea, suspension of fishing to protect herring stocks in the western Baltic Sea, and permanent cessation of fishing activities targeting cod and herring in the western Baltic), applicable to seven fleet segments for which problems have been identified.
Greece	2023	no	/	/	/	/	No action plan prposed by the MS, justifications are provided in the fleet report
Greece	2024	no	/	/	/	/	MS considers that certain fleet segments are not in balance with their fishing opportunities. An Action plan is in preparation but was not submitted with the annual fleet report. It is proposed to complete the action plan by the end of 2024
Ireland	2023	No	/	/	/	/	Based on the fleet reports of 2021-2024, it is the view of the Irish that structural imbalance is not present in any of the Irish fleet segments and no action plans have been proposed. It is the Irish view that any imbalance identified in some fleets in the fleet report is due to the difference in the rate of interest used in calculating the indicators.
Ireland	2024	No	/	/	/	/	Based on the available information, Ireland considers that structural imabalance does not exist in any of its fleet segments and no action plans are proposed.
Italy	2023	Yes	Update	No fleet segments mentioned	Partly	Partly	Updated from at least 2017. Objectives are not specifically targeted at the fleet segments that are out of balance, but rather refer to GSAs. The action plan describes several measures to be taken to reduce fishing mortality. Of these, only temporary closure periods are explicitly described and percentage targets for a reduction of fishing capacity for specific GSAs were issued. The other measures are mostly unfinalized and/or have not been implemented yet.
Italy	2024	Yes	Update with some new actions added	Fleet segments provided by GSAs	Mostly	Mostly	The action plan (AP) presented in this year´s fleet report is a revised version of last year´s action plan. Specific tools for a reduction in fishing pressure have been adjusted, the MS presents a table with the scrapping targets per GSA by segment (period 2021-2027). The measures in the action plan presented by the MS are mostly GSA-specific. In the scrapping plan, the minimum tonnage to be withdrawn is provided by fleet segment per GSA, however, the number of vessels affected cannot be determined
Latvia	2023	Yes	New	Yes	Yes	Yes	Timeframe: 31.12.2023. The target is the Baltic fleet segment of trawlers TM VL2440 through permanent withdrawal from fishing activity of 9 vessels involved in sprat and herring fishery. The EWG could not assess if the actions proposed will influence the balance.
Latvia	2024	No	/	/	/	/	MS stated that the measures to balance the fleet segment VL2440, included in Annex VII of the Annual Report on the Latvian Fishing Fleet 2022, are in the implementation phase and the effect of the reduction of the segment should be evaluated in the following years.
Lithuania	2023	No	/	/	/	/	Ongoing AP provided with 2020 fleet report. Timeframe: 2021-2023. Two types of measures targeting fleet segments NAO DFN 1012 and NAO DTS 2440 operating in the Baltic Sea - a system of transferable fishing concessions and a scrapping scheme with public compensation for permanent cessation of fishing for reducing overcapacity. No action plan for the distant water fleet segment (OFR TM 40XX).
Lithuania	2024	Yes	New	Yes	Yes	Yes	The AP foreseen 4 vessels of the NAO DTS VL2440 fleet segment would be withdrawn in 2024 with public compensation for permanent cessation, resulting in a 40% reduction in the fleet segment's total tonnage and a 42% decrease in power. The Lithuania Programme for the European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund 2021–2027 aims, by the end of 2029, to withdraw vessel capacity expressed in gross tonnage (GT) of 468.00 and kW of 884.00 in terms of power.
Malta	2023	yes	new	no	yes	no	The proposed action plan is largely a statement of intent to improve monitoring activities.
Malta	2024	yes	new	no	yes	yes	The proposed action plan is largely a statement of intent to improve monitoring activities. Some measures have been specified such as equipping vessels with a tablet (to transmit catches electronically), a sampling plan for lampara), obliging all vessels to be equipped with VMS or GPRS tracking devices, prohibition of fishing in certain bays from middle of february to middle of july, etc.).

MEMBER STATE	Year*	Action plan presented?	Status	Appropriately targeted?	Timeframe described	Tools described	EWG comments
Netherlands	2023	No	/	/	/	/	No rationale for not presenting AP is elaborated in the fleet report.
Netherlands	2024	No	/	/	/	/	The rationale given not to include any action plan is given as follows: "The consequences of the North Sea sole stock benchmark and the ongoing negotiations between the Coastal States on the pelagic stock management."
Poland	2023	yes	Update	yes	yes	yes	Some updates were performed in the action plan which were added to the 2023 MS report. An action plan applies to the vessels operating within the Baltic Sea region. The DTS VL1824 segment was withdrawn from the action plan due to it being definitively wound down in 2022. A timeframe is for three to five years without specific dates. However, a 5 year period was indicated for 2023 to 2027. The remedial measure for seven segments set out in the action plan will be implemented under the European Marine, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund.
Poland	2024	yes	Update	yes	yes	yes	Updated from 2023. The AP clearly specifies the targets and tools. However, no specific implementation date was indicated, only that the plan is to be implemented over the 3-5 year period 2023-2027 . The MS identified the concern regarding seven fleet segments operating in the Baltic Sea. The EWG 24-13 is unable to assess the extent to which the measures in the action plan are likely to redress the imbalance in the fleet segments concerned.
Portugal	2023	yes	Update	yes	yes	yes	Action Plan from 2022 and extended to the end of 2025 which provides permanent cessation of activity of 16 vessels from the fleet HOK >12m. The AP is strengthened by temporary cessation measure in 2023 for 40 vessels from the same fleet. The AP is clear, targeted and limited in time. In 2023, 26 applications meeting the scheme's eligibility requirements were submitted and an Order prohibited swordfish fishing for a total of 45 days affecting 28 vessels.
Portugal	2024	yes	Update	yes	yes	yes	Action Plan from 2022 and extended to the end of 2025 which provides permanent cessation of activity of 16 vessels from the fleet HOK >12m. The AP is strengthened by temporary cessation measure in 2023 for 40 vessels from the same fleet. The AP is clear, targeted and limited in time.
Romania	2023	yes	update	no	yes	yes	The action plan proposed the previous year is still ongoing and ends in 2027. The action plan does not specifically target any fleet segments for indicators that appear out of balance.
Romania	2024	yes	update	no	no	no	The action plan is largely a statement of intent to imprive monitoring activities. The action plan proposed the previous year is still ongoing and ends in 2027. The action plan does not specifically target any fleet segments for indicators that appear out of balance.
Slovenia	2023	No	/	/	/	/	Slovenia considers that MS fishing activity is extremely low and have insignificant impact, but is committed to achieving a a sustainable balance between fishing capacity and fishing opportunities. MS considers that all segments of Slovenian fleet are in balance and did not present an action plan.
Slovenia	2024	No	/	/	/	/	Slovenia considers that MS fishing activity is extremely low and have insignificant impact, but is committed to achieving a a sustainable balance between fishing capacity and fishing opportunities. MS considers that all segments of Slovenian fleet are in balance and did not present an action plan.
Spain	2023	Yes	New	Yes	Yes	Yes	New AP. The objectives are clearly defined and the measures to achieve them are described. The objectives are appropriately targeted to the fleet segments which are out of balance.
Spain	2024	Yes	Update	Yes	Yes	Yes	Updated from 2023, with some new measures, targets and tools for some segments. The objectives are clearly defined and the measures to achieve them are described.
Sweden	2023	no	/	/	/	/	The MS considered all segments to be in balance. No action plan was presented.
Sweden	2024	no	/	/	/	/	The MS considered all segments to be in balance. No action plan was presented.

** Year relates to the year of the MS & apos's fleet report that included the AP*

***Appropriately targeted? - Are the measures in the AP specifically aimed at redressing the imbalance in the fleet segments concerned?*

Source: own elaborations.

EWG Task 3

Fleet segments assessed to be out of balance according to the SAR or the SHI were listed together with the fish stocks on which they rely and the area to which they are attributed. The list is available as Annex III of the EWG 24-13 report.

STECF conclusions

STECF concludes that all terms of reference were successfully addressed by EWG 24-13.

Conclusions on the indicators by supra-region

Based on the findings of the EWG 24-13 and according to the criteria in the Commission Guidelines (COM(2014) 545), STECF concludes the following:

A meaningful value for the SHI could be calculated for a higher proportion of fleets in all regions compared to the results of EWG 23-13, from 36% in 2021 to 40% in 2022 of the fleet segments in the North Atlantic Ocean (NAO); from 31% in 2021 to 47% in 2022 in the Mediterranean and Black Seas (MBS) and from 33% in 2021 to 62% in 2022 in the Other Fishing regions (OFR).

For the North Atlantic Ocean (NAO) and the Other Fishing regions (OFR), most (80% and 85%, respectively) of the meaningful SHI indicated fleet segments were assessed to be in balance with fishing opportunities. For the Mediterranean and Black Seas (MBS), less than half (45%) of the meaningful SHI indicated fleet segments were assessed to be in balance with fishing opportunities although the trend in SHI is improving in 49% of the segments. Most of the trends in SHI were either not clear or could not be calculated (66% in NAO, 46% in MBS and 90% in OFR).

Economic indicators are showing most fleet segments to be in balance across regions. Trends in economic indicators show contrasting trajectories for different segments and different indicators in the NAO, with an indication of slight deterioration in the MBS and improvement in the OFR. This in a context of increasing energy prices in 2022.

The technical indicator Vessel Utilisation Ratio (VUR) indicates that about half of the segments would be in balance in the NAO and MBS. In the OFR, almost all fleet segments appear in balance according to the VUR. For the VUR, no clear trends can be detected for any of the supra-region’s NAO, MBS and OFR.

Conclusions on the process

STECF concludes that it is not clear how the inactive vessel indicator (IV) should be calculated. In order to facilitate the comparison work of the balance group in 2025, it should be clarified by the Commission prior to the writing of the national fleet reports whether the indicator is to be calculated relative to the fleet per length class or the total fleet. STECF also concludes that to aid interpretation, the IV indicator should keep its three components; number of vessels, gross tonnage and engine power.

STECF concludes that the choice of the total landings used (EU or total) to calculate the fleet segments contribution to the mortality of a stock at risk likely impacts the SAR indicator for fleet segments fishing on shared stocks and highly distributed stocks. To evaluate the effect of the choice of total landings, STECF concludes that an ad hoc contract assessing the actual sensitivity of the SAR indicator to that impact would be useful. The results of the contract would ideally be available for the spring plenary 2025 in order to inform Member States before they submit their fleet report in case changes in the calculation are required and would cover all fleet segments, including outermost regions. STECF considers that such a contract should cover:

- Identifying which criteria and conditions triggered the inclusion of stocks at risk in previous year (data already partly available),
- When the contribution condition (ii) was the trigger, identifying the total landings used for the different stocks (e.g. how has the BREXIT changed the total landings used for stocks evaluated by ICES?),
- Assessing whether data are available to estimate the total landings for all stocks (using existing databases such as RFMOs or for some stocks FAO data base)
- Assessing the effect of the use of the total EU landings or the total landings on the SAR indicator results,
- Investigate further analysis that the expert may judge relevant to better express the SAR indicator in regards to criteria, condition and geographical area.

STECF concludes that the clustering of fleet segments might impact the SAR indicator and that justification should be provided by the Member States as to why the transversal data are not provided by fleet segment (i.e. if it is due to a lack of data or confidentiality).

5.4 EWG 24-14: Economic Report on the EU aquaculture

Request to STECF

STECF is requested to evaluate the findings of the STECF Expert Working Group meeting and make any appropriate comments and recommendations.

STECF comments

EWG 24-14 met online 21-25 October 2024. The EWG was attended by a group of aquaculture economic experts consisting of 25 experts from 20 countries, three JRC experts and five observers. The economic report of the EU aquaculture sector is made on a biennial basis. The 2024 report is the ninth of its kind. It provides a comprehensive overview of the latest information available on the production, economic value, structure and competitive performance of the aquaculture sector at the Member State and EU level. The report covers the years 2008 to 2022, with the focus on 2017-2022 trends and nowcast for 2023. The report includes the marine finfish, shellfish, freshwater finfish and Algae segments.

STECF notes that following the 2024 call for economic data on the EU aquaculture sector, EWG 24-14 was requested to analyse and comment on the economic performance of the EU and national aquaculture sectors in 2021 and 2022 and produce a nowcast for 2023. The EWG was also requested to develop a short new section of the report that focuses on the economic sustainability of the EU aquaculture sector, which includes the use of economic sustainability indicators. Furthermore, the experts were requested to provide an analysis of the period 2017-2022 showing how these economic sustainability indicators evolved. To answer to that request, EWG 24-14 updated the time-series of the previous 2022 report, with data for 2021 and 2022.

STECF observes that the collection of social data is only mandatory every three years according to the EUMAP and the next dataset containing all Member States social indicators will be delivered in 2026 referring to 2023. However, some Member States collect social data every year according to their national work program. These countries provided data to the EWG. STECF notes that based on these submissions the EWG assessed the quality of the social indicators and provided suggestions for improvement in the Member State reporting of data.

STECF notes that definitions and how to report social data in a coherent way is still an issue and it requires additional preparation (such as development of a reporting template) before the next data submission in 2026.

STECF acknowledges that the EWG delivered a comprehensive report within two weeks after the meeting ended and acknowledges the difficulty faced during the

meeting due to data re-submissions during the meeting week and data updates after the meeting.

STECF observes that the total nominal turnover from the EU aquaculture sector reached 1.2 million tonnes corresponding to a sales value of €4.8 billion in 2022. This corresponds to a 1% increase in volume and a 13% increase value in 2022 compared to 2021. The nowcast estimates referring to 2023 predict a small decline in both sales volume and sales value in 2023, however there is a high uncertainty as regards this estimation and the decline should be taken with caution. The EU 27 aquaculture sector directly employed around 73 000 persons working and 41 000 FTE's in 2022 distributed on close to 14 000 enterprises.

STECF observes that the overall information on the EU sector has improved compared to the previous report due to the reporting of more data under the freshwater aquaculture segment and due to the new estimations, allowing to bridge data gaps and present time trends (by using imputation and nowcasting tools). However, despite the progress, the EWG continues to experience issues with data submission and resubmission during the meeting by Member States. STECF notes that erroneous data makes the work of the EWG to obtain key performance indicators of the EU aquaculture sector challenging. Furthermore, the data resubmission during or after the meeting improves the data quality but decreases the time dedicated to analysis of the data presented in the report. It also hinders experts to engage in deeper economic analysis and to provide in-depth explanations of the development.

STECF reiterates its observation from PLEN 22-03 that in order to provide comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the aquaculture sector in the EU, the data sets, submissions and templates for national analysis should be finalised prior to the meeting.

STECF conclusions

STECF concludes that EWG 24-14 adequately addressed all ToRs including provision of a nowcast for the sector for 2023 and an analysis of economic sustainability indicators.

STECF concludes that the report provides a good and reliable overview of the economic performance of the EU aquaculture sector over the 2017-2022 period. However, some data provision issues remain, including non-submission and continuous re-submission during the meeting, which reduces the available time that the EWG has to analyse the data and indicators produced.

STECF reiterates its conclusion from PLEN 22-03 that in order to provide a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the aquaculture sector in the EU, the data sets, submissions and templates for the analysis, should be finalised prior to the meeting. Therefore, STECF considers that the EWG should be divided into two shorter meetings:

1. an online preparatory 2-3 days meeting for data finalisation and drafting of national chapters and,
2. a shorter 3 days meeting with a smaller number of experts in person to produce in depth analysis of the EU level trends, segments overviews and special chapters.

STECF also concludes that provision of social indicators needs to be better aligned to be able to compare between Member States. This requires a preparatory methodological discussion on the definitions of the social variables requested under the EUMAP and the development of a common template for future data calls, which may be undertaken by RCG ECON and the newly established Intersessional Subgroup (ISSG) on social aspects.

5.5 EWG 24-15: Evaluation of Work Plans for data collection and data transmission issues

Request to STECF

STECF is requested to evaluate the findings of the STECF Expert Working Group meeting and make any appropriate comments and recommendations. The following topics are particularly pertinent for DG MARE:

1) MS follow-up in new work plans on RCG recommendations, previous STECF evaluations (WP, AR, DT)
2) Evolution of MS work plans compared to 2022-2024, also including policy development (e.g. Marine Action Plan) and integration of previous pilot studies, if not done until 2024.
3) Integration of regional WP into national WP: observed progress towards more coordinated data collection to satisfy end-user needs, recommendations for improvement.

STECF comments

STECF notes that EWG 24-15 met in Brussels from 28 to 31 October 2024 and virtually on 4 November 2024 to:

- Evaluate the Member States national Work Plans (WP) and their link to the Regional Work Plans (RWP), under the Data Collection Framework (DCF) for the years 2025-2027,
- Evaluate high-severity Data Transmission issues (DTi) from the 2024 Fleet Economics data call (EWG 24-03 and EWG 24-07) and medium- and low-severity issues from 2023 data calls, uploaded on the Data Transmission Monitoring Tool (DTMT),
- Test and provide input on the DCF IT platform.

STECF considers that the EWG adequately addressed the TORs and has the following specific comments on the ToRs.

1. Evaluation of Member States' national WPs and their link to the RWPs

STECF notes that 24 Member States submitted their national WP for 2025-2027, of which 20 were new WPs and 4 revised WPs.

STECF notes that prior to the EWG, all national WPs were pre-screened through a series of ad-hoc contracts and a so-called ping-pong information exchange was conducted between DG MARE and the Member States as in previous years. Member States were requested to reply to the issues identified by the EWG experts during the meeting and after the third round of this ping-pong process (including the pre-screening), issues identified in 16 national WPs were unsolved by the end of the meeting, leaving those issues to be re-assessed during the STECF plenary meeting (PLEN 24-03).

STECF notes that 15 out of 16 Member States provided feedback on the outstanding issues and/or resubmitted their national WP by the end of the STECF plenary meeting. The final cross-check of the outstanding issues by the STECF plenary, in cooperation with DG MARE, resulted in that minor issues remained unresolved in eight WPs at the end of the STECF plenary. Some of these issues require bilateral communication between the Commission and Member States to be resolved. STECF notes that the evaluation sheets (so-called assessment grids) and guidance for evaluators developed by STECF during 2020-2022 were used for the evaluation. The detailed outcomes of the evaluations by each Member State were reported in the evaluation sheets (assessment grids) to keep track of the adjustments and comments made during the multiannual WP evaluation process.

STECF observes that effort has been made to further refine the national WP templates, WP guidelines and assessment grid for future WP evaluations and/or submissions, e.g. the EWG agreed to amendment the guidance to specify that table 2.1 (‘List of required species/stocks’) only refers to commercial sampling and that in table 2.5 (‘Sampling plan description for biological data’) an ‘out-of-frame’ row must be provided for each Sampling scheme identifier. STECF observes that the proposed revised assessment grid is available in the electronic annexes of the EWG report and reflects e.g. the addition of a consistency check between the sampling scheme identifiers in the tables and the quality annexes and the option to include additional comments.

STECF observes that during the evaluation of the national WPs, the EWG was also asked to check the consistency of the national WPs with the regional WPs (RWPs) and to verify the alignment with the Marine Action Plan objectives regarding the by-catch of sensitive species and impact of fishing on the seabed.

STECF observes that the EWG identified discrepancies between RWPs and national WPs, and emphasized that in case of an error in the RWP, it should not be transferred to the national WP. Instead, the inconsistency with the RWP should be clarified with a comment in the national WP and the error in the RWP should be addressed by the respective RCG. The EWG also noted a common issue in several national WPs regarding references to specific tables that do not exist in the RWPs.

STECF observes that although five out of six RWPs are formally approved by STECF, the EWG still identified inconsistencies in the RWPs. A frequently occurring issue is the incorrect application of the threshold rules for not sampling when a Member State has no landings or catches of a species.

STECF observes that the EWG conducted a cross-check of the references to the Marine action plan in the national WPs and asked the Member State to provide the reference if it was missing in the national WP.

STECF observes that the EWG was asked to assess the progress compared to the previous national WP submissions, including how effectively the issues identified in past evaluations have been addressed, whether test studies have now been integrated into the regular sampling programmes and if RCG/end-user recommendations have been followed.

STECF notes that the EWG provided an overview of the main changes in national WPs from 2022-2024 to 2025-2027 per Member State and section of the WP, along with comments on those changes. The EWG used the Member States summaries of the changes and amendments in the national WPs to compile those overviews. However, STECF observes that, due to the lack of a standardized approach, the level of detail and focus in the overviews of the Member States varies widely and hampers the assessment of the progress.

STECF observes that the EWG did not address the follow-up on RCG recommendations in the national WPs. STECF notes that, unlike in the AR template, the WP template does not include a table for Member States to document follow-up actions, as those recommendations are incorporated in the RWPs and do not often require multiannual follow-up.

2. Evaluation of Data Transmission issues (DTi)

STECF observes that the EWG evaluated one high-severity DTi from the 2024 Fleet Economics data call (EWG 24-03 and 24-07), and 157 medium- and low-severity DTis from the data calls in 2023 (49 issues from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), 8 issues from Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC), 32 issues from Fisheries independent Information (FDI), 52 issues from Mediterranean and Black Sea (Med&BS) and 16 issues from processing industry).

STECF notes that 5 DTis related to the ICES data calls, were assessed as ‘Follow-up needed,’ with DG MARE appointed as the ‘Follow up responsible’, following the updated DTMT guidance and decision tree (version March 2024). 33 DTis were assessed as

‘Unsatisfactory’ and 52 as ‘Unsatisfactory-to be revised’, of which the majority is related to the IOTC and Med&BS data call.

STECF notes that the high-severity DTis lacked a response from the Member States and was therefore assessed as ‘Unsatisfactory’.

STECF notes that the additional time allocated in the new DTMT assessment cycle for end users to provide feedback on the responses provided by Member States, resulted in end user feedback for the DTis, related to the FDI data call, Mediterranean and Black Sea data call and the processing industry call. STECF notes that the feedback facilitated the assessments.

STECF observes that the EWG suggested amending the DTMT Guidance document to clarify that when a DTi is assessed as ‘Unsatisfactory’, a ‘Follow up responsible’, should not be assigned, as this closes the issue.

3. DCF IT platform

STECF observes that although submission via the platform was optional, the majority of the Member States successfully submitted their national WP to the DCF IT platform before the pre-screening and during the EWG meeting. STECF notes that the EWG acknowledges the great progress in functionality of the DCF IT platform, which resulted in fewer editing errors compared to traditional submissions in previous years.

STECF observes that the use of the DCF IT platform in the pre-screening process resulted in faster and more comprehensive issue identification. However, the ability to assign comments to specific parts in the text or to multiple cells, rows or columns at once would further enhance the process.

STECF observes that the DCF IT platform was also tested in relation to the EWG assessments and communication with MS for 2 national WPs.

STECF observes that the EWG provided suggestions for the improvement of the cross-checking rules within the DCF IT platform.

STECF conclusions

STECF endorses the outcomes of EWG 24-15 presented during PLEN 24-03 and concludes that all ToRs were appropriately addressed.

STECF concludes that the extended ping-pong evaluation process (i.e. communication of issues with the WP between DG MARE and Member States), consisting of four cycles, extended into the STECF plenary meeting which caused additional work during the plenary meeting, but will benefit future AR evaluations.

STECF concludes that there is a need for guidance on the level of detail required in the summaries of the Member States regarding changes in the WPs, as this information is used to assess the progress of Member States WPs compared to previous submissions.

STECF concludes that the follow-up on RCG recommendations by Member States in the WPs was not addressed and cannot be easily verified, as there is no documentation reflecting follow-up actions by the Member States. For this reason, STECF concludes that this documentation should be requested in future WP submissions.

The EWG provided suggestions for improving the WP templates, WP guidelines and assessment grid used. STECF concludes that these should be considered in future WP submissions and evaluations.

STECF concludes that a comprehensive operational test of the DCF IT-platform was conducted for the first time, demonstrating its valuable functionality in enabling faster error detection during the submission and evaluation of the WPs. However, the functionality of adding and saving comments could still be improved.

6. ADDITIONAL REQUESTS SUBMITTED TO THE STECF PLENARY BY THE COMMISSION

6.1 Assessment of the situation relating to the TACs of pollack in ICES divisions 8abde, 8c and 9-10

Background provided by the Commission

Further to STECF assessments of the review and analysis of socio-economic data relating to the TACs of pollack in ICES divisions 8abde (STECF PLEN 24-01), 8c and 9-10 (STECF PLEN 24-02), there was evidence for potential “choke” phenomenon triggered by reduced pollack TACs, set in line with ICES advice.

Taking into account Article 5(3) of the Western Waters MAP, the Council of Ministers decided to set the TACs at the levels of 959 tonnes, 108 tonnes and 132 tonnes respectively. In addition to this decrease by -35% compared to 2023 levels, the Council adopted additional conservation measures to rebuild the stock’s biomass, namely i) the increase of the minimum size (from 30 to 42 cm), ii) the limitation of recreational fisheries (catch and release Jan-April, 1 fish/day) and iii) the prohibition of directed fishing on the stock.

Background documents are published on:

https://stecf.ec.europa.eu/meetings-calendar/past-meetings

Request to the STECF

Considering that the ICES advice has been provided for 2 years, 2024 and 2025, the STECF is requested to assess whether the situation for the 3 TACs of pollack in 2025 will differ from the situation in 2024.

In this context, the STECF is asked to assess the flexibilities offered by swaps, inter-annual flexibilities, and inter-area flexibilities.

Summary of the information provided to STECF

DG Mare provided STECF with data on monthly landings of pollack by Member States and ICES division for the years 2022, 2023 and for the first nine months of 2024.

STECF was requested to analyse the potential choke situations in 2024 in two different requests. For divisions 8abde (PLEN 24-01), for division 8c and for subareas 9 and 10; Union waters of CECAF 34.1.1 (PLEN 24-02). In the reports from these plenaries, STECF commented on the possibility that several fleets could be choked by the available quota of pollack in 2024. This potential choke related to the French fleets in divisions 8abde and the Spanish fleets in division 8c.

Summary of the TACs and quotas regulation in place for 2024

The ICES advice for ICES subarea 8 and division 9a states that when the Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) approach is applied, commercial catches of pollack should not exceed 872 tonnes in each of the years 2024 and 2025. In the advice, all commercial catches are assumed to be landed. Furthermore, ICES cannot quantify the corresponding total catches because the recreational catches cannot be quantified (ICES, 2023).

Although the ICES advice is combined for the entire area, at management level three TACs are set. A TAC for divisions 8abde, with quota allocations for France and Spain, a TAC for division 8c with quota allocations for France and Spain and a TAC for ICES subareas 9 and 10 with quota allocations for Portugal and Spain.

Regulation (EU) 2024/257 provisionally set the pollack TAC for 2024 in ICES divisions 8abde from 1 January to 30 June 2024 at the level of 500 tonnes (t). This TAC was amended by the Regulation (EU) 2024/1856 setting the final TAC at 959 t, with the remark that 459 t of the TAC could only be captured in non-directed fishing operations.

Regulation (EU) 2024/257 set the TAC in each of the years 2024 and 2025 in ICES division 8c at the level of 78 tonnes. This TAC was amended by the Regulation (EU) 2024/2678, setting the 2024 TAC for this stock at 108 t, with the remark that from the 1st of October 2024 pollack could only be captured in non-directed fishing operations.

Regulation (EU) 2024/257 set the TAC in each of the years 2024 and 2025 in ICES subareas 9 and 10 at the level of 96 tonnes. This TAC was amended by the Regulation (EU) 2024/2678 setting the 2024 TAC for this stock at 132 t. This last regulation and for the specific case of this stock presented two footnotes: a special condition: of which up to 100 % of the Spanish quota may be fished in division 8c and that in addition to this TAC, Portugal may fish quantities of pollack not exceeding 98 t.

Overall, the TAC of Pollack for these areas combined was 1199 t, 37% above the catches advised by ICES for 2024 and 2025 of 872 t per year. Table 6.1.1 presents a summary of the TACs and quotas for the three areas.

Table 6.1.1. Summary of the TAC setting for Pollack in the three TAC areas.

Area	TAC setting	EU (t)	France (t)	Spain (t)	Portugal (t)	Portugal (SC) (t)
8abde	ICES advice	698	579	119	0	
	Final	959	796	163	0	
8c	ICES advice	78	8	70	0	

	Final	108	11	97	0	
9-10	ICES advice	96	0	93	3	
	Final	132	0	128	4	98
All areas	ICES advice	872	587	282	3	
	Final	1199	807	388	4	
	Final +SC	1297	807	388	102	

Source: background documentation provided by the Commission and own elaborations.

Note: The quotas of France and Spain in the divisions 8abde are based on the historical relative shares. The remaining quotas are based on the regulations in place during the year 2024. SC stands for special condition.

Finally, for the three management areas, a minimum conservation reference size of 42 cm was established (COM/ 2024/257).

STECF comments

Pollack in the ICES divisions 8abde

STECF notes that based on the data available, at the end of September 2024, French fleets captured 571 t of pollack in divisions 8abde. These catches represent 72% of the French quota of 796 t (Regulation (EU) 2024/1856) for this stock. In those divisions catches of Spanish vessels at the same time were 6.85 t, approximately 4.2% of the Spanish quota.

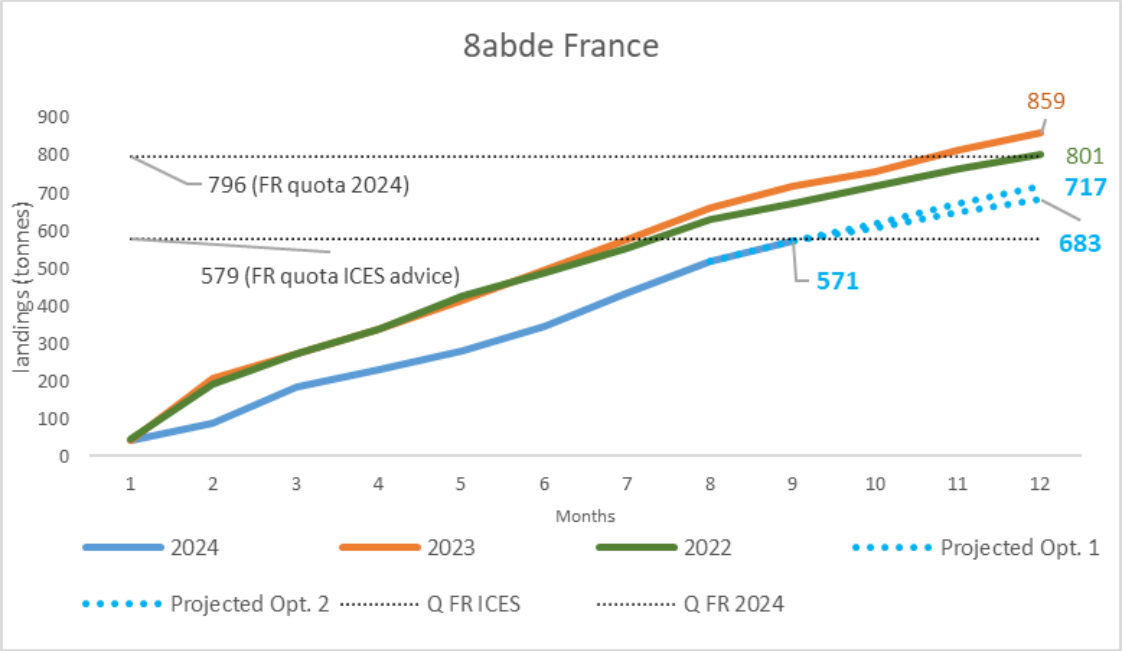
It is not yet possible to provide an accurate estimate of the catches at the end of the year 2024. However, STECF has projected the plausible catches considering two different options as a reference: Option 1 uses the ratio between the total catches up to September 2024 and the mean catches in the same months in the years 2022 and 2023. This ratio is then applied to the mean catches in 2022 and 2023 from October to December. Option 2 uses the maximum observed catches in 2022 and 2023 in each of the months from October to December.

The results of these two projections show that, option 1 would imply landings of 682.5 t in 2024 and Option 2 would imply 716.7 t, for French fleets. For the Spanish fleets this projection would result in landings of 7.5 t and 7.6 t, for option 1 and 2, respectively. Considering the TAC of 959 t agreed for 2024, the Member State quotas, and that no

flexibility tools are used, the projections imply an uptake between 86-90% for French fleets and of 5% for the Spanish fleets.

If the TAC for 2024 had been set inline with ICES advice (i.e a TAC of 698 t, PLEN 24-01), and no flexibility tools were used, projected uptakes would be between 118% and 124%, for French fleets and 6% for the Spanish fleets.

Figure 6.1.1. Monthly evolution of cumulative catches in 2022, in green, (801 t at the end of month 12), 2023, in orange, (859 t at the end of month 12) and 2024, in blue, (571 t at the end of month 9) of pollack in the divisions 8abde by French fleets and the putative quota for France if based on ICES advice for 2024 and the relative stability (579 t) and quota set for 2024 (796 t). The dotted blue lines represent a projection for month 12 under two scenarios: under 2024 pattern (683 t) (Option 1) and the maximum catches observed from month 10 to 12 in the period 2022-23 (Option 2) (717 t).



Source: background documentation provided by the Commission, ICES and own elaborations.

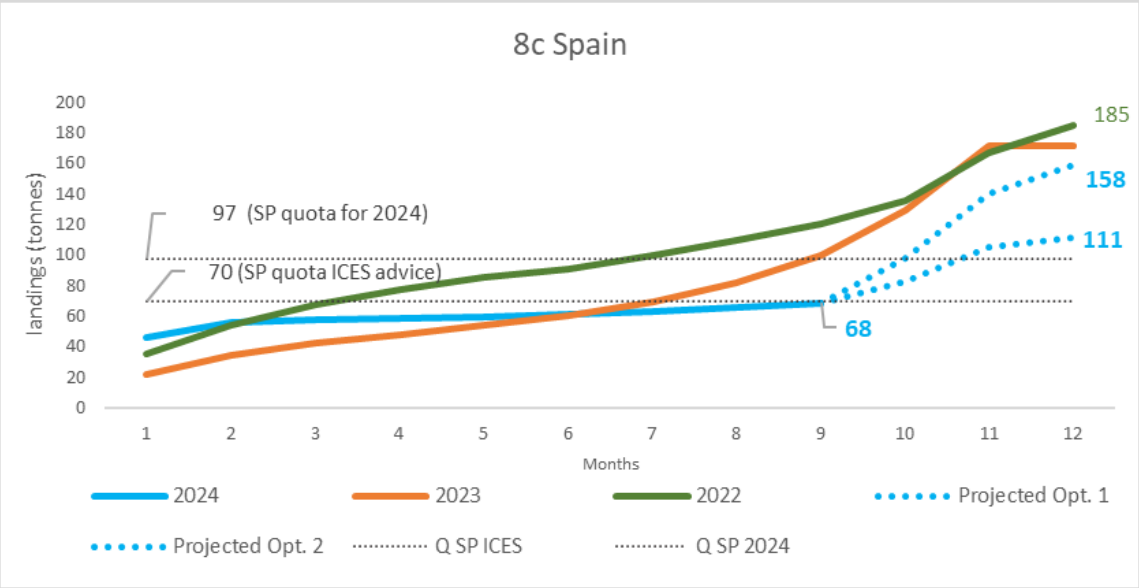
Pollack in the ICES divisions 8c

STECF notes that based on the data provided, until the end of September 2024, Spanish fleets captured 68 t of pollack in this division. This is 71% of the 97 t of the Spanish quota (Regulation (EU) 2024/2678) for this stock. Catches of the French vessels in this division are negligible.

The two options explained above for the projection of catches up to the end of the year 2024 can also be applied for this stock. Option 1 would imply 111 t of landings in 2024

and Option 2, 158 t of landings for Spanish fleets. Considering the TAC of 108 t agreed for 2024, the Member State quotas, and that no flexibility tools are used, this would imply an uptake between 114-163% for Spanish fleets. If the TAC for 2024 had been set in line with ICES advice (i.e. a TAC of 78 t (EU) 2024/257), projected uptakes would be between 158% and 226%, for the Spanish fleets.

Figure 6.1.2. Monthly evolution of cumulative catches in 2022, in green, (185 t at the end of month 12), 2023, in orange, (167 t at the end of month 12) and 2024, in blue, (68 t at the end of month 9) of pollack in the division 8c by Spanish fleets and the quota for Spain if based on ICES advice for 2024 (70 t) and final quota in 2024 (97 t). The dotted blue lines represent a projection for month 12 under two scenarios: 2024 pattern (111 t) (Option 1) and the maximum catches observed from month 10 to 12 in the period 2022-23 (158 t) (Option 2).



Source: background documentation provided by the Commission, ICES and own elaborations.

Pollack in the ICES subareas 9-10; Union waters of CECAF 34.1.1

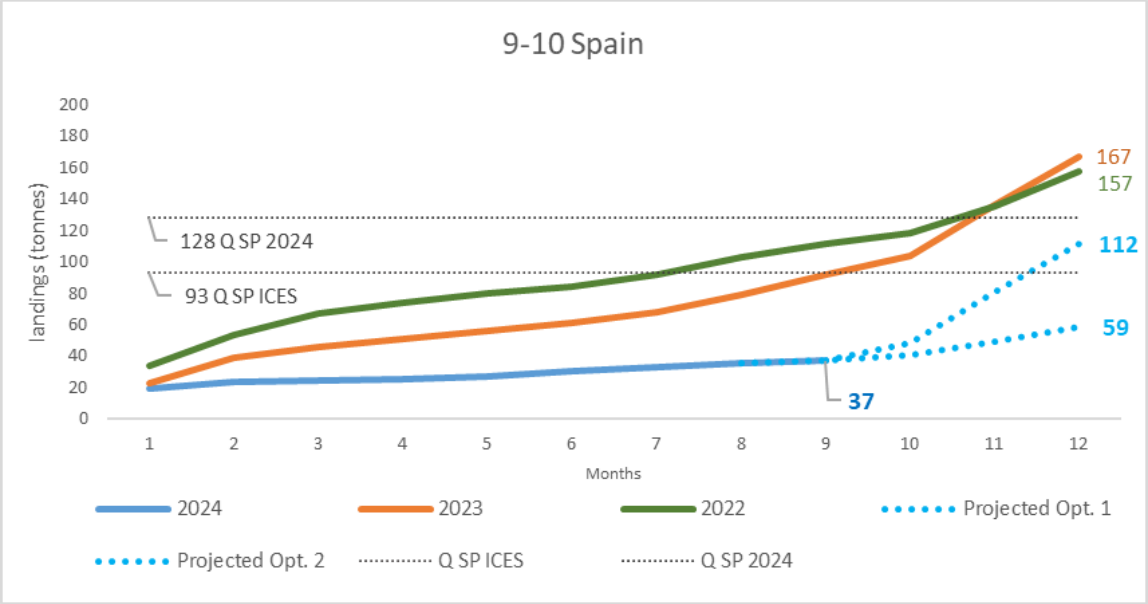
Spain

STECF notes that based on the data provided, until the end of September 2024 Spanish fleets captured 37 t of pollack. This amounts to 29% of the 128 t of the Spanish quota (Regulation (EU) 2024/2678) for this stock.

The two options explained above for the projection of catches up to the end of the 2024 year, can also be applied for this stock. Option 1 would imply 59 t of landings in 2024 and Option 2, 112 t, for Spanish fleets. Considering the TAC of 132 t agreed for 2024, the Member State quotas, and that no flexibility tools are used, this would imply an uptake of between 46-96% for Spanish fleets. If the 2024 TAC had been set in line with

ICES advice (i.e a TAC of 96 t, (EU) 2024/257), projected uptakes would be between 63% and 132%, for the Spanish fleets.

Figure 6.1.3. Monthly evolution of cumulative catches in 2022, in green, (157 t at the end of month 12), 2023, in orange, (167 t at the end of 12) and 2024, in blue, (37 t at the end of month 9) of pollack in the division 9a and sub area 10 by the Spanish fleets and the quota for Spain according to ICES advice for 2024 (93 t) and final quota in 2024 (128 t). The dotted blue lines represent a projection for month 12 under two scenarios: under 2024 pattern (59 t) (Option 1) and the maximum catches observed from month 10 to 12 in the period 2022-23 (112 t) (Option 2).



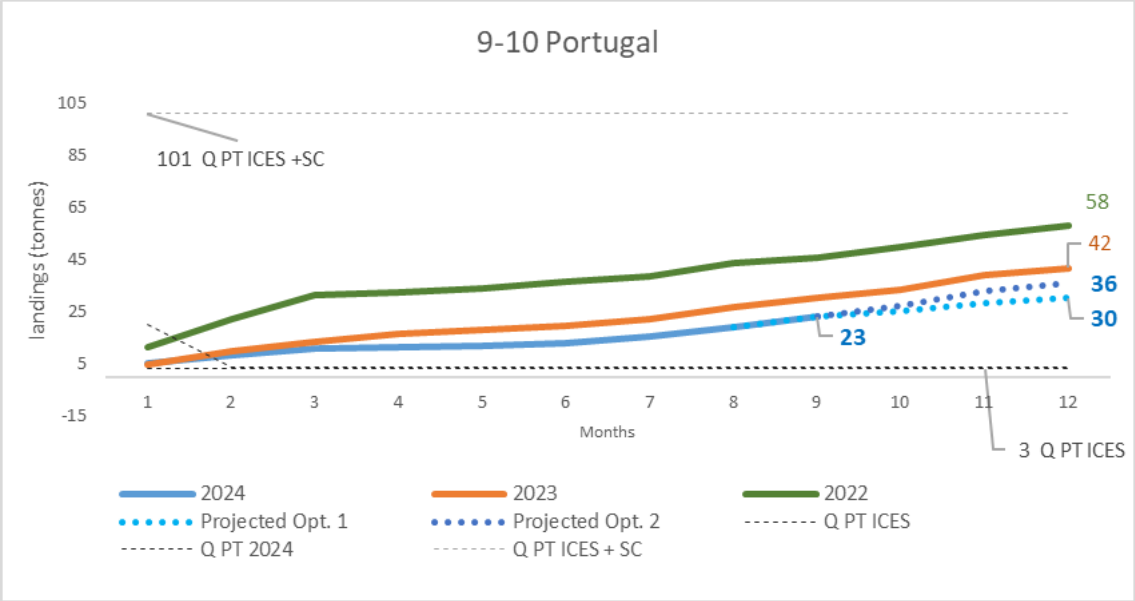
Source: background documentation provided by the Commission, ICES and own elaborations.

Portugal

STECF notes that based on the data provided, until the end of September 2024 Portuguese fleets captured 23 t of pollack. This is 23% of the 102 t of the Portuguese quota for this stock (Regulation (EU) 2024/2678)

The two options explained above for the projection of catches up to the end of the year 2024 can also be applied for this stock. Option 1 would imply 30 t of landings in 2024 and Option 2, 36 t, for Portuguese fleets. Considering the TAC of 102 t, the Member State quotas, and that no flexibility tools are used, this would imply an uptake between 30-36% for the Portuguese fleets. If the ICES advice were considered (i.e a TAC of 101 t (EU) 2024/257), projected uptakes would be similar.

Figure 6.1.4. Monthly evolution of cumulative catches in 2022, in green, (58 t at the end of month 12), 2023, in orange, (42 t at the end of 12) and 2024, in blue, (23 t at the end of month 9) of pollack in subareas 9-10 by the Portuguese fleets and the quota for Portugal according to ICES advice for 2024 (3 t) and final quota in 2024 (101 t). The dotted blue lines represent a projection for month 12 under two scenarios: under 2024 pattern (30 t) (Option 1) and the maximum catches observed from month 10 to 12 in the period 2022-23 (36 t) (Option 2).



Source: background documentation provided by the Commission, ICES and own elaborations.

STECF notes that the Regulation (EU) 2024/2678 includes a special condition (SC) that in addition to the TAC of this stock (132 t), Portugal may fish quantities of pollack not exceeding 98 t. This is reflected in the Figure above as “Q PT ICES +SC”. Without this special condition, the 23 t captured until the end of September 2024 would represent an uptake of 576% of the Portuguese TAC for this stock.

Table 6.1.2. Summary of the landings in 2024 (until the end of September 2024) and the projected landings for 2024 under the two projection options.

	2024 Landings until the end of September (t)	Potential 2024-landings, Option 1(t)	Potential 2024-landings, Option 2 (t)
France in 8abde	571	683	717
Spain in 8abde	6.9	7.5	7.6

France in 8c	0.004	0.02	0.02
Spain in 8c	68.4	111	158
Spain in 9-10	36.8	58.6	112
Portugal in 9-10	23.1	30	36
Total	706.57	890	1030

Source: background documentation provided by the Commission and own elaborations.

Assessment of the flexibilities offered by swaps, inter-annual flexibilities, and inter-area flexibilities.

Swaps

Swaps in this context are quota exchanges between Member States to adapt the fishing possibilities to their fishing fleets' portfolios. STECF notes that in previous years swaps have occurred between Spain (donor) and France (receptor) for pollack in divisions 8abde (PLEN 24-01). Considering that the quota uptake by the Spanish fleets until September 2024 or any of the projections made for the end of the year is lower than 10%, there is a potential swap of 100 t if ICES advice is considered to set 2025 TAC for pollack for this stock.

STECF notes that in previous years swaps have occurred between France (donor) and Spain (receptor) for pollack in division 8c (PLEN 24-02). Considering that the quota uptake by the French fleets until September 2024 or any of the projections made for the end of the year is lower than 10%, there is a potential swap of 5 t if ICES advice is considered to set 2025 TAC for pollack for this stock.

Regarding the pollack in the division 9a and sub area 10, STECF is not aware of any swap between Portugal and Spain. Considering the Portuguese quota (without the special condition set out in Regulation (EU) 2024/2678 of 98 t to Portugal) and the uptake of it by Portuguese fleets, the room for a potential swap can be considered as limited. However, if the 98 t of the special condition is considered, there is a potential swap of 60 t.

Inter-annual flexibilities

STECF notes that this flexibility implies that unused quantities in 2024 can be transferred to 2025 of up to 10 % of the 2024 quota in 2025. In divisions 8abde, under both projected options projected for 2024, unused quota is above the 10% limit which implies that there will likely be a possibility of 10% (79.6 t) to increase the French quota for this stock in 2025.

In division 8c, and for Spain, the projected uptakes are above 100%, which implies that there will likely not be any unused quota.

In sub areas 9-10, considering the quota uptake of Spain (until the end of September), there could be a potential use of this inter annual flexibility in 2025.

STECF notes that the use of inter-annual flexibilities can create a situation where the fishing possibilities in 2025 could exceed the ICES advice for this year.

Inter area flexibilities

Regulation (EU) 2024/2678 presents a special condition of which up to 100 % of the Spanish quota of the subarea 9-10 quota may be fished in division 8c. The uptake of the Spanish quota up to the end of September 2024 was 40% and Spain can potentially use this flexibility. STECF further notes that this special condition is new for 2024 and 2025.

STECF notes that the use of this flexibility is in line with how the ICES advice is provided (i.e combined for three TAC areas).

Other factors

Recreational catches

STECF notes the setting of a recreational allocation, in the Fishing Opportunities Regulation for 2024, of a 2 fish/day bag limit in ICES subareas 8, 9, 10.

Considering that recreational catches are not included in the ICES assessment (ICES, 2023a), STECF is unable to estimate the impact of that measure. Furthermore, as these catches are not included in the ICES advice for 2024-25, any changes or restrictions of recreational fisheries will not affect the calculation of the advised fishing opportunities for commercial fisheries.

Change in the MCRS of pollack

Regarding the change of the MCRS from from 30 to 42 cm, STECF cannot assess quantitatively the effect of the change on the productivity of the stock nor on the impact on the fishing fleet's income. However, STECF notes that this change would especially affect the Spanish gillnetters (GNS_DEF_60_79_0_0mm) in division 8c and French gillnetters in divisions 8abde, where most catches are composed by individuals < 45 cm.

STECF notes that if the landing obligation is not fully implemented, an increase in MCRS without a change in the selectivity of the gear, would increase the high grading risk. STECF further notes the low survivability of pollack after discarding.

Other regulations affecting fleets fishing pollack

STECF notes that from 2024, fishing in the French EEZ of the subarea 8 was banned from 22 January to 20 February as a measure to reduce dolphin bycatch. This ban applied to numerous French and Spanish vessels above 8 m LOA, operating in that area and fishing with gears considered at risk of bycatch. STECF observes that in the first two months of 2024 French fleets reduced the landings of pollack by 65%

compared to the 2022-2023 average. The reduction of the effort deployed in this area in these two months is likely part of the explanation of the observed reduction of pollack landings, although STECF cannot assess the exact effect of this ban on pollack catches. STECF considers that given that in 2025 the ban will be applied again for French and Spanish vessels in that area (Delegated regulation, EC(2024)6800), a similar reduction of landings (compared to the 2022-23 average) could occur.

STECF notes that the landings of pollack made by the Spanish fleets have increased by 63% in January 2024 compared to the 2023-22 average in division 8c. STECF notes that the fishing closure to protect dolphins was in place in 2024 for division 8c and will notbe in place in 2025 (Delegated regulation, C(2024) 6800).

STECF notes that Spain implemented daily catch limits after February 2024 for pollack in division 8c and subarea 9 (BOE-A-2024-2435): 10 kg per day and vessel for longliners and 5 kg per day and vessel for the rest of the fishing modalities. STECF notes that from February to September there has been a decrease in the Spanish landings in division 8c of 72% compared to the 2022-2023 average and that this daily limit has likely contributed to this observed reduction, although STECF cannot assess the exact effect of it.

Finally, STECF notes that the effect of the Council decision prohibiting directed fishing on the stock of pollack may also have contributed to reducing catches in 2024 for French fleets and may also have a similar effect in the last 3 months of 2024, for Spanish fleets.

STECF conclusions

STECF concludes that based on the data provided, total landings of pollack at the end of September 2024 reported by the three Member States in the three management areas (707 t) do not exceed the ICES advice for 2024 (872 t). However, STECF concludes that based on the reported landings up to September 2024 and the projected estimates for October - December 2024, the total landings of pollack for 2024 are expected to exceed the catch of 872 t advised by ICES for 2024 and 2025.

Fishing opportunities for 2024 (1297 t, including the special condition of 98 t to Portugal in sub area 9-10) exceed those advised by ICES for 2024 and 2025. STECF reiterates that the ICES single-stock advice is based on the best available biological and ecological science and does not directly account for socioeconomic considerations nor mixed fisheries issues. However, exceeding the MSY advice in 2025 may lead to a further deterioration of the stock in subsequent years.

STECF concludes that in the nine first months of 2024 there has been a reduction of the pollack landings compared to the average 2023-22 by those fleets that were identified by PLEN 24-01 and 24-02 as having a potential choke effect: 18% reduction for French fleets in 8abde and 38% for Spanish fleets in 8c. STECF further concludes that the closure for the protection of common dolphin in the French EEZ of area 8abde and the daily catch limit (in 8c) have likely contributed to this catch reduction observed in the

first nine months of 2024 although cannot assess the exact effect of them. STECF concludes that the closure for the protection of common dolphin in the French EEZ of area 8abde will continue in 2025, however STECF cannot anticipate if the daily catch limits applied to the Spanish fleets in divisions 8c and subareas 9-10 will continue in 2025.

STECF concludes that the maximum landings observed for Portugal fleets in the period 2022-24 has been 58 t, i.e. 59% of the special condition (SC) of 98 t that Portugal has on this stock and 57% of the total fishing possibilities for this MS in 2024. However, STECF concludes that a lump sum quota independent of the TAC or any scientific advice, as the 98 t of the special condition to Portugal, may lead to a further deterioration of this stock in the following years and therefore, not contribute to the conservation objective of the CFP.

STECF concludes that the increase of MCRS without a change in the selectivity of the gears increases the risk of high grading and/or the landings of non-marketable sizes of this species. Therefore, this increase in the MCRS does not necessarily contribute to the conservation objective of the CFP.

STECF concludes that there will always be a risk of a choke in mixed fisheries managed by single stocks TACs if the landing obligation is fully implemented. However, STECF reiterates that there are several confounding factors, such as doubts around the implementation of the landing obligation, no reporting of choke cases, and the effectiveness of measures applied in recreational fisheries which limit the accuracy of the assessment that can be provided.

STECF concludes that there are mechanisms within the CFP such as swapping and spatial and time flexibilities, improvements in selectivity and additional regulations such as daily limits and effort reductions,that might alleviate or eliminate any choke risk in 2025 if ICES advice is used for setting the 2025 TACs.

6.2 Recommendations of the Regional Coordination Groups

Background provided by the Commission

The Liaison meeting took place online on 24 and 25 of September 2024. Recommendations of the Regional Coordination Groups were put forward.Background documents are published on:

https://stecf.ec.europa.eu/meetings-calendar/past-meetings

Request to the STECF

STECF is requested to analyse the recommendations of the RCGs in the light of their possible impact on the scientific advice process (stock assessment, annual economic report, management measures assessment) and to inform the Commission on the possible effect of the recommendations on the data coverage, quality and availability.

STECF observations

The Liaison Meeting brings together the chairs of the Regional Coordination Groups (RCGs), end users (ICES, STECF, Regional Fisheries Management Organisations) and the Commission. This year's Liaison Meeting took place on 24 and 25 September 2024 in Brussels in a hybrid format and was chaired by Marie Storr-Paulsen from DTU Aqua, Denmark.

The RCGs and the Liaison Meeting have put forward numerous recommendations, but contrary to previous years, none were initially identified by DG MARE as relevant for STECF. However, as there are a high number of recommendations, it was agreed that a selection of recommendations relevant for STECF would be provided by DG MARE. These relate to issues of data collection and/or reporting, to data calls that are handled by STECF, and/or STECF EWGs (past or future), highlight possible data gaps or relate to data availability.

The selection of recommendations for STECF analysis is the following:

- RCG NANSEA/Baltic: recommendation 1,4,5
- RCG Med&BS: recommendation 1,3,5,
- RCG LD: recommendation 1
- RCG LP: recommendation 6
- RCG ECON: recommendation 3,4,7

STECF considered primarily each of the RCG recommendations selected by DG MARE and commented on them in the table below. In addition, there was one recommendation

from the RCG NANSEA/Baltic on developing and implementing AI for electronic monitoring, which STECF found relevant and commented on as well. STECF observes that important topics relevant to the various EWGs have been addressed by the RCGs.

STECF supports the use of available tools for data processing and agrees with RCG Mediterranean and Black Sea (Med&BS) that the establishment of the regional database (RDBFIS) is an important step in this process.

STECF notes that its long-standing recommendation on making Med&BS survey data public has finally been agreed by Member States.

STECF supports the collection of genetic samples for North Sea cod and bluefin tuna. Nevertheless, STECF notes that Member States, especially in the Med&BS region, are facing increasing demands for data, not only from the regular end-users such as STECF EWGs and GFCM, but also from research projects. In order to make this process as efficient and multi-purpose as possible, STECF supports the development and utilisation of the regional database RDBFIS as far as possible.

Detailed comments by STECF on each RCG recommendation are provided here below.

RCG NANSEA/Baltic:

Recommendation 1. MS collect genetic samples from spawning (running) cod in the southern North Sea (4b, 4c) and the channel 7d, in spring 2025.	
NANSEA BALTIC-2024_R01	The RCG NSEA & Baltic recommends that all MS collect genetic samples from spawning (running) cod in the southern North Sea (4b, 4c) and the channel 7d, in spring 2025. The collection could be conducted from IBTS or other relevant scientific survey program as well as from observer programs if possible.
Justification	The aim of this sampling is to make best use of resources (both at sea and in the lab) and therefore only sample and analyse samples that are expected to help improving the stock assessment and advice on the Cod in Subarea 4, divisions 6.a and 7.d, and Subdivision 20 (North Sea, West of Scotland, eastern English Channel, and Skagerrak). The project EMFAF-2023-PIA-FisheriesScientificAdvice GenDC has been funded and signed in May 2024. The project duration is 2 years. The project aim is to improve stock assessments and sustainable management of marine fisheries, specifically cod, through integrated genetic data collection.
Follow-up actions needed	All MS collect genetic samples from spawning (running) cod in the southern North Sea (4b, 4c) and the channel 7d, in spring

	2025. The collection could be conducted from IBTS or other relevant scientific survey program as well as from observer programs if possible.
Responsible persons for follow-up actions	NCs
Time frame / Deadline	Spring 2025
Comments	
Comments Decision Meeting 2024	No further comments
STECF comments	STECF supports the request for the collection of genetic samples of cod in the North Sea and adjacent waters. On genomic sampling and data analysis in general, STECF provides extensive comments in the plenary report section under ToR 6.9 (FishGenome).

Recommendation 3. Review the template to document the methodology and data sources used to populate the calculated RDBES fields.	
NANSEA BALTIC-2024_R03	The RCG recommends that ICES WGCATCH, WGBYC review the template developed by the RCG to document the methodology and data sources used to populate the calculated RDBES fields in the commercial landings and effort files and provide feedback.
Justification	The ISSG on Metier and transversal variables have prepared a template to document the methodology and data sources used to fill in calculated fields of CL and CE files. This type of document is already requested in other data calls (e.g. FDI National Chapters) and it is considered very relevant for end users (e.g. it can be very useful to know more about how the effort data for gillnets is calculated)
Follow-up actions needed	ICES WGCATCH, WGBYC review the template developed by the RCG to document the methodology and data sources used to populate the calculated RDBES fields in the commercial landings and effort files and provide feedback.

Responsible persons for follow-up actions	ICES WGCATCH, ICES WGBYC
Time frame / Deadline	November 2024
Comments	
Comments Decision Meeting 2024	No further comments
STECF comments	STECF supports this recommendation and considers that the review of the template is also of interest to the FDI EWG.

Recommendation 5. Workshop to clarify data confidentiality concepts and find the best solution for RDBES and FDI.	
NANSEA BALTIC-2024_R05	Commission to set up a Workshop for NCs and data experts to clarify data confidentiality concepts and find the best solution for RDBES and FDI.
Justification	The RDBES data license has been simplified and aligned with other Data Calls and data types. All countries agrees that scientific bodies need to be able to use the data in a disaggregated way, but they diverge in the rules proposed for data publication. Some countries reminds that they are not allowed to submit he data if the national confidentiality rules are not ensured. NC need security in this issue. Additionally, there is a need to distinguish between non-sensitive (e.g. age, length) and sensitive (e.g. by-catch, discards) sapling data.
Follow-up actions needed	Commission to set up a Workshop for NCs and data experts to clarify data confidentiality concepts and find the best solution for RDBES and FDI.
Responsible persons for follow-up actions	COM
Time frame / Deadline	2024
Comments	

Comments Decision Meeting 2024	R05 has been rephrased to accommodate the comments received; the inclusion not only of NCs but also data experts.
STECF comments	STECF considers that this workshop is needed to clarify data confidentiality concepts so that the STECF FDI data can be disseminated and used to its full potential. Currently, some of the data provided to the FDI database is marked as confidential and cannot be publicly disseminated. The disseminated data excludes confidential cells and, in some cases, confidential data might represent a significant amount of information provided (see analyses produced by STECF FDI EWGs (EWG 24-11 is the most recent). Permission to use confidential data provided to STECF FDI is needed each time when a new end-user requests the set of data for scientific or analytical purposes. This process normally takes at least one month to get permissions from all Member States and has to be done through DG MARE. This workshop will clarify which data can be disseminated and in what aggregation level, considering also creative commons principles and licences (https://creativecommons.org/),so that the data can be disseminated and used for research and analysis. STECF notes that STECF FDI EWG 24-11 also explored options to publish some aggregated data sets and potentially spatial data at Member State level, therefore the results of the workshop would be taken into account when agreeing new dissemination formats for FDI data.

Recommendation 6. Workshop for developing and implementing AI to review data from electronic monitoring	
NANSEA BALTIC-2024_R06	RCG recommends ICES to organise in 2024/2025 a workshop to establish the needs in terms of data acquisition, storing, and sharing for developing and implementing AI to review data from electronic monitoring (EM) sources, and particularly to complement data collection onboard RV with EM.
Justification	In the RCG there is an interest to initiate partnerships between fisheries institutes to complement data collection onboard RV with EM and start collecting and labelling imagery data of catches to train detection/classification open-access or shared models that would be beneficial to all. It was agreed that a workshop could be organised by ICES in the coming year to kick start this work in the NANSEA and Baltic regions.

Follow-up actions needed	ICES to organise in 2024/2025 a workshop to establish the needs in terms of data acquisition, storing, and sharing for developing and implementing AI to review data from electronic monitoring (EM) sources, and particularly to complement data collection onboard RV with EM.
Responsible persons for follow-up actions	ICES
Time frame / Deadline	2025
Comments	
Comments Decision Meeting 2024	No further comments
STECF comments	STECF notes that the ICES working groups WGTIFD and WGMLEARN already deal with these issues. STECF therefore, considers that an additional ToR in the new set of ToRs for WGTIFD (2025-2027) could be the first step to collate the information that may already exist, before a possible workshop is organised.

RCG LDF:

Recommendation 1. Assignment of RCG LDF as designated body for data requirements and collection in outermost regions	
LDF-2024_R01	RCG LDF to take the role as designated body to monitor data collection requirements and, if needed to coordinate biological data collection in the outermost regions
Justification	
Follow-up actions needed	Approval by all RCG LDF NCs and updating the RoP of RCG LDF where and when appropriate. A workshop could be organised with the French representatives to discuss the requirements before the next TM.
Responsible persons for follow-up actions	RCG LDF NCs to approve and to request the EU Commission to assign the RCG LDF as the designated body for data

	requirements and collection in the outermost regions in future updates of the EU-MAP
Time frame / Deadline	Decision meeting 2024
Comments	For more details see section 3.7 on 2024 RCG LDF technical meeting report
Comments Decision Meeting 2024	A workshop was included in the follow-up actions following the comments by the Anaïs Roussel (French NC). FRA is not part of the RCG LDF however FRA has outermost regions and therefore would like to be informed.
STECF comments	STECF notes that Spain and Portugal, two of three Member States with outermost regions, are already participating in the RCG LDF. STECF further considers that the RCG LDF takes note of the reports of the EWGs on Outermost Regions (EWG 19-19 and 24-06).

RCG LP:

Recommendation 6. Develop a CKMR coordinated sampling programme, pending ICCAT´s Commission decision in November 2024	
LP-2024_R06	RCG LP recommends that MSs incorporate in their NWP a CKMR coordinated sampling programme for bluefin tuna, stating that it is subject to ICCAT´s decision, so when it comes to report in the annual report MSs can refer to ICCAT´s decision.
Justification	Pending ICCAT's decision, developing a coordinated Close-Kin Mark–Recapture (CKMR) program for Bluefin Tuna is crucial for improving stock assessments.
Follow-up actions needed	Amend BFT sampling to meet new requirement to be included in the NWP and RWP
Responsible persons for follow-up actions	
Time frame / Deadline	November 2024, ICCAT´s Commission
Comments	

Comments Decision Meeting 2024	Subject to ICCAT´s decision in Nov 2024. MS can go ahead and incorporate it in their NWP stating that it is subject to ICCAT´s decision so when it comes to report in the annual report MS can refer to ICCAT´s decision.
STECF comments	STECF supports Member States developing a CKMR sampling programme for bluefin tuna, pending ICCATs decision.

RCG ECON:

Recommendation 3. Feedback from STECF EWG social & ICES social (national profiles, and analysis of social data)	
ECON-2024_R03	RCG ECON recommends establishing an ISSG on social aspects, especially to discuss social indicators and determine the practical issues regarding data collection, availability, and the timeline for adjusting the National Plans accordingly.
Justification	To follow recommendation 11, decided in the RCG ECON 2023, the working groups of STECF and ICES, concerned with developing the social variables to support the social dimension of the CFP by providing analytical tools, proposed developing a set of new social indicators. The EWG 24-05 assessed the status of the (potential) indicators. The indicators have been informed by the policy priorities identified by the DG-MARE in 2023 and the stakeholder consultation developed in 2024. The indicators are organized by categories that fit the top five priorities (social and financial status, working conditions, assessment of management measures, and generational renewal). Potential indicators with data sources that can be used or easily gathered are discussed in EWG 24-05. Concerning the possible inclusion of new variables, RCG ECON concluded that the practical aspects of data collection, availability and timeline should be discussed.
Follow-up actions needed	RCG ECON recommends establishing an ISSG on social aspects.
Responsible persons for follow-up actions	RCG ECON chairs

Time frame / Deadline	September 2024, so that the results of this ISSG can be used in the drafting of pilot studies in the National programmes
Comments	Agreed
Comments Decision Meeting 2024	The new established ISSG on Exploring options for data collection for new social variables held a first meeting online on the 18-19 Sep. 2024.
STECF comments	STECF supports the creation of an ISSG dedicated to social aspects. This step is aligned with the objective of strengthening the social dimension of the CFP by developing new social indicators. The ISSG should address practical issues concerning data collection, availability and the timeline for adapting national Work Plans. The ISSG should also enable further advancement of these indicators, ensuring that they are robust, relevant, and practical for implementation. STECF considers that the ISSG takes note of the reports of the EWGs on Social Data (EWGs 22-14, 23-17 and 24-05).

Recommendation 4. Feedback from the work towards combining FDI and AER data calls.	
ECON-2024_R04	RCG ECON recommends that MS continue discussions at the national level to resolve the inconsistencies they face with FDI and AER data.
Justification	In December 2023, a virtual workshop was held on harmonizing the AER and FDI data set. MS presented some of the inconsistencies they detected in their AER and FDI data and suggested solutions on how to fix them. Moreover, the Member States worked on their issues offline to make some comparisons. Then, the MS presented their findings on why these inconsistencies happened and how they would tackle them. The AER and FDI data differences were found in the number of fleet segments, vessels, effort, and landing weight and value. The methods used between national institutes need to be harmonised. Moreover, during the workshop, other sources of inconsistencies were mentioned, like Clustering issues, Inactive vessels missing from FDI, and Poor data for gears, which are considered less important at the national level and are not considered in the FDI due to significant difficulties and obstacles in collecting robust data for these small fishing segments. Some secondary fishing gears, used only occasionally, were not reported in the FDI data call; the Geo indicator was reported differently in both data calls; The

	Definition of Fishing technique and source of data used to prepare the AER and FDI are taken at different points.
Follow-up actions needed	MSs have to work at the national level to see the inconsistencies and provide solutions. This procedure takes time to solve the discrepancies, and the harmonization needs time. Next year an evaluation of the outstanding discrepancies between the FDI and AER data will be useful to be carried out in the frame of the FD methodological EWG.
Responsible persons for follow-up actions	MS at national level
Time frame / Deadline	2025
Comments	Agreed
Comments Decision Meeting 2024	No further comments
STECF comments	STECF supports the ongoing discussions on national level aimed at resolving inconsistencies between the FDI and AER data sets. The discrepancies identified during the December 2023 workshop, while complex, can be effectively addressed through these continued efforts, contributing to a more coherent and reliable data framework. STECF recognizes that full harmonization will require time and encourages further examination of unresolved discrepancies within the STECF FDI methodological EWG over the coming year.

Recommendation 7. Updating the RCG ECON Guidelines	
ECON-2024_R07	RCG ECON recommends that the update of the guidelines for economic and social data collection will become a standard TOR for the Technical meeting in order for the guidelines to be updated regularly
Justification	The guidelines have not been updated on the last changes in the definitions decided during the last Technical meeting. This is partly due to the fact that the procedure for updating these guidelines is not clear yet. The group discussed that including the update of these guidelines in TOR of the Technical

	Meeting, the changes will be included in the report and it will be clear what decisions have been made and who needs to implement these.
Follow-up actions needed	Including the update of the guidelines for economic and social data collection will become a standard TOR for the Technical meeting
Responsible persons for follow-up actions	RCG ECON chairs, needs to send the changes to JRC after publication of the report.
Time frame / Deadline	2025
Comments	Agreed
Comments Decision Meeting 2024	No further comments
STECF comments	STECF supports the recommendation that updating the guidelines for economic and social data collection should become a standard TOR for the Technical Meeting. STECF acknowledges that regular updates to these guidelines are essential to reflect the latest changes and decisions made during these meetings. STECF endorses this approach, recognizing its importance for maintaining clear, up-to-date guidance for all stakeholders.

RCG Med & BS:

Recommendation 01. Data requirements and data transmission issues	
Med&BS_2024_R01	Use of the available data quality check tools by Member States for submission to the DG MARE Data Calls and other reporting obligations
Justification	This recommendation complements RCG MED & BS 2023 Recommendation 6. In recent years, several tools have been developed in order to check the quality of the data collected before being submitted to any data call, such as RoME for MEDITS survey or the RDBQC R package for the information obtained in the monitoring of the commercial fleet. In addition to this, the Qualitrain project carried out: (i) two trainings on

	quality checks, to strengthen capacity and improve the quality of Med and BS data, (ii) data checks of 146 Med & BS stocks through Tasks 2 & 3, the outcomes of which will be sent to the Member States for eventual action. All MS should be well aware, by now, of these tools, which will help to provide consistent information to all end-users through the different data calls, as also highlighted by STECF EWG 24-02. This is also in line with the legal obligations of Member States, based on Article 14 of the DCF Regulation. To this end, it is recommended that MS visit the github folder where the quality check packages are stored (https://github.com/COISPA/RDBqc, https://github.com/COISPA/RoME) and follow-up the process of the Qualitrain project regarding quality checks. Additionally, the RDBFIS has integrated the abovementioned quality checks, which are readily available to Member States for use.
Follow-up actions needed	MS to use the available quality check tools to ensure the consistency of information provided to end-users, as part of their standard checking procedures MS to address the data issues identified by Qualitrain task 2 & 3, in the proposed order of priority
Responsible persons for follow-up actions	MSs, QualiTrain and RDBFIS II consortia, RCG Med & BS chairs
Time frame / Deadline	Before submitting information to any Data Call in 2025 for point 1 and point 2 priority 1 issues
Comments	
Comments Decision Meeting 2024	No further comments
STECF comments	STECF considers that it is important to ensure that all Member States are using the available tools. This could improve the quality of the data that is submitted and save time and effort in the EWGs. STECF notes that the project Qualitrain was discussed at length during PLEN 24-01 and PLEN 24-02.

Recommendation 03. RDBFIS use for submission of data	
Med&BS_2024_R03	Use of RDBFIS for the submission of data to the 2025 Med & BS data call and optionally to the 2025 FDI data call

Justification	RDBFIS (Hosting, maintenance and further development of the Regional Database for the Mediterranean and Black Seas) is a specific contract within the FRAMEWORK CONTRACT – EASME/EMFF/2020/OP/021 (EMFF/2020/3.2.4 Lots 1-2-3), a “Framework Contract for the provision of scientific advice for the Mediterranean and the Black Seas” that has developed a centralized database system serving the RCG Med & BS and relevant Member States. The project has a duration of 24 months from 1.4.2023 to 31.3.2025. Through a number of data calls, RDBFIS is currently being populated with data up to 2022 by the relevant Member States. An online training is planned from the 17th to the 19th of September 2024, to familiarise national experts with RDBFIS. A second training will be organised before the completion of the project. By the end of the project, the Med & BS Member States are expected to have quality checked and uploaded the relevant data up to 2022 to RDBFIS. In order to ensure that the datasets in both the RDBFIS and JRC databases are consistent, Member States are encouraged to perform quality checks to the 2023 data sets and upload them to RDBFIS. To explore the possibility of allowing the submission of Med & BS data to JRC through RDBFIS only, a test run is proposed, where a subset of data from RDBFIS is submitted to JRC, before the 2025 data calls. COM will facilitate this process. If the test run is successful, the Med & BS Member States should use RDBFIS for the submission of data to the 2025 Med & BS data call and, optionally, to the 2025 FDI data call. This ties in with RCG MED & BS 2023 Recommendation 9, that aims to identify ways to facilitate the managing of the increasing number of data calls through different ways.
Follow-up actions needed	Member States to participate to the relevant bilateral meetings and trainings of RDBFIS Perform test run to check submission of data from RDBFIS to JRC If test run is successful, Member States to upload 2023 data sets to RDBFIS and to use RDBFIS to submit data to the 2025 Med & BS data call and, optionally, to the 2025 FDI data call
Responsible persons for follow-up actions	RDBFIS Consortium, RDB Steering Committee, RCG Med&BS, MS experts, COM, JRC

Time frame / Deadline	Before next data calls and RCG Med&BS technical meeting
Comments	
Comments Decision Meeting 2024	No further comments
STECF comments	STECF considers that RDBFIS aligns well with the general goals for effective data management and consistency across databases. The centralized system developed under RDBFIS provides a valuable infrastructure to support MS in answering the data calls.

Recommendation 05. Public availability of survey data	
Med&BS_2024_R05	Make DCF survey data publicly available, excluding the last 3 years of data
Justification	Commission Implementing Decision (EU 2021/1168) establishes a list of mandatory research surveys. For the Med & BS Member States, these include MEDIAS, BTSBS, PTSBS, MEDITS and SOLEMON. In 2021, at its Plenary meeting 21-02, STECF concluded that, because fisheries data (both commercial and survey data) in the Med & BS area are currently less accessible than the corresponding ones in the ICES area, this adds a significant workload to all interested parties, and makes data sharing for the Med&BS data a longer and more cumbersome process which negatively affects all interested parties (data requesters, MS, DG MARE, JRC). In recent years, COM, together with JRC, have been receiving and handling an increasing number of data requests from various users, in order to promote the multiuse of DCF data. At the STECF PLEN 21-02 meeting, STECF stressed that the data collected under DCF calls are funded through public money; survey data, in particular, represent highly valuable information of generic scientific interest and without restrictions linked to commercial confidentiality. STECF fully supports that these scientific resources be made publicly available in the interests of all end- users and be freely used for further analyses provided the source is acknowledged and the obligations are met. In line with STECF conclusions from the STECF PLEN 21-02 meeting, during the 2024 MEDITS and MEDIAS Coordination Group meetings, the COM proposed to make surveys data (MEDIAS, BTSBS, PTSBS MEDITS and

	SOLEMON) publicly available, allowing for a 3-year restriction, as per the DCF Regulation (Article 17 paragraph 7). The MEDITS and MEDIAS Coordination Group meetings agreed to this proposal. The two groups also agreed to prepare a document addressed to end users, describing the changes in survey design and implementation through time, to be finalised by end of 2024/ beginning 2025 (MEDITS) and by the next MEDIAS meeting (April 2025). During the RCG Med & BS 2024 meeting, the proposal to set up a way to track data sets was considered, that will help following up the use of data. Data would be publicly available on the condition that tracking data tools will be ensured.
Follow-up actions needed	Produce a document addressed to end users by end January 2025 for MEDITS and by end April 2025 for MEDIAS Propose tools for tracking of data sets Under the condition that tracking of data is enabled, make survey data (MEDIAS, BTSBS, PTSBS, MEDITS and SOLEMON) publicly available, excluding the last 3 years of data
Responsible persons for follow-up actions	Scientific survey Coordination Groups (e.g. MEDITS and MEDIAS), COM, JRC, RDBFIS consortium, RCG Med & BS, NCs
Time frame / Deadline	Before the RCG Decision Meeting (25th September) each MS must define for which years (prior to survey funding by COM), all survey data will be made publicly available.
Comments	
Comments Decision Meeting 2024	GRC agreed to make the data publicly available from 1995, in the document should be stated that the data for some years is poor; HRV agreed to provide data from 2002; ITA agreed to provide data from 1994; FRA agreed; MTL agreed data available from 2002; ESP agreed; CYP it is not applicable because CYP was not conducting any sampling prior to DCF; SVN agreed.
STECF comments	STECF acknowledges and supports the decision by Med and BS Member States to make survey data publicly accessible. Recognizing that these data are collected through publicly funded DCF calls, STECF recommends that these valuable scientific resources be made available for all end-users, provided that appropriate acknowledgment is given and obligations are met (e.g., tracking data tools available). STECF

	emphasizes that limited accessibility to survey data can hinder data sharing, leading to delays and inefficiencies. STECF notes that the exclusions of “the last 3 years of data” as referred in the recommendation from the RCG, refers to the three most recent calendar years (and not the last three years of the data series).

6.3 Joint recommendation on fisheries conservation measures in the marine protected area Havet king Ven in the Baltic Sea (Article 11 CFP)

Background provided by the Commission

On 9 September 2024, the Baltic Sea Member States (with Sweden as initiating Member States) submitted to the Commission a joint recommendation on conservation measures for the Natura 2000 site Havet king Ven. According to the joint recommendation, the main purpose is to minimize the risk for bycatch of the Belt Sea harbour porpoise. The recommended fisheries conservation measures consist in a prohibition for fishing with all types of static nets without the simultaneous use of active acoustic deterrent devices with the aim of reducing the risk of by-catch of the Belt Sea harbour porpoise.

Background documents are published on:

https://stecf.ec.europa.eu/meetings-calendar/past-meetings

Request to the STECF

The STECF is requested to:

- Review the suitability and potential effectiveness of the proposed conservation measures to minimise the negative impacts of fishing activities on the marine ecosystem and ensure that fisheries activities avoid the degradation of the marine environment.
- Assess to what extent the proposed measures: a) contribute towards achieving the conservation objectives of the sites (in relation to fishing as a pressure); b) and to what extent the proposed measures can prevent: (i) deterioration of natural habitats and the habitats of species and (ii) significant disturbance of species protected in the site, as required by the Habitats Directive.
- Comment on whether the proposed control measures are adequate in relation to the proposed the management measures.
- Comment on how the proposed conservation measures may affect the fishing activity in the proposed management zones. This should include identification of the fleets concerned, their economic dependence on the proposed management zones, their potential to reallocate the fishing activity (displacement) and potential economic and ecological consequences.

Summary of the information provided to STECF

STECF was provided with the joint recommendation (JR) and background documents collated by DG MARE:

- *Letter to Commission - JR for the MPA Havet kring Ven*

The BALTFISH chair wrote to the DG MARE describing the JR historical development and recalling that the discussions on the Joint Recommendation were finalised by written procedure, which ended on 27 August 2024. The proposal was adopted at the BALTFISH High-Level Group meeting on 4 September 2024.

- *The JR for the MPA Havet kring Ven*

The Joint Recommendation contains the Swedish proposal for fisheries conservation measures for the marine protected area Havet kring Ven in the Baltic Sea.

The proposed measure is the prohibition for fishing with all types of static nets without the simultaneous use of active acoustic deterrent devices following the rules laid down in the Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2020/967[2][1], in Havet kring Ven.

'Static nets' means any type of gillnet, entangling net or trammel net that is anchored to the seabed for fish to swim into and become entangled or enmeshed in the netting following Article 6(23) of Regulation (EU) 2019/1241[3][2]. The coordinates of the area are listed.

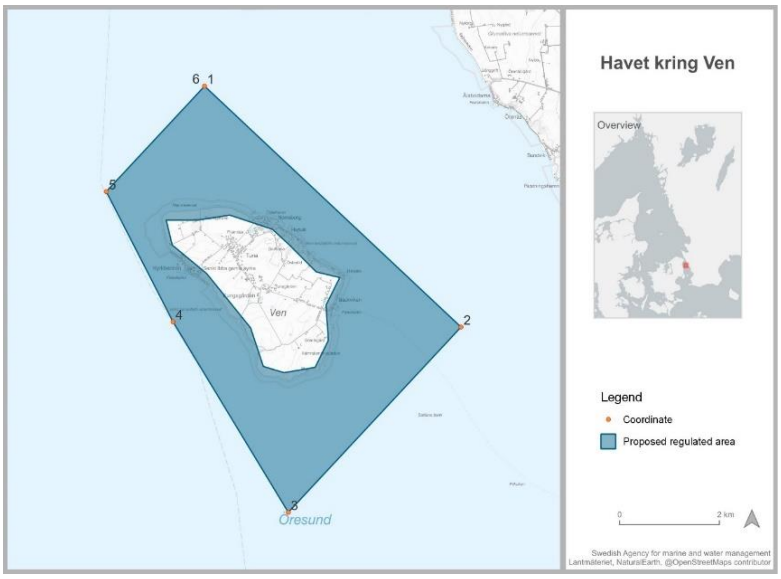
The proposal has been coordinated with Denmark, having a direct management interest in the fisheries affected by these measures. The Baltic Sea Advisory Council has also been informed and consulted.

The main purpose of this proposal is to minimise the risk of bycatching the Belt Sea harbour porpoise. As recalled by the JR, a species conservation status is considered favourable when population development shows that the species will remain part of its habitat in the long term, its natural range does not decrease, and there is enough habitat for the species to be maintained in the long term.

2[1] Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2020/967 of 3 July 2020 laying down the detailed rules on the signal and implementation characteristics of acoustic deterrent devices as referred to in Part A of Annex XIII of Regulation (EU) 2019/1241 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the conservation of fisheries resources and the protection of marine ecosystems through technical measures.

3[2] Regulation (EU) 2019/1241 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on the conservation of fisheries resources and the protection of marine ecosystems through technical measures.

Figure 6.3.1. Map of the Havet kring Ven MPA.



Source: background documentation provided by the Commission.

- *Annex 1 MPA Havet kring Ven*

The JR is annexed with a document to support the JR with description of the objective of the Havet kring Ven MPA intending to conserve Harbour porpoise (1351), sandbanks (1110), reefs (1170), and grey seal (1364). The population of harbour porpoises found in the area around the island Ven is the “Belt Sea population”. It is classified as vulnerable (VU) by HELCOM as it is estimated to comprise less than 10,000 mature individuals, and such a level does not achieve good environmental status (HELCOM 2023).

The document also describes the commercial fisheries active in the area and annual landings, as well as recreational fisheries in the Western Baltic.

Table 6.3.1. Extracted from the Annex 1 document. 2015-2019 landings in Euro from VMS-equipped vessels (≥ 12 m length) within Havet kring Ven and the ICES rectangle 40G2 (Grand total). “Outside MPA” represent the landings from the areas outside Havet kring Ven, but within the ICES rectangle 40G2.

Nationality	Fishing gear	Havet kring Ven	Outside MPA	Grand Total
Denmark	Gillnet	55 657	476 554	532 211
	Other		2 462	2 462

Denmark Total		55 657	479 016	534 673
Sweden	Gillnet	12 810	142 026	154 836
Sweden Total		12 810	142 026	154 836
Grand Total		**68 467**	**621 042**	**689 509**

Source: background documentation provided by the Commission.

Table 6.3.2. Extracted from the Annex 1 document. Swedish total landings (2015-2019) in Euro from vessels (<12 m length, not equipped with VMS) reporting catches in logbooks within Havet kring Ven and the ICES rectangle “40G2” (Total sum). Outside MPA represent the landings from the areas outside Havet kring Ven, but within the ICES rectangle 40G2.

	Havet kring Ven	**Outside MPA**	**Total sum**
Gillnet	438 279	3 961 718	**4 399 998**
Long lines		7 480	**7 480**
Other	177 363	171 386	**348 749**
Total sum	**615 643**	**4 140 584**	**4 756 227**

Source: background documentation provided by the Commission.

The document argues that the marine protected area is small in comparison to the important area for harbour porpoises in Öresund, and a no-take zone in Havet kring Ven will likely only displace the fisheries into other parts of the important area for harbour porpoises in Öresund. Using pingers in the gillnet fisheries cannot eliminate bycatch within Havet kring Ven, but the JR states that it could reduce the bycatch rates significantly. The authorisation of fishing with pingers might avoid or reduce effort displacement effects.

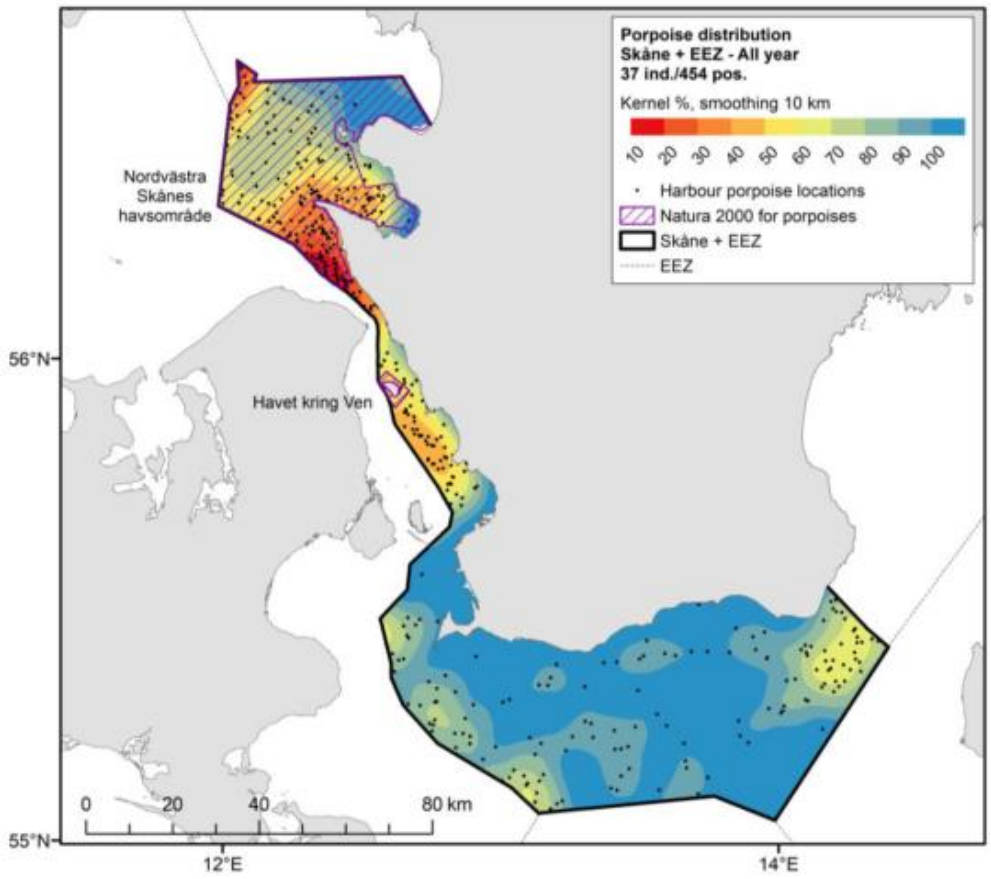
In mitigating the impact from fisheries, the document recalls that several studies show reduced bycatch of harbour porpoise when applying pingers (Palka et al. 2008; Larsen et al. 2013; Orphanides & Palka 2013; Larsen & Eigaard 2014). However, the supportive document to the JR also recalls concerns raised regarding the consequences of widespread pinger use due to the risk of displacement of harbour porpoises from e.g. important feeding grounds (Kyhn et al. 2015; van Beest et al. 2017). Accordingly, if pingers are used as deterrent devices, pinger´s impact possibly inducing exclusion from a preferred habitat must be weighted with their role in mitigating bycatch to achieve minimisation of impact fisheries in marine protected areas.

In order to monitor and control the Natura 2000 site the JR includes requirements for using AIS transponders and transmitting the fishing vessels position would be mandatory for all commercial fishing vessels, also including those under 15 metres, when entering the concerned areas. It is also stated that the AIS must be functioning, turned on and transmitting positioning data during the whole fishing journey. The schematic pictures of how AIS can be used for tracking fishing activity provided in the annex of the JR (section 9.1) concerns fishing with mobile gears (hauls) and not fixed nets. Furthermore, no information as regards control of the acoustic devices is included in the JR.

- *Appendix 1: Maps of surveys and findings in the area*

This document provides maps showing the distribution data of harbour porpoises tagged inside the Belt Sea population management unit from 1997 to 2021. In total, 111 harbour porpoises were tagged, but only 37 individuals visited the area of interest (Figure 6.3.2).

Figure 6.3.2. Extracted from Appendix 1 document. Distribution data of harbour porpoises (37 individuals) that were tagged within the Belt Sea population management unit from 1997-2021. The map illustrates distribution within Skåne and the Swedish exclusive economic zone (EEZ) waters and the Natura 2000 sites of Havet kring Ven and Nordvästra Skånes havsområde. The map shows Kernel plots of all 454 positions year-round, with a smoothing factor of 10 km.



Source: Map modified from Teilmann et al. 2022 by Åarhus University.

- *<u>BSAC statements MPA including Havet kring Ven</u>*

BSAC consulted their members about the JR and received three comments:

1. The Fischereischutzverband disagrees that the gillnet fishery is the main cause of decline in the harbour porpoise population and presents some data of bycatch of harbour porpoise from Schleswig-Holstein.
2. The European Anglers Alliance highlights that recreational angling opportunities should always be maintained if and when they do not directly affect the achievement of conservation goals of a Marine Protected Area.
3. The Swedish Society for Nature Conservation welcomes the proposal to prohibit all fishing in the first 4 MPA highlighting the Biodiversity Strategy objectives for 2030 and the expected contribution to local recovery of fish stocks and benefits to Baltic Sea fisheries in the long-term. A closure of the static nets fishery is advocated for instead of pinger use in the Havet kring Ven.

- *Ad hoc contract including evaluation of the JR on Havet kring Ven*

The ad hoc evaluation concluded that proposed fishery measures may be adequate to help in conservation/bycatch minimisation. Still, the limited geographical coverage of the JR (only this single MPA) will not be enough to reach the conservation target for harbour porpoises in the broader Belt Sea area. Additional measures in the wider area will be needed.

Nevertheless, the evaluation observes that the proposed control measures are inadequate, as they do not outline how they will ensure that the fishers within the MPA are using active acoustic deterrent devices.

The ad hoc report states that the JR proposal will not help improve the status of sandbanks and reefs, as sea bottom disturbance is still possible with net fisheries. With a possible impact, especially on sensitive species (e.g., corals), when chains are added to the static nets.

The ad hoc report states that the effects discussed from a possible effort displacement of ongoing fishing activities are irrelevant here, as the fisheries are still allowed to fish within the MPA as long as they use pingers. In the JR, no conclusion is made on the potential economic consequences of the measure. If only pingers were to be made mandatory, the only additional economic cost would be purchasing and maintaining the acoustic deterrent devices.

The ad hoc report observes that the analysis of the fishing activities within the area should be improved and updated, as the data is from 2015-2019. There is no information on the number of different vessels active in the area, which should be essential information as it gives a view of how much fishers have to invest in acoustic devices.

The ad hoc report observes that the economic dependence of the Swedish and Danish gillnet fleet on the MPA itself, i.e. comparing the outside activity to the one that has occurred inside the area, is not detailed per fishery. Additionally, only one general estimate is given referring to their possible dependence to the site in percentage related to the ICES rectangle 40G2 without knowing if some effort were also spent outside this area.

The ad hoc evaluation recalls that most of the Danish gillnet fishery comprises vessels below 12m. It is unknown where these vessels might have been fishing (no requirement for VMS), so there is no view of their dependency on the MPA. According to this evaluation, the request to use AIS would be required to monitor such effort allocation, but would be insufficient as control measure.

STECF observations

- *Regarding the **suitability and potential effectiveness** of the proposed conservation measures to minimise the negative impacts of fishing activities on the marine ecosystem and ensure that fisheries activities avoid the degradation of the marine environment.*

Interactions between cetaceans and different types of fishing gear (e.g. trammel nets, gillnets and small-scale set longlines) have long represented a profound concern (Gilman et al. 2022). Some cetacean species, mainly those inhabiting the coastal areas, are attracted to fisheries, which offer them concentrations of “easy food” saving them spending energy searching for prey.

STECF notes that under certain conditions (strength of the acoustic signal, density of the nets, and density of pingers on the nets), the use of pingers can cause strong evasive reactions in harbour porpoises and can be effective at reducing harbour porpoises bycatch in set-nets (Brennecke et al. 2022; Larsen et al. 2013). However, STECF also notes that this study shows that 25 % of animals may not react to pinger sounds.

STECF recalls that alternative measures to reduce the negative impacts of fishing activities, such as smaller nets (referred to as “low-height nets” or “half-height nets”, Northridge et al. 2017) might be more effective to mitigate bycatch if the net density in the Natura 2000 site is high, while avoiding adverse harbour porpoise behavioural response to acoustic deterrent devices. As the fishery on the site with the highest bycatch is lumpfish and the targeted cod fishery in the area has disappeared (see ICES stock assessment: cod.27.21 has zero catch advice for 2025 and 2026) the use of such nets could be used to continue fishing flatfish while reducing the bycatch of cod, and would also result in a lower bycatch of harbour porpoise, compared to the nets formerly deployed (Northridge et al. 2017). Adding add-ons to nets, such as pearls, has also been shown to help the harbour porpoise avoid being trapped in nets. (Kindt Larsen et al. 2024).

- *Regarding to what extent the proposed measures: a) contribute towards achieving the conservation objectives of the sites (in relation to fishing as a pressure); b) and the proposed measures can prevent: (i) deterioration of natural habitats and the habitats of species and (ii) significant disturbance of species protected **in the site**, as required by the Habitats Directive.*

STECF observes that if the net density is high in the Natura 2000 site, using pingers might not be the best option to protect the harbour porpoise population in the site. Indeed, pingers are acoustic deterrent devices that scare away the animals from the fishing gears, depending on the density of nets deployed on site, such a deterrent effect, could exclude the animals from visiting the site. As such, STECF observes that if the net density is too high such use of pingers in an harbour porpoise hotspot area would potentially be in conflict with achieving the objective of the Natura 2000 site,

which is to ensure that the species remains part of its habitat in the long term, its natural range does not decrease, and there is enough habitat for the species to be maintained in the long term (EU Habitat Directive). However, as no information on the net density (and other biological considerations on the reaction of harbour porpoise to it) in the Natura 2000 site was provided in the JR, STECF cannot assess this risk.

STECF notes that based on the distribution map for harbour porpoise given in the Annex to the JR, STECF notes that the designated area to which the proposed measures are to apply is very small and may only offer protection for a small proportion of the population.

STECF observes that the BSAC members have been consulted and the surface area of the Natura 2000 site may be large enough for the professional and recreational fishers[4[3]] to advocate against a full exclusion of fishing with nets in the Havet kring Ven area, as noted in the consultations reported by the BSAC. Besides this, STECF observes that the supportive documentation does not describe if it is possible to displace effort toward other fishing grounds, for example, if the area surrounding the Havet kring Ven site would be crowded with other marine uses, for example, with commercial shipping vessels.

- *Whether the **proposed control measures** are adequate with the proposed management measures.*

STECF observes that the proposed control measures to monitor all vessels present in the site with AIS and pingers in the JR are not sufficient to ensure that the proposed measures will be effective in reducing harbour porpoise bycatch. If pingers were to be made mandatory in the area, at a minimum, extensive monitoring and control would be required to ensure that the pingers are being installed and deployed as intended.

STECF observes that acoustic devices are proposed to be implemented in accordance with the rules laid down in the Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2020/967. Control and monitoring procedures to ensure implementation of these measures would be appropriate in Havet kring Ven.

STECF observes that the most effective monitoring and control of the Natura 2000 site would require additional information and complementary tools such as electronic monitoring systems to record and quantify bycatch events.

STECF observes that the fishing effort data presented in the JR does not include effort by smaller vessels, indicating that the estimation of harbour porpoise bycatch events is also an underestimation. STECF observes that the supportive document refers to

4[3] (recreational fishing in the area is defined as using 3 nets max, 135 meters in total max, see Danish law Declaration on recreational fishery BEK nr 1615 af 11/12/2015, 180 meters in total max for the Swedish recreational fishery; Fiskelag 1993:787)

a bycatch rate for 2018 of 0.154 harbour porpoises/fishing effort (day at sea) in Baltic Sea and 0.056 for the Greater North Sea (ICES 2020) which will translate into greater or fewer numbers of dead animals depending on the coverage of the effort reported. Percent of fishing days with bycatch of harbour porpoise deduced from electronic monitoring observations between 2010-2020 amount at 8.6% of the recorded fishing days of netting in Danish waters (Kindt-Larsen et al. 2023). Besides this, STECF observes that areas of high bycatch do not systematically correspond to areas of high fishing effort (Kindt-Larsen et al. 2023). Instead, predicted high bycatch areas are associated with areas where fishing tactics are more likely prone to bycatch (soak-time, net length deployed and mesh-size), which does not necessary correlate with days spent at sea. Such features also need to be documented and monitored in a Natura 2000 site dedicated to the protection of the species.

- *How the proposed conservation measures **may affect the fishing activity** in the proposed management zones. This should include identification of the fleets concerned, their **economic dependence** on the proposed management zones, their potential to reallocate the fishing activity (**displacement**) and potential economic and ecological consequences.*

STECF notes that from the information provided in support of the JR, it is not possible to determine the areas to which, as a result of the proposed measures, fishing effort would be displaced to. However, given that other abundant hotspots for Belt Sea harbour porpoise are found far to the north of Havet kring Ven (see the abundance distribution map provided in the supportive documentation to the JR, STECF considers that any adverse impact on the harbour porpoise population in the Belt Sea arising from the displacement of fishing effort using nets, is likely to be minor. Although with the data and information available, the potential impacts cannot be quantified.

STECF observes that from the economic estimates based on old data related to past fishing activities prior to 2020, the dependency on the area has been evaluated at 10-15% of the annual income. However, it is uncertain whether this is still the case, as the target fish stocks have declined and the fisheries are also in decline. STECF cannot identify more in detail from the supportive document which fisheries may be affected within the static nets commercial and recreational fisheries active in the area. However, STECF notes that cod and lumpsucker (lumpfish) populations have declined recently. A reduction of their targeted fisheries will likely come along reducing bycatch of harbour porpoise, as fishing for cod or lumpsucker with nets are known to contribute to high bycatch rates of birds and harbour porpoises (e.g., Christensen-Dalsgaard et al. 2019).

STECF notes that if the proposed measures are implemented, there may be an incentive to displace fishing to avoid operating with pingers to minimise costs (provided that the cost is borne by the fisher). However, there is no information accompanying the JR on the suitability of other fishing grounds to which fishing effort might be displaced or whether displacement of effort is an option.

STECF conclusions

STECF concludes that the JR submitted to protect the harbour porpoise in the Havet kring Ven Natura 2000 site may reduce the bycatch of animals navigating the area. However, for the proposed measures to be effective, adequate monitoring and control measures need to be put in place to ensure that the pingers are deployed as intended by (EU) Regulation 2020/967.

STECF concludes that there is a risk that deployment of pingers on nets in Havet kring Ven may displace harbour porpoise away from the site. The extent of any such displacement will relate to the density of net in the site and would be counter-productive to achieving the Natura 2000 objectives. STECF concludes that a more effective measure, which would counter any risk of displacement of harbour porpoise arising from the deployment of pingers on nets would be to prohibit all fishing with nets in the area and at the same time contribute to achieving the Natura 2000 site objectives.

STECF cannot conclude whether the proposals socio-economic effect is significant because key information on this aspect is missing (e.g., the number of vessels, the full area extent of the engaged vessels, and the possibility of reallocating effort spatially), and because the scarce information presented on fishing activities is largely outdated.

STECF recalls that extensive ongoing research projects will continue delivering results on alternatives to the use of pingers (see EU funded Marine Beacon, CIBBRiNA, REDUCE). The outcomes of such projects will hopefully help to identify alternative and additional long-term solutions to help protect harbour porpoises, including electronic monitoring, better spatial or temporal avoidance, modified gear geometry, and best practices in handling unwanted catches.

STECF concludes that, monitoring with AIS on all vessels present in the site as proposed by the JR, will allow national authorities to remotely monitor if vessels are present in the site and to direct sea or air surveillance to the site if considered necessary.

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6.4 Joint recommendation on fisheries conservation measures for the protection of reef structures in five Danish Natura 2000 Areas in the North Sea and Skagerrak (Article 11 CFP)

Background provided by the Commission

On 17 July 2024, the North Sea Member States (with Denmark as initiating Member States) submitted to the Commission a joint recommendation on conservation measures for four Natura 2000 sites located in the Danish EEZ: Thyborøn Stenvolde (EU site code: DK00VA348), Jyske Rev, Lillefiskerbanke (EU site code: DK00VA257), Store Rev (EU site code: DK00VA258), Gule Rev (EU site code: DK00VA259; and for one Natura 2000 sites located in the Danish part of the Skagerrak (between the baseline and 12 nm): Lønstrup Rødgrund (EU site code: DK00VA301). The measures entail a prohibition to fish with mobile bottom contacting gears. The management measures are supported by specific control measures.

Background documents are published on:

https://stecf.ec.europa.eu/meetings-calendar/past-meetings

Request to the STECF

The STECF is requested to:

- Review the suitability and potential effectiveness of the proposed conservation measures to minimise the negative impacts of fishing activities on the marine ecosystem and ensure that fisheries activities avoid the degradation of the marine environment.
- Assess to what extent the proposed measures: a) contribute towards achieving the conservation objectives of the sites (in relation to fishing as a pressure); b) and to what extent the proposed measures can prevent: (i) deterioration of natural habitats and the habitats of species and (ii) significant disturbance of species protected in the site, as required by the Habitats Directive.
- Comment on whether the proposed control measures are adequate in relation to the proposed the management measures.
- Comment on how the proposed conservation measures may affect the fishing activity in the proposed management zones. This should include identification of the fleets concerned, their economic dependence on the proposed management zones, their potential to reallocate the fishing activity (displacement) and potential economic and ecological consequences.

Summary of the information provided to STECF

STECF was provided with five documents:

1. Joint Recommendation Danish North Sea areas 17-07-2024.pdf. “Fisheries management measures for protection of reef structures in five Danish Natura 2000 Areas in the North Sea and Skagerrak. Joint recommendation regarding Fisheries Conservation Measures under Article 11 and 18 of Regulation (EU) No 1380/ 2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 on the Common Fisheries Policy, Copenhagen, 17 July 2024.“

2. JR DK North Sea - Annex I_ Proposal Fisheries Regulation in DK North Sea Skagerrak.pdf. “Proposal for Fisheries Management Measures for the protection of reef structures (H1170) and submarine structures made of leaking gasses (H1180) structures in five Danish Natura 2000 sites in the North Sea and Skagerrak. Draft proposal for Fisheries Management Measures under article 11 and 18 of Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013 of The European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 on the Common Fisheries Policy, amending Council Regulations EC No 56/2008, (EC) No 1954/2003 and (EC) No 1224/2009. 17 July 2024.”

3. JR DK North Sea - Annex II_ Pilot study Gule Rev.pdf. “Pilot study in Natura 2000 site in Danish waters. 17 July 2024.”

4. 07-2324 NSAC Advice on Danish Natura 2000 areas.pdf. “NSAC Advice 07-2324. NSAC Advice on Fisheries management measures in five Danish Natura 2000 sites in the North Sea and the Skagerrak.”

5. Evaluation report of the proposed conservation measures for five Danish Natura 2000 areas and marine protected area Havet kring Ven in the Baltic Sea. Ad hoc contract No 24101.

Overview of the Joint Recommendation

The proposal for fisheries conservation measures for five Natura 2000 sites in the Danish part of the North Sea and Skagerrak is jointly recommended by Denmark, as the initiating Member State, together with Sweden, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and France.

Overall objective

The overall objective of the proposal is to ensure adequate protection of designated reef structures from fishing activities. The proposal therefore seeks to contribute to the obligation of achieving favourable conservation status for the habitat types with habitat codes H1170 (Reefs) and H1180 (Submarine structures made by leaking gases, i.e. ‘bubbling reefs’) in accordance with Article 6 (2) of the Habitats Directive.

Areas concerned

The JR proposes fisheries conservation measures in five Natura 2000 sites located in the Danish part of the North Sea and Skagerrak, which have been designated for reef structures with habitat code 1170 and 1180:

Four Natura 2000 sites are located in the Danish Exclusive Economic zone in the North Sea and Skagerrak (outside 12 nautical miles):

i) Thyborøn Stenvolde (EU site code: DK00VA348)

ii) Jyske Rev, Lillefiskerbanke (EU site code: DK00VA257)

iii) Store Rev (EU site code: DK00VA258)

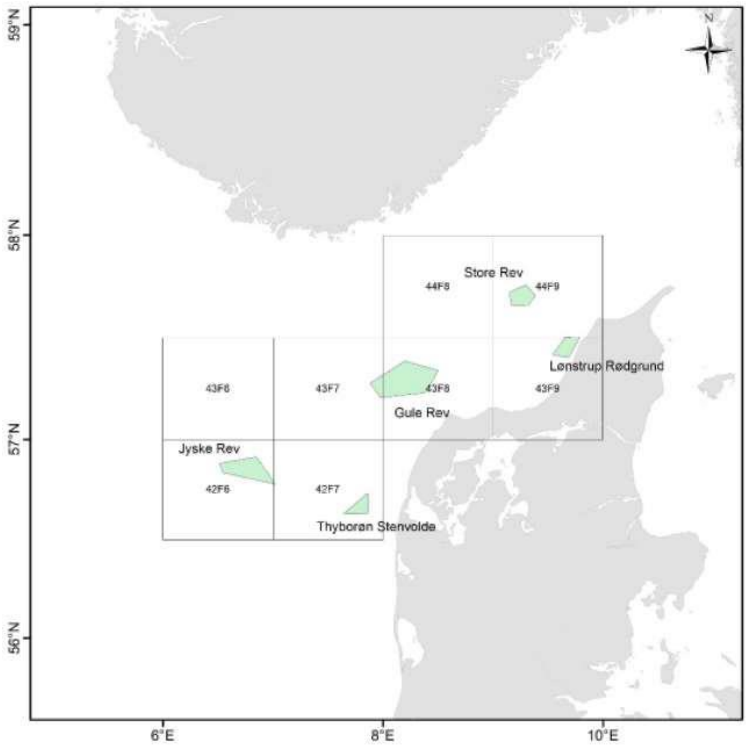
iii) Gule Rev (EU site code: DK00VA259)

One Natura 2000 site is located in the Danish part of the Skagerrak (between the baseline and 12 nautical miles):

iv) Lønstrup Rødgrund (EU site code: DK00VA301)

The location of the sites concerned is shown in Figure 6.4.1.

Figure 6.4.1. Location of the five Natura 2000 sites concerned by the JR (From Annex I of the JR).



Source: background documentation provided by the Comission.

Table 6.4.1. Extent of the reef areas contained in each of the Natura 2000 sites.

Habitat No.	Natura 2000 Site No.	Area name	Area (km2)	Reefs (km2)	% reef area
H259	250	Gule Rev	470.6	309.6	65.79
H258	249	Store Rev	108.4	71.6	66.05
H257	248	Jyske Rev, Lillefiskerbanke	240.8	153.8	63.87
H256	247	Thyborøn Stenvolde	78	36.54	46.85
H202	202	Lønstrup Rødgrund	92.8	56.62	61.01

Apart from H258 Store Rev (Habitat code H1180, bubbling reefs) the other Natura 2000 sites are Habitat code H1170 (Reefs).

Source: Table 4 in Annex I of the JR provided by the Comission.

Implementation measures

The following measures are proposed:

•A ban for fishing activities with mobile bottom contacting gear in areas mapped as reefs (H1170), including the surrounding buffer zones:

Table 6.4.2. Gears to be banned (Table 1 of Annex 1 of the JR).

Gear types	Gear code Annex XI in EU Regulation No. 404/2011	International standard Classification of Fishing Gears (ISSCFG)
Beam trawl	TBB	TBB
Bottom trawl / otter trawl	OTB, OTT, PTB, TBN, TBS, TB	OTB, OTT, OT, PTB, PT, TBN, TBS, TB, TX
Seine nets	SDN, SSC, SX, SV, SPR	SB, SV, SDN, SSC, SPR, SX
Dredges	DRB, HMD	DRB, DRH, HMD, HMP, HMX

Source: Table 1 in Annex I of the JR provided by the Comission.

• A ban for all fishing activity in areas mapped as bubbling reefs (H1180, Store Rev), including the surrounding buffer zones.

Coordinates for the areas incorporating surrounding buffer zones are given in Section 6A of the JR (Doc. 1) and section 9 of Annex I (Doc. 2). The accuracy of the coordinates was not checked by STECF.

A pilot study to permit fishing by Belgian beam trawls in the Natura 2000 site Gule Rev (habitat No H259) to test the ability to avoid sensitive areas is also given with the JR.

Control, enforcement and monitoring

The following control measures are proposed to be adopted and are listed in the JR:

1. Fishing activities in the five Natura 2000 areas as set out in this proposal shall be controlled by the coastal Member State. The coastal Member State shall have a system to monitor fishing vessels in these areas under its jurisdiction or sovereignty.

2. Member States may for the monitoring of their vessels use one or more of the following systems:
a) A vessel monitoring system, cf. Article 9 of Regulation (EC) 1224/2009.
b) An automatic identification system referred to in Article 6a of Directive 2002/59/EC, which meets the performance standards of Article 10(1) of Regulation (EC) 1224/2009.
c) For vessels below 12 meters length overall, an alternative system provided and approved by the flag Member State for its vessels allowing the vessel to be automatically located and identified while at sea through the transmission of vessel position data.

The flag Member State shall inform that coastal Member State of the system used on board its vessels using this system.

The flag Member State shall transmit vessel position data to the coastal Member State when a vessel is present in the waters of another Member State.

In case, the device on board the vessel used in this system is not within reach of a network, the vessel position data shall be recorded during that period of time and shall be transmitted automatically as soon as the vessel is in reach of such a network. Connection with the network must be re-established at the latest before entering a port or landing site.

At least the following data are to be sent to the fishing monitoring centre of the flag Member State and received and transmitted to the coastal Member State in the format used for systems under a):

i. The fishing vessel identification.

ii. The most recent geographical position of the fishing vessel.
iii. Date and time (expressed in Coordinated Universal Time (UTC) of the fixing of the said position of the fishing vessel.
iv. The instant speed and course of the fishing vessel.

3. The frequency of transmission of the vessel position data shall be of at least once every 10 minutes for vessels present in one of the areas mentioned in paragraph 1.

4. For vessels using systems described in paragraph 2 (a), a 4 nautical miles alert zone around the areas mentioned in paragraph 1 shall be established for vessels equipped with devices, which do not support the automatic change of reporting frequency. In these alert zones, the same frequency of transmission of vessel position data shall apply as in the areas mentioned in paragraph 1.

5. Fishing vessels that are not permitted to fish in the areas mentioned in paragraph 1 or are carrying on board gears prohibited to use in the areas may only transit through the areas subject to the following conditions:
a) All fishing gear is lashed and stowed during the transit.
b) The transit is continuous and the speed during transit is not less than six knots except in cases of force majeure. In such cases, the master shall immediately inform the fisheries monitoring centre of the vessel's flag Member State, which shall then inform the coastal Member State.
c) The tracking device providing position of the vessel as referred to in paragraph 2 is functioning.

6. If the devices on board the vessels of the systems referred to in paragraph (2) are not functioning, the vessels is not allowed to be present in the areas mentioned in paragraph (1).

7. All fishing activities in the areas referred to in paragraph 1 shall in periods, where certain fishing activities are restricted or prohibited, be subject to a fishing authorisation in accordance with Article 7 of Regulation (EC) 1224/2009.

Compliance with the requirements is controlled by the competent Danish Fishery Monitoring Centre (FMC) under the Danish Fisheries Agency. The FMC coordinates and evaluates the control and enforcement of fishery management measures in marine Natura 2000 sites in Denmark.

Pilot study

Accompanying the JR (annex II) is a proposal for a pilot study to carry out precision fishing to avoid sensitive reef structures in the southern part of the Natura 2000 site Gule Rev (Habitat No. H259) using Belgian beam trawls.

According to the proposal, the expected outcomes are as follows:

Outcome 1: In a first phase, the use of the WASSP multibeam sounder will be tested to check whether a clear distinction can be made between sandy areas and the reefs. This will allow to form a clear image of sensitive areas that need to be avoided.

Outcome 2: A second milestone, is that the Belgian beam trawl equipped with VISTOOLS[5[1]] and the WASSP can demonstrate the ability to fish very precisely within the project area. Based on the WASSP images on board, the skipper will be able to decide where to fish to avoid the sensitive habitats. The landings will be closely monitored via the VISTOOLS system and an observer will collect data to make a detailed catch composition analysis, supported by the use of the camera. Depending on the success of the pilot project a follow up project can be setup to test the best system outcome of the pilot project on its feasibility for regular fishery activity.

Main findings of the ad hoc review

The ad-hoc review provides a comprehensive review and discussion of the data and information given in the JR together with the reviewer's opinion in relation to the items in the Terms of reference. The opinions of the reviewer are summarised in the following abstract which is taken directly from the ad-hoc review:

"*Based on contractor review of the JR, it can be concluded that the JR is sufficient to reach its conservation goals, knowing that:*

- *The JR fishery conservation measures is the prohibition to fish with mobile bottom contacting gears in areas mapped as reefs (H1170) and all fishing activities in areas mapped as bubbling reefs (H1180). These measure with the target to reach favourable conservation status for H1170 and H1180 within those areas. This is an appropriate measure to reach this conservation goal. The defined areas are large enough and the habitat occurrence is well-mapped. Adding a buffer area around the management areas is appropriate to reduce the risk of damaging the reefs. The only doubt for reaching the conservation status, and especially improving the state of the sessile, long-living species associated with the reefs (H1170) is still the allowance of intense net fishery in certain MPA's (Store, Gule and Jyske Rev). It is advised that these fishery prove they are compliant with the conservation objectives of the areas and adapt or take the necessary measures when not.*

5[1] Precisievisserij - ILVO Vlaanderen (VISTOOLS)

- *I observe that the ecological information on the MPA areas is more than 10 years old, so there is no recent evaluation of the conservation status of the MPAs, as also no time series (except for Lønstrup Rødgrund). There are also no clear, practical conservation objectives defined. Therefore, I recommend good monitoring and higher quality assessment of ecology and also fishing activities (cf net fishery) in the future to prove the success of the measures on the conservation objectives.*

- *The JR is sufficient in relation to the control and enforcement measures, which are clearly and in detail defined. The procedure of operating and controlling the management areas is appropriate, as the VMS ping frequency is increased and a 4 nautical mile alert zone is installed. The necessary regulations with the authorities are included.*

- *The JR includes identification of the fleets concerned, their economic dependence on the proposed management zones, and potential economic and ecological consequences. The JR missed the evaluation of the effect of displacement of the fishery activities.*"

STECF observations

STECF has previously reviewed and given advice on similar requests from the Commission relating to fisheries management measure for Natura 2000 sites in its plenary reports of STECF PLEN 15-01, 17-01, 17-02, 19-01, 21-01, 22-03 and 24-01, in the written procedure OWP 19-04 and the STECF EWG 16-24.

STECF reviewed the JR and associated documents together with the review of the JR conducted under ad hoc contract.

Proposed measures

Annex I of the JR provides a brief overview of the main risks to stone and bubbling reef structures from fishing activities and cites relevant scientific literature.

STECF notes that the proposed measures to ban fishing with mobile bottom contacting gears (MBCG) will encompass the entirety of the reef structures within each of the five Natura 2000 sites and surrounding buffer zones. In addition, all fishing activity is to be banned over Store Rev (Bubbling reef, Habitat No H258).

STECF also notes that excluding fishing activity with mobile bottom contacting gears will reduce the impacts of fishing on the reef structures. However, while continued fishing with static gears is likely to have only limited physical impact on the reef structure it will still impact the reef epifauna and the associated fish community (EWG 20-05 and EWG 22-12).

Pilot study

STECF notes that the JR includes a proposal for a pilot study to carry out precision fishing to avoid sensitive reef structures in the southern part of the Natura 2000 site Gule Rev (Habitat No. H259) using Belgian beam trawls. The general ambition of the pilot project is to show that by using the latest technology in the beam trawl fishery and conducting precision fisheries, it is possible to avoid and safeguard the most sensitive areas. The main objectives of the pilot project are to: 1) Show the viability of precision fishing methods in Gule Rev and 2) to minimize disturbance to sensitive gravel beds during fishery.

STECF notes that while an overview of the methodology to be adopted in the pilot study is provided, the JR and annexes do not include any information on the number of participating vessels in the pilot project, their intended fishing effort, gear description, the duration of the pilot study or measurable performance targets.

STECF notes that while the aim to test whether it is possible to distinguish and map the reef and associated gravel areas to permit precision fishing may be valid, STECF considers that it is nonsensical to propose to undertake such a study using beam trawls in an area that is designated to protect reef structures. Furthermore, STECF observes that the success of such an approach would depend heavily on the skills of skippers and can also be influenced by other factors e.g. varying weather conditions or emergency situations relating to gear deployment and retrieval. Additionally, any damage caused during the pilot study could be irreversible.

Control, enforcement and monitoring

STECF notes that the proposed control, enforcement and monitoring measures are clearly described and if implemented as intended, appear appropriate for effective at sea monitoring of the Natura 2000 sites.

Fishing activity in the Natura 2000 sites

Data on fishing activity and catches are given in Annex C of Annex I to the JR. The fleets that fish in the sites concerned are described in terms of the number of active vessels for each area, gear type (bottom-contacting and other, mobile and passive) and nation for the period 2012-2020 in Table 8 and fishing effort (hours) is given in Table 9. Similarly, landed catches in weight (kg) and value (euro) for year, area and nation are given in Tables 1 and 2 and landed catches in weight and value from the proposed buffer zones are given in Tables 5 and 6 for Danish vessels only.

STECF notes that it is not clear whether the reported landings include recreational landings and that since the most recent data are for the year 2020, they may no longer be representative of the current situation. It is unclear to STECF why more recent data have not been provided.

From Tables 8 and 9, it is clear that the value of landings varies considerably by site, year, country and gear type. However, the extent to which the fleets concerned are dependent on such landings cannot be inferred from the information presented. To make such an inference the annual value of the catches of all fishing operations by the fleets concerned would be required.

The JR does not provide any assessment of how fishing activity might be displaced as a result of the proposed measures. The only information presented is limited to a single paragraph which states *"Analyses of fishing patterns based on VMS positions and logbook data indicate that the proposed fisheries conservation measures are likely to affect the current fishing activities in the Danish part of the North Sea and Skagerrak. There are currently fisheries effort with beam- and bottom trawl in the concerned areas, which is to be prohibited, and this fishery is expected to be displaced into other areas."* No appropriate data and information is given in the JR to allow STECF to carry out an assessment of how fishing activity may be displaced as a result of the closed areas to fishing or to assess the potential economic and ecological consequences.

STECF conclusions

STECF concludes that the JR is clearly described and includes relevant details of proposed control, enforcement and monitoring measures. However, the information on fishing activities relate to the period 2012-2020 and may not be representative of the current situation. Furthermore, no information is provided about participating vessels, duration etc. of the proposed pilot project with beam trawlers. STECF concludes that relevant and up to date information is a prerequisite for STECFs ability to assess the proposed measures.

Specific conclusions in relation to each of the items in the request to STECF are given below.

1. Review the suitability and potential effectiveness of the proposed conservation measures to

a. *minimise the negative impacts of fishing activities on the marine ecosystem and*
b. *ensure that fisheries activities avoid the degradation of the marine environment.*

STECF concludes that the proposed conservation measures will contribute to minimising the negative impacts of fishing activities within the defined areas encompassing reef structures and buffer zones but will not eliminate such impacts. Notably, if implemented as intended, a ban on bottom-contacting mobile gears will offer

increased protection to reef structures and associated epifauna. Continuing to permit fishing with static gear is though likely to provide some risk to the reef structure and associated epifaunal and fish communities, but the extent of such risk cannot be quantified with the information available to STECF. In this regard, STECF concludes thus that the banning of all fishing activities within the reef area and surrounding buffer zone of Store Rev is likely to be more beneficial in terms of reducing fishing activity impacts than only banning mobile towed gears although the extent to which this is the case is not quantifiable.

2. Assess to what extent the proposed measures:

a) contribute towards achieving the conservation objectives of the sites (in relation to fishing as a pressure);
b) and to what extent the proposed measures can prevent:
(i) deterioration of natural habitats and the habitats of species and
(ii) significant disturbance of species protected in the site, as required by the Habitats Directive.

Banning fishing with mobile bottom-contacting towed gears will contribute to preventing the deterioration of natural and species habitats although the extent of the contribution cannot be determined with the data and information available. The ban on all fishing activity on Store Rev (Bubbling reef) will provide increased protection to species and habitats compared to the other four Natura 2000 sites.

3. Comment on whether the proposed control measures are adequate in relation to the proposed the management measures.

STECF concludes that the proposed control and enforcement measures appear appropriate and adequate for at sea monitoring of all vessels present in the Natura 2000 sites.

4. Comment on how the proposed conservation measures may affect the fishing activity in the proposed management zones. This should include
(i) identification of the fleets concerned,
(ii) their economic dependence on the proposed management zones,
(iii) their potential to reallocate the fishing activity (displacement) and
(iv) potential economic and ecological consequences.

The extent to which the fleets concerned are dependent on the landings from each of the Natura 2000 sites identified in the JR cannot be inferred from the information presented in the JR.

The information in the JR is not sufficient to permit an evaluation of the potential reallocation of fishing activity as a result of the proposed measures, although STECF notes that the JR indicates that beam- and bottom trawl activity which currently takes place in the concerned areas, is expected to be displaced into other areas.
There is insufficient information to assess the potential economic and ecological consequences of the proposed conservation measures.

Regarding the proposed Pilot study to test whether it is possible to distinguish and map the reef and associated gravel areas to permit precision fishing with beam trawls in the Natura 2000 site Gule Rev, STECF concludes that it seems nonsensical to permit such a study in an area that is designated to protect reef structures. It is not clear to STECF why this technological project is not carried out in an area that is not classified as a Natura 2000 protected area.

6.5 West Med MAP: Analyses of the ad-hoc contracts France & Spain

Background provided by the Commission

Background documents are published on:

https://stecf.ec.europa.eu/meetings-calendar/past-meetings

Request to the STECF

The STECF is requested to evaluate the results of the ad-hoc contract for EMU 1 - France and EMU 1 - Spain. The STECF should use the same basis as discussions as done for ToR 6.10 during STECF PLEN 24-02. TORs for this ad hoc contract:

TOR 1: Provide an overview on the implementation of the crisis mechanism in the respective Member State. This should include the legal framework.

TOR 2: Develop and populate a database with the available data on paid subsidies in the MS regarding the fleet segments used in the bio-economic models of the West Med Map evaluations (economic fleet segments, specific fleet segments in Italy).

TOR 3: Provide an overview on the measures of temporal and permanent cessations in the MS. This should include an overview on payments already issued and planned funding in the future.

TOR 4: Analyse AER data regarding operational subsidies for the time period 2012-2022 in France, Italy and Spain. This information should reveal how the last years may have been different from the years before the COVID-19 crisis. This provided data overview should be specified by countries and fleet segments.

Finally, STECF is requested to compile the information from the ad-hoc contracts (see background docs) conducted on Italian data, French data and Spanish data in order to complete the outputs from STECF EWG 24-12 report.

Information provided to STECF

Overview of ad hoc contracts

Three ad hoc contracts have been issued to collect specific information regarding payments of subsidies in Spain, France and Italy prioritising vessels operating in the Western Mediterranean Sea. The report for Italy was assessed by STECF during the July plenary session (PLEN 24-02). The report for France was delivered for EWG 24-12. A third report covering Spain was available to the STECF November plenary.

a. Operating subsidies

Mandatory temporary cessation of fishing activities (MTC)

In France, MTC funds aim to support fishing vessels forced to halt activities due to regulatory management plans, specifically targeting trawlers and small-scale fisheries operating in the Gulf of Lion and Corsican waters (zones GSA 7 and GSA 8). The main measures imposed by the West Med MAP consist of reducing trawl fishing effort with a reduction in the number of fishing days compensated by implementing temporary stops (EMFF measure 33) and spatio-temporal closures of fishing zones aimed at protecting juveniles.

French MTC payments are calculated based on the vessel's turnover from previous years and the number of days in temporary cessation. Vessels must have operated at least 120 days over the previous two years to be eligible. Payments are administered through EMFF funds (until 2022) and subsequently through EMFAF funds, with compensation rates increasing based on vessel size and skipper-ownership status. However, a significant proportion of payments lack identifiable vessel data, making it difficult to allocate funds accurately by vessel length class.

The French program uses annual approvals at the ministerial level to define cessation periods and the duration of fishing stops, which vary by year. Not all payments are associated with vessel identifiers. Around 34% of payments were untraceable to specific vessels in 2022, complicating the evaluation of funding impact by fleet segment.

Spain's MTC funds are part of a larger regulatory effort under the EMFF (until 2022) and then through EMFAF, implemented to support vessels engaged in demersal fishing in the West Mediterranean (GSA 1, 2, 5, 6, and 7). Spain's objectives emphasize biological sustainability, aiming to reduce the fishing effort and protect fish stocks over multiple years. The Spanish MTC policy mandates yearly effort reductions, with a target of up to 30% reduction for the period from the second to the fifth year of application of the plan, encouraging sustainable practices among larger and mixed coastal fleets.

In Spain, MTC payments are structured based on gross tonnage (GT) and assigned fishing days, calculated per vessel according to a graduated aid scale. This calculation considers vessel size and operational area, with larger vessels receiving higher compensation. Spain's subsidies are distributed through EMFF (until 2022) and then through EMFAF, with allocations recalculated annually based on fleet composition and regional fishing effort. Spanish vessels must demonstrate a specific operational history (120 days) similar to France's eligibility criteria.

Spain's MTC program operates with a pre-defined reduction framework, assigning fishing days to vessels annually based on projected biological impact. However, the program faces challenges in data aggregation due to owner-level reporting rather than vessel-level reporting.

Italy's MTC funds are implemented through a national management plan that sets annual cessation days specifically for trawlers in the West Mediterranean zones (GSA 9, 10, and 11). Italian policies require a gradual reduction in fishing days to decrease overall fishing effort, particularly targeting demersal fish species. The Italian program establishes baseline cessation days and additional cessation days that vary annually, with a planned reduction in fishing effort up to 30% over five years.

Italy provides MTC payments calculated on vessel gross tonnage and cessation days, but Italian subsidies focus on providing uniform cessation days across fleets with additional cessation days added progressively. The financial support is provided through EMFF under measure 1.33. The list of beneficiaries is published yearly by the national administration. Italian vessels are similarly required to have a minimum of 120 operational days within the prior two years.

30 days of temporary cessation of fishing activities was set for trawlers operating in GSA 9, 10 and 11 each year. Since 2019, additional days of temporary cessation were adopted for the trawlers operating in Western Mediterranean Sea.

Table 6.5.1. Comparative summary of subsidies related to mandatory temporary cessation of fishing activities (MTC).

	France	**Spain**	**Italy**
Primary Objective	Reduce fishing effort in GSA 7 & 8 for stock protection	Sustainable fishing effort reduction in multiple GSAs	Effort reduction in GSA 9, 10, & 11 with progressive cessation days
Calculation	Turnover and cessation days	Gross tonnage and cessation days	Gross tonnage and cessation days, with annual adjustments
Eligibility Criteria	Minimum 120 operational days	Minimum 120 operational days	Minimum 120 operational days
Payment Administration	Centralized (EMFF/EMFAF)	Not reported	Centralized (EMFF/EMFAF)
Data Issues	Lack of vessel identifiers for some payments	Subsidies were allocated to the different GSAs proportionally to the catches in the GSA	Delays in payments are very common due to the time required for paperwork processing, checks, and payment warrants (payment year is not the year of implementation of the temporary cessation measure)

Source: adhoc contract and own elaboration.

Temporary Cessation of fishing activities aimed at mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak

This category of funds includes measures related to Temporary Cessation of fishing activities (TC_Covid_19) and Emergency Fund for Fishery and Aquaculture_Covid-19 (Fund_Covid-19).

France's COVID-19 relief funds for the fishing sector focused on sustaining operations through temporary cessation subsidies and broader financial support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the fishing industry. France adopted two main measures to support the fishing sector: a temporary cessation measure to compensate for the unexpected loss of fishing opportunities and package supporting forgone wages for workers.

France provided COVID-19 cessation subsidies through EMFF funds, with payments calculated based on vessel turnover from previous years and the number of days of cessation. The subsidies were available to all vessels regardless of type or fishing area, with eligibility criteria requiring vessels to have operated for at least 120 days in the prior two years. Payments also included additional compensation for skippers or owner-operators of larger vessels. France supplemented these subsidies with partial exemptions from social security contributions for small companies with significant revenue losses, but these contributions were part of broader SME support and not classified as fisheries-specific subsidies.

France's data on COVID-19 cessation subsidies is partially incomplete, with several records lacking vessel specific details. Many beneficiaries were unidentified due to missing vessel identifiers in national databases, with 84% of 2020 payments not linked to a specific vessel type or size. This gap in vessel data limits the ability to assess how funds were distributed among different fleet segments, impacting the precision of France's COVID-19 fund analysis.

Spain's COVID-19 funds were geared toward compensating fishing vessels for temporary loss of income caused by pandemic related restrictions and the resulting demand reduction. Spanish relief measures included direct subsidies for temporary cessation and broader operational cost support to maintain fleet viability. Spain also reactivated storage aid to help fisheries manage unsold catch, offering a diversified approach to help mitigate the economic impact on fishers.

Spain's COVID-19 temporary cessation payments were structured according to gross tonnage and eligible cessation days, with a compensation scale increasing according to vessel size. The relief funds allowed fishers and vessel owners to claim compensation for lost income during the pandemic lockdowns. Spain's approach also permitted additional support for production and marketing through revised aid ceilings, giving flexibility to producer organizations in planning and financing market adaptation efforts. The cessation funds were distributed from EMFF allocations, with temporary relief measures managed at the national level for expedited disbursement.

The ad hoc contractor faced challenges in aggregating subsidy data due to its practice of reporting at the owner level rather than on vessel level. While payment calculations based on gross tonnage are clear, the aggregated data structure complicates the task of disaggregating funds by vessel, limiting the ability to evaluate how relief funds affected specific segments of the fleet. Additionally, Spain's reactivated storage aid was applied at the organizational rather than vessel level, which further reduces the visibility of individual support measures within national databases.

Italy's COVID-19 relief funds included temporary cessation subsidies and a dedicated emergency fund for fishery and aquaculture. The Italian government sought to provide financial support to fishers affected by the collapse in fresh fish demand and operational disruptions. The relief measures were broad, offering income support for fishers and subsidies for cessation days based on vessel size and activity. Italian subsidies aimed at preserving income for both fleet owners and self-employed fishers during the pandemic.

Italy's COVID-19 relief payments combined cessation subsidies and emergency funds, with cessation payments calculated based on vessel gross tonnage and cessation days. All fishing vessels were eligible to apply, provided they had a minimum of 120 operational days over the prior two years. Italy's cessation subsidies covered lost fishing opportunities during specific periods in 2020, with payments distributed through regional authorities. In addition to direct subsidies, Italy's budget law introduced income support for fishery workers in small cooperatives and self-employed fishers, providing a daily stipend to offset income losses from reduced fishing activity.

Italy's COVID-19 subsidy data show regional variation in reporting, with some regions lacking detailed vessel level information, which affects consistency in national records. Italian payments are calculated based on vessel gross tonnage, but regionally managed data aggregation leads to inconsistencies. Additionally, income support for fishers is not fully documented in vessel records, further complicating the tracking of relief distribution by fleet segment.

Table 6.5.2. Comparative Summary of subsidies aimed at mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak (TC_Covid_19 and Fund_Covid-19).

	France	**Spain**	**Italy**
Primary Objective	Sustain operations and alleviate revenue loss	Compensate for temporary income loss, storage support	Income support and operational cost mitigation
Calculation Basis	Vessel turnover and cessation days	Gross tonnage and cessation days	Gross tonnage and cessation days

	France	Spain	Italy
Eligibility Criteria	All vessels, minimum 120 operational days	All vessels, minimum 120 operational days	All vessels, minimum 120 operational days
Additional Support	Partial social security exemptions for SMEs	Reactivated storage aid, increased aid ceilings	Income support for self-employed fishers and cooperatives
Data Challenges	Missing vessel identifiers, partially identification of fleet segments associated with payments	Aggregated at owner level, difficult to assess vessel-specific impacts. subsidies under EMFAF are not yet fully processed and certified	Regional data inconsistencies, incomplete vessel-level data that reduce the uniformity of vessel-level information and impacting the national assessment of fund distribution

Source: adhoc contract and own elaboration.

Ukraine Crisis Relief Funds (Fund_ EU Ukraine crisis)

France's Ukraine crisis relief focused on mitigating the effects of fuel price hikes, which significantly impacted fishing profitability. The French program offered direct subsidies for fuel costs, combined with a temporary nationwide fuel rebate to ease immediate operational expenses. The objective was to maintain fleet viability by directly compensating vessel owners for increased fuel prices and sustaining fishing activities despite the economic challenges.

France's payment structure for Ukraine crisis relief included both a fuel rebate at the point of purchase and a specific aid measure administered by regional fisheries departments. The rebate and aid rates varied over time in response to market fluctuations. Compensation was calculated based on fuel consumption, with vessel owners required to submit fuel invoices to qualify. The support combined de minimis aid (€30,000) with additional funding allocated through the Ukraine package.

France's implementation of Ukraine crisis funds relied on centralized rebate systems and regional administrative applications. Although the rebates were distributed directly at fuel stations, the lack of a comprehensive beneficiary database meant that vessel specific data were not always available, leading to limited traceability of payments at the vessel level. Regional fisheries departments handled specific applications, adding another layer of complexity to data aggregation.

Spain's relief measures addressed the increase in production costs resulting from higher fuel prices, targeting both fuel costs and broader operational expenses for the

fishing sector. Spanish aid included direct fuel subsidies for fishing vessels and exemptions from certain port fees. The objective was to provide a multi-layered support system for fleets, particularly those operating in high fuel cost fishing segments like trawlers and tunny fisheries.

Spain's Ukraine crisis funds included direct subsidies calculated based on gross tonnage (GT) and vessel size, with maximum caps set per vessel.

Spain's relief measures were implemented with a detailed subsidy scale based on GT, but data aggregation occurred at the owner level, which limits visibility into vessel-specific allocations. While the Spanish government attempted to track subsidies through annual records, the aggregation method prevented a precise breakdown of funds by fleet segment, complicating the assessment of fund impact at a granular level. Port fee exemptions were also documented collectively, reducing specificity in individual fleet-level support.

Italy's Ukraine crisis relief combined fuel cost compensation with a tax credit mechanism for fuel expenditures, offering financial relief while incentivizing efficient fuel usage. Italy also introduced a one-off compensation based on vessel length, vessel power (kW) and fishing technique, aimed at offsetting the impact of operational cost increases. The Italian approach emphasized a balanced relief structure, providing both immediate support and a long-term reduction in tax burdens associated with fuel costs.

Italy's relief structure included both direct subsidies and a tax credit equal to 20% of fuel costs, with eligibility extending to all fishing vessels. Subsidies for increased fuel costs were calculated based on vessel length and operational activity, with separate provisions for large and small vessels. The tax credit, applicable to fuel costs in 2022 and 2023, was introduced through a legislative decree and allowed vessels to offset other state aid against these credits if necessary.

Only direct subsidies based on EMFF/EMFAF funds are partially available; Ukraine crisis funds were administered regionally, with data reported inconsistently across administrative regions. Not all regions reported data with vessel level granularity, leading to inconsistencies in the national database. Additionally, Italy's tax credit system required detailed fuel cost records, which smaller fleets reportedly struggled to maintain, leading to limited uptake among these segments.

Table 6.5.3. Comparative summary of Ukraine Crisis Relief Funds (Fund_ EU Ukraine crisis).

	France	**Spain**	**Italy**
Primary Objective	Offset fuel costs, maintain fleet viability	Alleviate increased operational costs due to fuel prices	Offset fuel costs with tax credits
Calculation Basis	Fuel consumption, temporary rebate	Gross tonnage, fuel consumption	Vessel length, vessel power, fuel

	France	Spain	Italy
			consumption, and tax credit
Eligibility Criteria	All vessels, fuel invoices required	All vessels, with aid scale based on GT	All vessels, fuel invoices for tax credit eligibility
Additional Support	Temporary rebate at fuel stations	Port fee exemptions	Tax credit for fuel costs, one-off compensation by length
Data Challenges	Lack of vessel-level data in rebates. Data on payments are not available	Aggregated at owner level, limits vessel-specific data; subsidies under EMFAF are not yet fully processed and certified	Regional inconsistencies, limited tax credit uptake

Source: adhoc contract and own elaboration.

b. Investment subsidies

The review of the EMFF database published by the French administration identified only four types of measures for which applications were made in the Mediterranean regions between 2019 and 2022: Start-up support of young fishermen (31), Permanent cessation of fishing activities (34), Innovation linked to the conservation of marine biological resources (39), Energy efficiency and mitigation of climate change (41). In 2022, 14 trawlers operating in the GSA7 area have benefitted from a measure of permanent cessation of fishing activities

In Spain, EMFF and EMFAF funds are allocated for a broad range of projects including innovation in fishing techniques, diversification of income streams, and investments to reduce environmental impact. Permanent cessation of fishing activities is not reported.

Italy's investment subsidies emphasize fleet modernization and environmental adaptation, with particular attention to reducing the ecological footprint of fishing activities. The permanent cessation of fishing activities was implemented in 2017; payments were made in 2018 for a total of about EUR 70 million. In 2022, a new permanent cessation measure will be launched under the new EMFAF. For the West Med fleet segments, a reduction of 25 percent of the fishing capacity in all the GSAs; a withdrawal of 15 percent and 10 percent respectively for longliners in GSA 10 and polyvalent passive in GSA 9. Italy's investment subsidy data are fragmented across different administrative regions, with regional differences in data reporting formats and availability.

c. Data acquisition and data issues

The three contracts provided datasets structured in the same way and reporting payments by type of subsidies, GSA, fishing technique, vessel class and payment year, where available. A summary is presented in table 6.5.4.

Table 6.5.4. Operating subsidies by year and country.

	MTC	**Fund_Covid-19**	**TC_Covid_19**	**Fund_ EU Ukraine crisis**
France	**1.479.313**		**2.462.982**	
2020			2.462.982	
2021	458.423			
2022	1.020.890			
Italy	**5.340.445**	**4.431.236**	**2.814.075**	**7.892.452**
2019	1.173.850			
2020	1.481.275	4.431.236		
2021	1.301.035		435.902	
2022	1.140.889		2.217.773	
2023	243.396		160.399	
2024				7.892.452
Spain	**1.223.607**		**293.528**	**4.504.820**
2019	130.424			
2020	284.653		293.528	
2021	332.890			
2022	348.947			411.224
2023	126.694			4.093.596

Data source: Ad hoc contract on West Med MAP subsidies/state aid, reports for France, Italy and Spain.

The reports from the three ad hoc contracts highlighted several issues in acquiring complete data for each subsidy type. In all three Member States, data on subsidies are often aggregated at the fleet or company level, rather than the vessel level, limiting insights into how funds are distributed across different vessel types, sizes and segments. Particularly for Italy and Spain, regional differences in reporting and data management result in inconsistent availability of vessel specific subsidy data, impacting the ability to perform comprehensive analyses at a national level.

For certain subsidies, unique identifiers such as vessel registration numbers are missing or inconsistently applied. This lack of identifiers prevents precise tracking of subsidies, especially in France and Italy. Some subsidy data, especially concerning COVID-19 relief and Ukraine crisis aid, are restricted in public databases due to administrative constraints, reducing transparency in financial support allocations across all three Member States.

d. Operating subsidies as reported in the AER data call

The three contracts provided an analysis of the subsidies reported by Member State in the official AER data call. The analysis for the three Member States reveals some common conclusions.

For the last five years, subsidies for the fleets operating in the Western Mediterranean remained low until 2019, when they started to increase. This increase primarily benefited trawlers as compensation for the mandatory 30-day cessation of fishing, in line with the Mediterranean Management Plan. Subsidies continued to rise in 2020, 2021 and 2022, influenced by global events like COVID-19 and the Ukraine invasion.

Total operating subsidies, average subsidies by vessel and the share of subsidies on total income are included in the three reports by year and by fishing technique. A summary of this information is given in table 6.5.5.

Table 6.5.5. Subsidies from 2017 to 2021 (€) as reported in the fleet economic data call.

		2017	**2018**	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**
France	Operating subsidies	625.600	353.588	1.171.018	1.333.515	935.180
	Operating subsidies/vessels	4.700	2.667	8.871	10.725	7.743
	Operating subsidies/total income	0,53%	0,29%	1,05%	1,51%	1,11%
Spain	Operating subsidies	986.536	919.605	2.030.217	2.366.252	3.709.114

	Operating subsidies/vessel	385	368	846	997	1.582
	Operating subsidies/Total income	0,31%	0,27%	0,67%	0,81%	1,22%
Italy*	Operating subsidies	5.796.029	9.406.732	3.391.777	22.815.919	7.529.081
	Operating subsidies/vessel	515	845	312	2.231	730
	Operating subsidies/total income	0,6%	1%	0,4%	3,4%	1%

Data source: Ad hoc contract on West Med MAP subsidies/state aid, reports for France, Spain and Italy.

*Italian data refer to national values and not only to the fleets operating the GSAs covered by the West Med Plan because the AER data are available only at the supra-region level

STECF comments

STECF notes that all ad hoc contracts are structured following the same TORs to allow replicability and comparability. The subsidies are categorized into “operating subsidies”, that refer to direct payments/transfers related to the vessel activity and “investment subsidies” to finance all or part of the costs of their acquiring assets related to the vessel.

STECF observes that the French and Italian reports describe the implementation of the permanent cessation measure that has been implemented in 2022 in France, while it has been recently initiated under the new EMFAF in Italy.

STECF observes that there are relevant differences in the methods used to calculate the payment and in actual provision timings among the three countries, reflecting specific administrative procedures.

STECF notes that, although all three contracts provide basic subsidy data, the information presented is partial for several measures and years. STECF also notes that subsidy data for the most recent years are still being processed, particularly for funds related to the Ukraine crisis, leading to temporal gaps that complicate assessments of recent subsidy impacts.

STECF observes that the trend of the operating subsidies is quite cyclical; the payment year is not the year of implementation of the measures implemented; this is particular evident for the temporary cessation measure; as the deadline for structural funds approaches, there is an acceleration of payments. STECF considers that an increase in

operating subsidies is likely to be observed in the economic data sets referring to 2023 and 2024, that will be provided by Member States in 2025 and 2026 data calls.

STECF notes that in all the three contracts, differences are reported between subsidy records in the AER and EMFF databases. For Italy, AER data are not comparable because AER data refer to the whole Italian fleet and not to specific GSAs. For France and Spain, the differences may be partially due to timing mismatches between data collection and actual subsidy payments. Additional measures (e.g., reduced social contributions and fuel expenses) were not fully captured in AER data due to their complex accounting and lack of transparency in EU-level reporting.

STECF notes that operating subsidies, as reported in the AER, constitute a small fraction of income across all segments.

STECF conclusions

STECF concludes that different types of payments have been introduced between 2019 and 2024 in response to global crises and to the reduction of fishing effort imposed by the West Med MAP. However, several payments are not yet fully processed and certified and gaps in reporting and the inconsistent timing of subsidy payments make it difficult to accurately assess the full impact of these subsidies on the fishing sector.

To address these issues, STECF concludes that even if the approach in each of the Member States reflects adaptations to national administrative structures, improvements in vessel specific data acquisition would enhance the ability to assess the impact of subsidies on fishers' behaviour.

STECF concludes that subsidies related to mandatory temporary cessation of fishing activities could eventually be integrated in the scenarios modelled in the West Med MAP EWGs. These types of subsidies are well suited for inclusion in models because, as highlighted by the three ad hoc contracts, they exhibit a relatively stable structure over time and are backed by more consistent reliable data from official administrative sources. Other types of subsidies, such as those implemented in recent years to mitigate the impacts of extraordinary events, are not suitable for inclusion in models because of the unpredictability of their future levels.

6.6 Evaluation of updated JR and MP for transparent goby in Gulf of Manfredonia

Background provided by the Commission

Following the conclusions of STECF PLEN 24-02, Italy was notified the main technical comments from STECF and requested to update the JR and MP. Italy agreed to do so and provided the additional information. The revised documents were transmitted to the Commission.

Background documents are published on:

https://stecf.ec.europa.eu/meetings-calendar/past-meetings

Request to the STECF

The STECF is requested to revise the updated MP and JR on the basis of TOR 6.5 from PLEN 24-02, to address specifically the outstanding points and revise its conclusions on the possibility of granting the requested derogations.

Summary of the information provided to STECF

STECF examined the following background documents:

1. Joint Recommendation of the Italian Member State Management plan on Transparent goby fisheries in certain Italian territorial water (Gulf of Manfredonia),

2. National Management Plan for derogation to mesh size and distance from the coast (reg EU 1241/2019 annex ix, part b and reg (EC) 1967/2006, art 13) regarding the fishing of transparent goby (*Aphia minuta*) by boat seines in the Manfredonia fishing district, October 2024 (Updated management plan).

In the submitted Joint Recommendation (JR), Italy is proposing a renewal of the management plan for transparent goby fisheries (*Aphia minuta*) in the Gulf of Manfredonia, in accordance with Article 18 of Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013 (document 1). The updated management plan applies only to the Italian fleet.

Document 2 is the updated management plan which is attached as an annex to the JR. This specific plan is proposed to have a duration of three years, ending on the 31st of May 2027.

STECF notes that the current submission is the 7th submission of a Management Plan for this fishery. Previous plans were examined by STECF during PLEN-14-03, PLEN-16-02, PLEN-21-01, PLEN-21-02, PLEN-21-03 and PLEN-24-02.

The updated Management Plan is essentially the same as the one submitted in June 2024 except for certain amendments made in response to comments and conclusions of PLEN-24-02.

Main conclusions of STECF PLEN 24-02 regarding the previous version of the proposed plan

During the summer plenary, STECF pointed out that the catch rates of transparent goby in the Manfredonia Gulf are much higher than those reported in other Mediterranean areas (e.g., Tuscany, Liguria, Murcia) and concluded that: "… *in order to fully understand the reasons for the high catch rates of transparent goby in the Manfredonia Gulf and distinguish between natural and technical factors affecting catch rates, information regarding the current gear and its use in the Manfredonia Gulf should be updated and detailed. Additional evidence such as images and videos recorded during the fishing operations should be provided. Information from the spatial monitoring of fishing operations foreseen under the previous and updated Management Plan would be also helpful, i.e., maps with locations of hauls.*"

Additionally, PLEN-24-02 concluded that the implementation of the boat seine management plan in the Manfredonia Gulf for the period 2018-2024 does not meet all the conditions upon which the derogations regarding minimum distance from the coast and depth have been granted: "*The fishery is subject to a management plan however its monitoring is not adequate as it is only based on information declared by the skippers in catch forms or logbooks and there is lack of any proper scientific monitoring (on board biological survey, spatial monitoring, socio-economic survey). Consequently, there is no scientific evidence on where and how the fishing operations are carried out, on the actual catch and bycatch volumes and size compositions (particularly with regards to species subject to minimum sizes in accordance with Annex IX of Regulation (EU) 2019/1241) as well as on discards rates. Therefore, STECF concludes that the plan does not contain all elements required to fully assess the fishery and to confirm that it does not have any significant impact on the marine environment.*"

Amendments made to the updated Management Plan

The main additions made in the updated version of the plan (submitted in October 2024), in response to the aforementioned PLEN 24-02, are outlined below:

1. A new section has been added to the Management Plan (p. 135-138) further describing the fishing gear and its operation as well as providing justifications for the high catch rates of transparent goby in the Gulf of Manfredonia (e.g., that the oceanographic characteristics of the Gulf favor the concentration of fish in the area). It is stated that:

"*The description* (of fishing gear and its operation) *is like the one presented in the management plan for the use of the "sonsera" (boat seine) in Catalonia, adopted with Reg. 1713/2021 of 24/09/2021 and currently being renewed.*" .

"*Fishing yields are subject to considerable fluctuations, with peaks that can be high. This phenomenon characterizes this type of fishing and is also reported in the scientific report supporting the seine plan in Catalonia, where catch values of 90 kg/day/boat were recorded in March 2011.*"

It is also mentioned that:

"*Starting with the next campaign, for a better understanding of the structure of the gear and its use, photographic documentation, images and videos recorded during fishing operations, will be produced. Images will be made of the gear deployed at the dock and of fishing operations at sea, as described in the text.*"

2. A new section has been added to the Management Plan (p. 139-144) presenting, on a monthly basis, maps of the locations of fishing hauls for the periods December 2022 - April 2023 and November 2023 - February 2024, i.e., the most part of the last two fishing seasons (December 2022 - May 2023 and November 2023 – May 2024, respectively).

   Furthermore, it is mentioned that: "*The spatial monitoring of this fishery will be implemented from the next campaign, through a system that will automatically detect the position of the hauls, even for vessels not subject to this obligation, via a user-friendly App for the fisherman"*.

3. With regard to Scientific monitoring (e.g., on board sampling), no data have been provided for the 2018-2024 period, when the fishery was conducted under two consecutive MPs and it is only stated that:
   "*In view of a constant improvement in the fishing monitoring, sampling data on size composition principal species, will be collected starting from next fishing campaign, particularly those mentioned in Annex IX of Regulation (EU) 2019/1241.*"

STECF comments

Regarding the maps of locations of fishing hauls, STECF notes that no information is provided on the methodology used to produce these maps e.g., number of hauls used to construct the map of each month in relation to total number of hauls, the origin of data used to delimit the Posidonia meadow shown in the maps.

STECF also notes that in certain monthly maps (e.g., November 2023, January 2024, February 2024) many hauls were located beyond the 50 m isobath (some even beyond the 100 m isobath) which is not compatible with the nature of this fishery, other Mediterranean regions (GSA 9) and the descriptions given in the management plan. For

example, it is mentioned in the management plan that: "*In the sequence of maps, it can be seen how, in the colder months, the transparent goby resource is localized very close to the coast, close to the Gargano promontory. Consequently, the fishing effort is also localized almost entirely in the Northwestern part of the Gulf, within the 50-metre isobath*."

STECF notes that evidence that the transparent goby seine-net, which is said to be similar with that used in GSA 9, can be operated in waters with depth greater than 50 m, is not provided. The experience from GSA 9 (see ToR 6.6 STECF PLEN-02) indicates that the detection of the transparent goby schools with echosounders is only technically possible in shallow waters (the schools are small and located close to the bottom) while the deployment and operation of the gear is also not feasible in deeper waters. Consequently, the transparent goby fishery in GSA 9 is carried out in shallow waters (up to 40 m) and till the month of March when the transparent goby schools can be found within this depth range.

As noted in STECF PLEN 24-02, scientific monitoring of the catch and bycatch composition and respective size distributions is required for this fishery. Scientific estimates of bycatch rates should be obtained through on-board sampling, as originally foreseen in the plan but seemingly not implemented. So far, the plan refers generally to '*Surveys onboard*', stating that "*upon request of the scientific body the fishermen beneficiaries of the Management Plan have to allow the scientists to get on board to check directly the fishing operations, the gear characteristics, spatial monitoring, the catches on target species and by-catch, and to get biological samples, which will be given away free of charge.*" However, no minimal direct on-board sampling scheme or planning is presented in the new Management Plan, as to grant that the lack of respective information, that appears to have arisen in the last implementations of the plan, will not happen again.

STECF conclusions

STECF acknowledges the effort made to collect and homogenize the georeferenced data and produce maps of the spatial distribution of fishing effort.

STECF concludes that the updated Management Plan does still not contain all elements required to fully assess the fishery and to confirm that it does not have any significant impact on the marine environment. Additional information on gear characteristics and its use, such as images and representative videos recorded during the fishing operations, as well as data from the scientific monitoring of the plan (e.g. on-board samplings, socio-economic survey), are still lacking.

STECF concludes that the scientific monitoring foreseen under the previous Managements Plans does not seem to have been carried out during 2018-2024. Furthermore, the proposal for the 2024-2027 Management Plan does not contain any detailed direct scientific monitoring scheme to guarantee that this will not happen again.

6.7 Evaluation of Italy's national management plans in line with MedReg and the CFP

Background provided by the Commission

Under Article 19 of Council Regulation (EC) No 1967/2006 (hereafter referred to as "MEDREG"[6]), Member States are expected to adopt management plans for fisheries conducted by trawl nets, boats seines, shore seines, surrounding nets and dredges within their territorial waters.

In 2013, the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP[7]) introduced new elements for conservation such as the target of maximum sustainable yield (MSY) for all the stocks by 2020 at the latest, the landing obligation and the regionalisation approach.

In line with these two regulations, the plans shall be based on scientific, technical and economic advice, and shall contain conservation measures to restore and maintain fish stocks above levels capable of producing maximum sustainable yield or MSY. Where targets relating to the MSY (e.g. fishing mortality at MSY) cannot be determined, owing to insufficient data, the plans shall provide for measures based on the precautionary approach, ensuring at least a comparable degree of conservation of the relevant stocks.

The plans shall also contain specific conservation measures based on the ecosystem approach to achieve the objectives set. In particular, they may incorporate any measure included in the following list to limit fishing mortality and the environmental impact of fishing activities: limiting catches, fixing the number and type of fishing vessels authorized to fish, limiting fishing effort, adopting technical measures (structure of fishing gears, fishing practices, areas/period of fishing restriction, minimum size, reduction of impact of fishing activities on marine ecosystems and non-target species), establishing incentives to promote more selective fisheries, conduct pilot projects on alternative types of fishing management techniques, etc.

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6 Council Regulation (EC) No 1967/2006 of 21 December 2006 concerning management measures for the sustainable exploitation of fishery resources in the Mediterranean Sea, amending Regulation (EEC) No 2847/93 and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1626/94. OJ L 409, 30.12.2006, p. 11–85.

7 Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 on the Common Fisheries Policy, amending Council Regulations (EC) No 1954/2003 and (EC) No 1224/2009 and repealing Council Regulations (EC) No 2371/2002 and (EC) No 639/2004 and Council Decision 2004/585/EC. OJ L 354, 28.12.2013, p. 22–61.

In 2011, Italy submitted consolidated management plans for demersal fisheries to the European Commission (EC). In January 2018, Italy submitted new management plan which should were examined by the STECF PLEN 2018-01. The 6 new plans cover the following areas: GSA 9, 10, 11, 16, 17-18 and 19. The plans were prolonged untill 2023 and further extended by an additional year in 2024. With the plans expiring on 31st December 2024, Italy needs to adopt new plans following the STECF evaluation. New demersal plans should account and work in synergy with the EU obligations stemming from the EU West Mediterranean MAP and the GFCM obligations stemming from the adopted MAPs for the Adriatic 8and Strait of Sicily.

Background documents are published on:

https://stecf.ec.europa.eu/meetings-calendar/past-meetings

Request to the STECF

ToR 1: The STECF is requested to review the implementation report of the boat seines fishery provided to support the Spanish request to renew the derogation. The STECF is also requested to present its findings and make appropriate comments with respect to the conservation and management requirements/objectives stipulated by Council Regulation (EC) No 1967/2006 ("MedReg") and by the Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013.

STECF is requested to:

- Advise and assess whether the documents transmitted by Spain contain adequate elements in terms of:
    - The description of the fisheries
        - Biological characteristics and state of the exploited resources with reference in particular to long-term yields.
        - Description of the fishing pressure and measures to accomplish a sustainable exploitation of the main target stocks.
        - Data on catches (landings and discards) of the species concerned, fishing effort and abundance indices such as catch-per-unit-effort (or CPUE).

8 https://gfcm.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/CoC/EWiQ72wF6gpPrZ5__qnQcz0Bi8N2mTN6Lhdx9QlbyGN9YA
https://gfcm.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/CoC/Ef_elH5PcHNKh6ao1n3jyYMBjJzqEkjs7TYfN04eciaF3A
https://gfcm.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/CoC/EYf2ib7DWNRDv41S-efTTJsBp3q13F2489qoif3dZxx1mw
https://gfcm.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/CoC/EbY3psmy13ZMhPiBoK2wNpQB0I7pqAHCjfKQ8OB2z5isGA
https://gfcm.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/CoC/EaYYi8NoI8tIpVWUUgQ3KwUBgGj6lwJTs2mXedd4cSC_FA

        - Catch composition in terms of size distribution, with particular reference to the percentage of catches of species subject to minimum sizes in accordance with Annex IX of Regulation (EU) 2019/1241.
        - Information on the social and economic impact of the measures proposed.
        - Potential impact of the fishing gear on the marine environment with particular interest on protected habitats (i.e., seagrass bed, coralligenous habitat and maërl bed).
    - Objectives, safeguards and conservation/technical measures
        - Objectives that are consistent with the objectives set out in Article 2 and with the relevant provisions of Articles 6 of Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013 and quantifiable targets, such as fishing mortality rates and total biomass.
        - Objectives for conservation and technical measures to be taken in order to achieve the targets set out in Article 15 of Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013, and measures designed to avoid and reduce, as far as possible, unwanted catches.
        - Measures proportionate to the objectives, the targets and the expected time frame.
        - Safeguards to ensure that quantifiable targets are met, as well as remedial actions, where needed, including situations where the deteriorating quality of data or non-availability places the sustainability of the main stocks of the fishery at risk.
        - Other conservation measures, in particular measures to gradually eliminate discards, taking into account the best available scientific advice or to minimise the negative impact of fishing on the ecosystem.
    - Other aspects
        - Quantifiable indicators for periodic monitoring and assessment of progress in achieving the objectives of a management plan.
- Suggest additional recommendation to improve the monitoring of this fishery.

<u>More specifically, STECF is requested to advise and comment on whether the documents provided contain adequate and up-to date scientific and technical justifications ensuring that the conditions of the MedReg are still fulfilled, in particular that:</u>

- There are particular geographical constraints, such as the limited size of the continental shelf along the entire coastline;
- The fishery has no significant impact on the marine environment;

- The fishery involves a limited number of vessels and does not contain any increase in the fishing effort with respect to what is already authorized by Member States;
- The fishery cannot be undertaken with another gear;
- The fishery is subject to a management plan and carry out a monitoring of catches as requested in Article 23;
- The vessels concerned have a track record of more than 5 years;
- The fishery does not interfere with the activities of vessels using gears other than trawls, seines or similar towed nets;
- The fishery is regulated in order to ensure that catches of species mentioned in Annex IX of Regulation (EU) 2019/1241 with the exception of mollusc bivalves, are minimal
- The fishery does not target cephalopods.
- The fisheries are highly selective and have a negligible effect on the marine environment; and
- The fisheries do not operate above seagrass beds of, in particular, *Posidonia oceanica* or other marine phanerograms

ToR 2: STECF is requested to review the monitoring elements provided and, if necessary, advise and assess whether the management plan for mechanised dredges catching bivalves in the waters of Catalonia contains adequate elements in terms of:

The description of the fisheries

- Biological characteristics and state of the exploited resources with reference in particular to long-term yields.
- Description of the fishing pressure and measures to accomplish a sustainable exploitation of the main target stocks.
- Data on catches (landings and discards) of the species concerned, fishing effort and abundance indices such as catch-per-unit-effort (or CPUE).
- Catch composition in terms of size distribution, with particular reference to the percentage of catches of species subject to minimum sizes in accordance with Annex III of the MEDREG[2].
- Information on the social and economic impact of the measures proposed.
- Potential impact of the fishing gear on the marine environment with particular interest on protected habitats (i.e. seagrass bed, coralligenous habitat and maërl bed);

Objectives, safeguards and conservation/technical measures

- Objectives that are consistent with the objectives set out in Article 2 and with the relevant provisions of Articles 6 of CFP[3] Regulation and quantifiable targets, such as fishing mortality rates and total biomass.

- Objectives for conservation and technical measures to be taken in order to achieve the targets set out in Article 15 of Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013, and measures designed to avoid and reduce, as far as possible, unwanted catches.
- Measures proportionate to the objectives, the targets and the expected time frame.
- Safeguards to ensure that quantifiable targets are met, as well as remedial actions, where needed, including situations where the deteriorating quality of data or non-availability places the sustainability of the main stocks of the fishery at risk.
- Other conservation measures, in particular measures to gradually eliminate discards, taking into account the best available scientific advice or to minimise the negative impact of fishing on the ecosystem.

Other aspects

- Quantifiable indicators for periodic monitoring and assessment of progress in achieving the objectives of the plan.

Summary of the information provided to STECF

STECF was provided with one report and two annexes:

The report, entitled “Technical Report on Drafting Management Plans for Italian Demersal Trawl Fleets in 2025-2030” presents the main aspects of the proposed management plan. It first summarises the history of management plans following the enforcement of Council Regulation (EC) No. 1967/2006 “Concerning management measures for the sustainable exploitation of fishery resources in the Mediterranean Sea” (MEDREG) that led to the implementation of a first generation of management plans in 2011 (Director’s Decree No. 44 of 17 June 2010, Director’s Decree of 6 September 2011) and of the second generation of plans (The Director’s Decree of 30 January 2018). This second generation of management plans covered the period 2018–2023 and were extended in 2024. These management plans were assessed by PLEN 18-01 that acknowledged that comprehensive information had been provided to support the plans. However, STECF noted that data was available only for a small fraction of targeted species, that it was unclear why the management plans promoted the same level of fishing effort reduction in each GSA as stock status were contrasted, and more importantly, that the decrease of effort was unlikely to be enough to reach Fmsy.

The report also summarises the regulatory context of the future management plans. It reminds that following the implementation of the Western Mediterranean Multiannual Management Plan (Regulation (EU) 2019/1022), the upcoming management plan should ensure the achievement of CFP objectives for demersal stocks in the Western Mediterranean, including the achievement of F_{MSY}. For other areas, different GFCM recommendations (GFCM/45/2022/7, GFCM/45/2022/8, GFCM/45/2022/6, GFCM/45/2022/5, GFCM/45/2022/4) have settled effort regimes, catch limits for some

species, fishery restricted areas for demersal stocks and trawlers fisheries. Their application by the Union was enforced by Regulation (EU) 2023/2124 of 4th October 2023.

The document also describes the fisheries. It reminds that stock assessments of the species targeted by the management plans are carried out by GFCM and STECF. Trends in fishing effort for bottom trawlers in the different GSA and for beam trawlers in the Adriatic are displayed and the report outline a decline of effort over the recent period 2018-2021. Trends in different socio-economic indicators (Net Profit Margin - NPM, Current Revenue over Break-Even Revenue – CR/BR, Number of fishermen in Full-Time Equivalent units – FTE, Gross Value added per FTE – GVA/FTE) are also displayed for the different fleets targeted by the plan for the period 2013-2022 (year of latest stock assessment available). Most of them show a decline in the socio-economic performance of the fleets in recent years, with indicators below defined thresholds in most cases (e.g. CR/BR < 1, NPM <= 10%).

The second part of the report presents the bio-economic simulations that are used to explore the effects of different potential effort regimes for the period 2025-2030. The biological simulations are based on the outcomes of the stock assessments models. For each stock, forecasts are run independently until 2030 assuming either constant recruitment (deterministic forecasts) or random recruitment (geo-mean of the last three years + lognormally distributed random noise – stochastic forecasts) and different scenarios of fishing effort for the Italian trawlers:

- status quo based on fishing effort in 2022 (last year of used stock assessment),
- 3% yearly decrease over 2025-2027, then stable effort until 2030,
- 5% yearly decrease over 2025-2027, then stable effort until 2030,
- single-stock progressive reduction over 2025-2027 so that each stock achieves $F_{0.1}$ (proxy of Fmsy) then stable effort until 2030. This single-stock approach is classically used to make advice (e.g. single-species catch-opportunity) but does not account dor the mixed-fishery nature of this fishery (e.g. effort reduction to achieve F0.1 for a species is not necessarily the same that the reduction to achieve F0.1 of a second species targetted by the same fleet),
- progressive reduction over 2025-2027 to ensure the achievement of $F_{0.1}$ (proxy of Fmsy) of the stock that as the poorest status in 2022 (“Fweak” scenario), then stable effort until 2030. This scenario aims to account for the mixed fishery nature of the fishery: achieving Fmsy for all stocks of the fishery requires a fishing effort reduction imposed by the stock with the poorest status. Fishing effort is assumed to be proportional to Fishing mortality.

Fishing mortality induced by non-Italian vessels and by Italian fisheries using other gears are kept constant in the simulations. A socio-economic model is coupled with those simulations. It includes a model of price dynamics, a model of costs that includes variable costs, fixed costs, capital costs and labour costs. The socio-economic model assumes that cost per unit of effort (e.g. fuel cost per unit of effort) or per unit of gross

tonnage (e.g. maintenance cost per unit of gross tonnage) are constant along the projection. Revenues per fleet are computed as the product of landings and prices, plus a correction factor for other species that are not assessed (subsidies are not considered for). Gross Value added (GVA) is then computed as the difference between revenue and fixed plus variable costs, and profit as the difference between GVA and other costs (i.e. labour and capital). CR/BER and FTE are then derived based on the number of boats (from fishing effort), number of employees and correction for the number of hours effectively fished per boat (equations are detailed in the background document).

The main results of the report are briefly summarised. These results are assessed in the management plan suggesting that the the 3% reduction strategy offers the best trade-off between socio-economic performance and biological outcomes in all regions (Tyrrhenian Sea, Strait of Sicily, Ionian Sea, Adriatic Sea).

In the last part of this report the proposed governance structure, safeguards and monitoring process are presented. The governance promotes an adaptative co-management. It is based on a steering committee (so-called Implementing Body of the Plan – IBP) that will be nominated once the plan is validated and will be composed of representatives of the main recipients of the Plan (e.g. trade associations and/or POs). It will be in charge of the coordination of the plan and of the exchanges between the central administration (MASAF), the Scientific Body responsible for the monitoring, and the recipients of the Plan. The IBP will issue periodic consultation towards all stakeholders to get their feedback on the implementation of the plan and possible adjustment in case of deviations of the objectives. Enforcement of the plan will be handled by coastguard (fishing effort control) and analysis of logbooks by port authorities (respect of closure areas).

The Scientific Body that will be nominated will be in charge of the monitoring of the progress of the plan in collaboration with STECF and GFCM that carry out the stock assessments. This includes yearly calculation of socio-economic and biological indicators (GVA/FTE, FTE, CR/BER, NPM) to check whether they achieve their associated targets. Targets for 2027 and 2030 are defined for each criterion. The targets are the same for all regions, except for GVA/FTE and FTE which are region specific.

The first annex of the report shows the biological results of the simulations for each stock. First it shows the results of stock assessment: trends in recruitment, landings, F and SSB and associated reference points. Then it shows the results of the forecasts with the different scenarios (both deterministic, i.e. constant recruitment, and stochastic, i.e. stochastic recruitment) for the same indicators. A table also details the situation in 2030, including the catch by Italian trawlers that can be compared to total catch (i.e. that include non-Italian vessels and Italian non trawler vessels). Maps of spatial distribution of fishing effort by regions are also presented.

The second annex presents the socio-economic results of the simulations, with tables displaying the situation of the indicators (GVA/FTE, FTE, CR/BER, NPM) in 2027 and 2030 for all fleets and scenarios.

STECF observations

The description of the fisheries

STECF observes that the report provides comprehensive data on landings of the species concerned, on fishing effort per fleet and on stock status. STECF acknowledges that the current plan is based on a subset of species that cover a larger part of the fleet landings (between 30 and 50% of landings depending on gears and GSA for the 2018-2021 period according to FDI data) compared to the previous plans in 2018 (less that 25% in most cases and as low as 8%, PLEN 18-01). This is due to the increased availability of stock assessments following efforts of STECF and GFCM. This allows a good overview of the status of the target species.

STECF notes that many stocks are still overexploited with fishing mortality higher than $F_{0.1}$ (used as Fmsy proxy). Furthermore, STECF observes that discards data are not reported in the report provided to STECF. Data on length frequency are not reported here either, but STECF notes that those data are routinely reported to GFCM or STECF to support the stock assessments (and that those data are thus implicitly used in the simulation exercise that rely on the stock assessment results). STECF also observes that trends in the socio-economic indicators listed in the previous plans are provided and indicate poor performance with many fleets below the threshold of profitability defined in the management plans and decreasing employment.

Objectives, safeguards and conservation/technical measures

STECF notes that the management plan objectives are listed in tables 5.3 to 5.6 (one table per region). They are the same for all regions: achieving Fmsy for all stocks by 2027 while ensuring biomass greater than reference points. Targets are set for the different socioeconomic indicators, with increasing NPM, GVA/FTE and FTE from 2027 to 2030 and CR/BER greater than 1 from 2027. STECF notes that those targets are consistent with GFCM recommendations GFCM/45/2022/7, GFCM/45/2022/6, GFCM/45/2022/5 GFCM/45/2022/4 but with an anticipated timeline (achievement of Fmsy in 2027 in the Italian plans, 2030 in those 4 recommendations) Fmsy in 2030. On the other hand, STECF notes that Fmsy should be achieved as soon as possible but not later than 2025 according to the Western Mediterranean Plan and that, as such, the targets of the plan (achieving Fmsy in 2027 for stocks that are still overexploited) are not consistent with the Regulation. This is also the case with the recommendation GFCM/45/2022/8 for the Adriatic Sea which targets Fmsy in 2026. STECF also notes that the West Med MAP is already a postponement of the MSY objectives included in the CFP to be reached by 2020.

STECF acknowledges the comprehensive simulation exercise carried out to test the effect of different fishing effort reduction regimes. STECF considers that the Fweak scenario in which F is set according to the reduction required to achieve Fmsy for the stock with the poorest status is of relevance given the mixed and multi-species nature of Mediterranean fisheries.

STECF notes that fishing mortality is assumed to be proportional to fishing effort and therefore that the simulation does not account for possible adaptation of fishers to the regulation.

STECF observes that fishing mortality due to non-Italian vessels or non-trawlers was assumed to remain constant over the period. STECF wonders whether it would have been relevant to assume that fishing mortality decrease progressively to Fmsy for stocks covered by recommendations GFCM/45/2022/7, GFCM/45/2022/8, GFCM/45/2022/6, GFCM/45/2022/5 and GFCM/45/2022/4, and at Fmsy for stocks covered by the West Med MAP to be consistent with the management targets. STECF notes that any reductions of fishing effort from those other fleets, as well as any reduction of Italian trawlers effort between 2022 (baseline mortality in the simulations) and 2025 (e.g. recent vessels decommissioning) might help achieve the target.

STECF notes that the simulations use the 2022 fishing mortality as a baseline and as such it does not account for management measures implemented after 2022, including recently decided vessels decommissioning.

STECF notes that the recommended 3% reduction strategy does not ensure the achievement of Fmsy in 2027 and 2030 for several stocks according to the deterministic simulations (DPS 8_9_10_11, HKE_8_9_10_11, ARS_9_10_11, HKE_17_18, DPS_17_18_19_20, HKE_19, ARS_18_19_20, ARS_12_13_14_15_16_21, DPS_12_13_14_15_16). The situation would be almost similar to a status quo scenario (with the only addition that NEP_9 would not achieve Fmsy). Fmsy would also be achieved for ARS_12_13_14_15_16_21 and DPS_12_13_14_15_16 in the 5% scenarios. STECF observed that Fmsy would not be achieved even with the Fweak scenario, the most precautionary one, for some stocks which are also significantly harvested by other vessels (HKE_8_9_10_11, HKE_17_18, DPS_17_18_19_20, HKE_19).

STECF suggests that it would be relevant to provide figures of resulting fishing effort per year and fishing fleet for the different scenario, especially with the Fweak scenario.

STECF observes that the report states that the 3% reduction strategy offers the best trade-off between biological and socio-economic performance but that this statement is not justified. For example, STECF observes that the 5% reduction and 3% strategy often deliver very similar socio-economic performance, and that in some situations, the Fweak strategy has significant negative impacts (e.g. FTE reduction to 666 for DTS_ALL GSAs with Fweak compared to 1241 with the 3% reduction). However, STECF notes that in some other cases, the Fweak scenario provide better socio-economic performance (e.g. most indicators in the Adriatic Sea). As such, STECF wonders whether a “one fits all” strategy applied in all regions is the most appropriate

strategy. Moreover, the 3% strategy over 2025-2027 leads to a reduction of less than 9% in total effort. STECF notes that this is less ambitious than other plans (e.g. West Med MAP imposing a 10% reduction in effort for 2020 only, and up to 30% from the second to the fifth year)

STECF notes that the outcomes of stochastic simulations are almost not used for the biological indicators (only diagrams are displayed, but not commented in the text and it is unclear whether stochasticity was accounted for when analysing the bio-economic trade-offs) and not at all for the socio-economic indicators. STECF suggests that it could be relevant to use these stochastic simulations to quantify risk of not achieving management targets. In such cases, it might also be relevant to account for other sources of stochasticity, such as cost changes (e.g. fuel cost crisis) or management implementation errors (e.g. non-complete compliance with the fishing reduction effort scenario).

STECF observes that the management plan promotes co-management and adaptive management. As such, it does not specify potential additional measures in case of deviations from the management targets, since such measures would be defined by the governance structure. STECF notes though that the harvest control rules are not defined as they were in 2018 management plans in which thresholds below or above which remedial measures would be taken had been clearly defined (e.g. the HCR stipulated that fishing effort would be decreased by 1/3 as soon as F/Fmsy>1.6 and SSB had fallen below quantile 66% of the series in a given year over the period 2017/2020, and that emergency measures would be taken if F/Fmsy had remained above 1 and SSB had fallen below the quantile 66% over the period 2021-2023).

STECF notes that discards and length compositions of catches are not discussed in the report.

STECF notes that the governance system (Implementing Body of the Plan - IBP - to coordinate the implementation of the plan and scientific body to monitor the progress) and the monitoring system (indicators to monitor, corresponding thresholds) are defined in the report. The IBP will be nominated once the Italian decree is published, so its composition is not known yet, though the report states that “it may take the form of a Consortium and may be made up of representatives of the main recipients of the Plan, e.g. trade associations and/or POs”. The IBP will organise periodic consultations targeting the stakeholders, based on the outcome of the Scientific Monitoring). Among others, a consultation will be organised in 2028, i.e. one year after the 2025-2027 fishing effort reduction, with the “aim to illustrate the results achieved, any deviations and, if so, any corrective measures to be adopted”. The STECF observes that the co-management promoted in the plan, the absence of definition of “any deviations”, of the composition of the IBP, of further details on corrective measures (e.g. which type? how they are set?), and of the exact audience of the consultation, impair our ability to assess precisely the future efficiency of the IBP.

STECF also observes that the description of control and enforcement system (control of days at sea by coast guards and control of compliance to spatio-temporal closures by

analysis of verification of the navigation logbooks by the Port Authorities) is generic and that it is difficult to assess its effectiveness. STECF notes that the governance system is largely similar to the system implemented by the 2018 Management Plans.

Other aspects

The plan defines the indicators that will be monitored as well as corresponding indicators. STECF considers that these indicators, already used in previous plans, are relevant to assess stock status and socio-economic performance of the fleets, and to check the compliance with CFP objectives.

STECF conclusions

Since 2019, the implementation of the WestMed MAP and of recommendations GFCM/45/2022/7, GFCM/45/2022/8, GFCM/45/2022/6, GFCM/45/2022/5, GFCM/45/2022/4 have enforced new management targets, that impair a direct comparison to previous STECF assessment conclusions about the previous Italian Management Plans (STECF PLEN 18-01). However, elements of comparisons are provided below when possible.

The description of the fisheries

STECF concludes that the description of the fisheries and the stocks is adequate. It benefits from the greater availability of stock assessments compared to the situation in 2018.

Objectives, safeguards and conservation/technical measures

STECF concludes that the objectives of the plan are not consistent with the West Med MAP (Fmsy in 2025), and with recommendation GFCM/45/2022/8 for the Adriatic Sea (Fmsy in 2026), as the Italian management plan targets Fmsy in 2027. Moreover, STECF concludes that the proposed 3% reduction of fishing effort does not guarantee to achieve Fmsy, even in 2030. However, STECF acknowledges that the ongoing vessel decommissioning and possible fishing effort reduction for other vessels (non-Italian vessels or vessels fishing with other gears) that were not accounted for in the simulations might contribute to progress towards the targets.

As was also the case for the 2018 Management plan, STECF concludes that the choice of the 3% reduction strategy is not fully justified and that alternative scenarios might be relevant in some regions. STECF suggests that whatever the strategy selected, it could be relevant to explicitly state in the plan the allowed levels of fishing effort per fleet and year, at least for the three first years of the plan.

STECF concludes that the management plan does not implement any additional safeguards and that any additional measures would be defined collectively later after consultation with stakeholders, if required. STECF suggests that, even if additional measures would be defined at a later stage, it might be relevant to specify clear harvest control rules and thresholds above or below which remedial measures will be taken.

STECF concludes that the plan does not include additional measures to reduce discards or to protect the environment.

Other aspects

STECF concludes that the monitoring system is appropriate to monitor the status of the stock, the socio-economic performance of the fisheries and progress in the implementation of the plan.

STECF concludes that the governance and control and enforcement systems are largely similar to the systems implemented in the 2018 Management Plans. STECF concludes that the description of the control and enforcement system is generic and STECF cannot assess its effectiveness.

6.8 Follow-up of the STECF EWG 24-10

Background provided by the Commission

STECF EWG 24-10 was requested to evaluate the stocks status for up to 20 commercial stocks managed under the EU West Mediterranean MAP. In this context the EWG raised comments on the possibility of updating certain benchmarks.

Background documents are published on:

https://stecf.ec.europa.eu/meetings-calendar/past-meetings

Request to the STECF

Considering the discussion and the request from the EWG for an update in Hake benchmarks, the STECF is requested to:

- assess if there is new scientific evidence that would require a departure from the current agreed stock boundaries for EMU 1 and EMU 2[9].
- Identify the main data issues to be resolved
- Identify possible alternative stocks assessment models that could suit these stocks and the data features.

Considering possible improvements in the data, provide guidance on trade-off between possible alternative stocks assessment models, like inter alia SPICT[10] or other statistical catch at age models, which could suit these stocks and the data features.

STECF observations

New scientific evidence on stock definition:

STECF observes that the MEDUNITs project (Spedicato et al., 2021) identified three main hake stocks within the Mediterranean basin (one in the Western Mediterranean, one in the Adriatic-Ionian-Tyrrhenian basins and one in the Eastern Mediterranean), combining genetic, otoliths' shape and chemistry data, and fishing patterns. Results highlighted a strong separation of the Eastern stock (GSA 22-27) from the Central (GSA

9 consider inter alia the results of MEDUNITS project

https://cinea.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3b394b0e-a126-4e57-b062-b43fa30562eb_en?filename=StudyAdvancingFisheries-HZ0122151ENN.en_.pdf

10 State of fisheries in Catalonia 2023, Part 2: Stock assessment (ICATMAR, 24-06) – icatmar

13-20) and the Western (GSA 1-12) ones, while the Central and Western were less significantly separated, probably due to a higher probability of exchange of dispersers between these two areas. All analysis agreed in confirming the significant separation of the Mediterranean population from the Atlantic population already highlighted by previous studies (Castillo et al., 2004; Cimmaruta et al., 2005; Milano et al., 2014).

Using otoliths' shape and chemistry of European hake Morales-Nin et al. (2022) observed as well that there seems to be a continuum of a western European hake population and could not identify evidence of clear-cut sub-populations at GSA level.

Hidalgo et al. (2024) used a combination of methods (genetics, otolith microchemistry, otolith shape, parasite composition, body morphometry and meristic descriptors), highlighting a differentiation between the north and south Alboran Sea (GSA 1 and 3) and between the north Alboran Sea (GSA 1) and Northern Spain (GSA 6). The integrative analysis underlines the differentiation between the north and south Alboran Sea, although it shows contrasting results for the differentiation between the north Alboran Sea belonging to GSA 1 and GSA 6. Differentiation between GSA 1 and 6 is also discussed and supported by Pita et al. (2022).

STECF notes that the methodologies used in combination within the above reported studies do not have the same resolution and taken individually are not necessarily developed to identify stock structures. Therefore, it should be noted that those studies are mainly informing on the presence of segregation within the Mediterranean Sea basin, but not necessarily to disaggregate stock units at finer scale.

Based on this published evidence, STECF observes that there is not a general agreement in the latest scientific outcomes supporting a specific definition of European hake sub-populations in the Western Mediterranean. The MEDUNITS report and Morales-Nin et al. (2022) point to an overall western (GSA1-13) sub-population, showing an increasing degree of overlap with the central Mediterranean sub-population from west to east. While Pita et al. (2022) and Hidalgo et al. (2024) support a defined separation between the most western GSAs (1 and 3) compared to GSA 6 and the eastern GSAs (of the western Mediterranean area).

STECF notes that to avoid violating stock assessment models' assumptions, stock boundaries should strive to represent the true extent of a biological population, i.e. a closed group of individuals of the same species. Therefore, when there is uncertainty in the boundaries' definition process it is advised that the larger resolution is taken into consideration to lower probabilities of violating models' assumptions (see Cadrin et al., 2023 and references therein).

STECF notes that the background information on stock boundaries (STOCKMED) supplied during the GFCM benchmark of European hake stocks in GSAs 1-7 and 8-11 (GFCM, 2019), is consistent with the more recent projects (MED_UNITS and TRANSBORAN projects).

STECF notes that the benchmark GFCM (2019) report highlighted that single GSA evaluations were not justified. Therefore, in the future, justifications for testing different stock boundaries should be justified and supported by strong scientific evidence.

Main data issues to be addressed

STECF observes that EWG 24-10 did not request that a benchmark process should be opened on the European hake stocks (GSA 1-7 and GSA 8-11), but highlighted inconsistencies in the MEDITS data used to estimate the abundance index time series between 2007 and 2020.

STECF notes that issues concerning the biological parameters of European hake in GSA 1-5-6-7 (HKE 1-5-6-7) were raised during the plenary:

- The growth parameters currently used in the assessment are not sex separated and should in general be revised
- The natural mortality vector should be revised

For both European hake stocks, improving the modelling of the fleet selectivity, either explicitly by fleets or in a more flexible way, could be beneficial to account for changes in the relative contribution of catches by fleets in time. All those issues would push forward a benchmark of the assessment. Additionally, as already discussed during the previous GFCM benchmark (GFCM, 2019), using length frequency data by quarter could improve the slicing process to estimate age classes.

STECF notes that in view of a benchmark meeting a scoping meeting among scientific experts should be planned to define the benchmark objectives, define the list of data input needed and draft a list of current assessment issues. Although it is not explicit if non-European countries would be involved in the process, time series of recruitment from GSA 4 (Algeria) and GSA 12 (Tunisia) could be considered as covariates to inform the evaluation of the European stock from GSA 1-7, in view of the results from the MEDUNITS project suggesting a dispersal connectivity across these areas.

STECF notes that European hake stocks in GSA 1-7 and GSA 8-11 are under a lot of scrutiny, being among the most overexploited stocks under the West Med MAP. Although it is important to face issues raised for these stocks through a benchmark process, other stocks under the West Med MAP have also been flagged as problematic and in need of a benchmark process. EWG 24-10 highlighted that Blue and red shrimp stocks from GSA 1-2 and GSA 8-11 need a thorough revision of data, biological parameters, stock boundaries and biological reference points. Additionally, biomass reference points are currently lacking or needing revision for six stocks and during PLEN 24-10 it was highlighted that the estimation process of biomass reference points should be revised through a dedicated methodological working group. EWG 24-10 (and previous western stock assessment EWGs) also highlighted the need for an overall stock assessment methodological working group to define methodological guidelines

(short term forecast settings, diagnostics standardization, data gaps handling, etc.) which are currently lacking under the STECF framework.

STECF highlights that a revision of the stock assessment process within STECF is needed to overcome the urgent issues raised by EWG 24-10 concerning the evaluation of stocks targeted by the West Med MAP.

Alternative modelling frameworks:

Concerning the request from DG MARE to consider alternative model frameworks and specifically Biomass dynamic models, STECF notes that the choice of “best” model framework to run a stock assessment is part of the benchmark process as it depends on the data available, both in term of data quality and consistency, and in terms of length of the time series. The European hake stocks of the Western Mediterranean area are currently assessed through the statistical catch at age (SCAA) model a4a (Jardim et al., 2014) as data for the parameterization are available.

STECF notes that Surplus Production Models (SPMs) need a time series of at least 15 years and the time series needs to show contrast to allow the model to converge (Kokkalis et al., 2024). The shortest the time series, the higher the contrast needed, otherwise estimates will have a higher risk of being imprecise and inaccurate. Shorter time series would increase uncertainty and could deliver biased model outputs, specifically when there is lack of contrast within the time series (Kokkalis et al., 2024).

STECF notes that long time series of catches (and abundance indices if available) can be fitted in some SCAA models also when the age structure is lacking for the historical part of the time series. Additionally, SCAA models can account for fleet selectivities which are intrinsically part of the WestMed MAP in place as yearly effort quotas are defined by fleet segment and metier (coastal and deep) among which selectivity does changes depending on the species. SPMs on the other side can also account for time series of absolute effort and catches besides CPUE (catch per unit of effort) indices, which might improve and explicitly resolve the relationship between effort and F used in bio-economic models. SPMs are generally best suitable to single fleet fisheries though, which is not the case in the West Med MAP.

STECF also highlights that mixed fisheries bio-economic models implemented in the evaluation of the West Med MAP (which inherits stock assessment outputs from the Western Mediterranean stock assessment EWG) cannot all incorporate SPMs outputs currently, therefore moving from an SCAA model to a SPM should assess the impact of model change on the bio-economic projections to ensure that no modeling artifact has been introduced to the advice (i.e. North Sea mixed fisheries advice which includes 2 SPiCT stocks, ICES 2024) and document any required changes to the model.

STECF highlights that fishing mortality (F) and reference points produced by SPMs are not entirely comparable to those obtained from SCAA models. A SPM describes the dynamics of the vulnerable biomass of a population to the fishery as a whole where F quantifies the rate at which such biomass decreases due to catches. On the other hand,

a SCAA model describes the dynamics of age classes in number, therefore F quantifies the rate at which the abundance of an age group decreases because of fishing pressure. To derive a single index of pressure, a Fbar is then calculated as an average of F values of different age groups without accounting for their difference in weights and in abundance. On the other hand, since SPM describe the evolution of total vulnerable biomass, F implicitly accounts for those differences. Consequently, absolute values of F from SPM and Fbar from SCAA are not comparable.

STECF notes that Winker et al. (2020) have demonstrated that, in some cases F/Fmsy and B/Bmsy of the two families of model can be consistent. However, this is dependent on how the stock recruitment relationship is modelled within a SCAA or if a stock recruitment relationship is considered at all. In fact, while MSY arising from SPM are by construction relying on an implicit stock-recruitment relationship (integrated into the intrinsic growth rate of the population), reference points arising from SCAA models can use a proxy that does not account for such relationship (e.g. F0.1). Therefore, moving from one framework to the other should take into account a change in the historical perspective.

Nevertheless, STECF highlights that, as more data become available, no model framework should be discarded a priori but should be tested and evaluated during the benchmark process.

STECF conclusions

STECF concludes that new scientific studies on the definition of European hake populations within the Mediterranean Sea basin, are consistent with what was observed in previous studies which supported the GFCM 2019 benchmark during which European hake in GSA 8-11 was benchmarked while European hake in GSA 1-7 was given basis for advice (GFCM, 2019).

STECF concludes that due to the data issues highlighted by EWG 24-10 and PLEN 24-03, there is a need for a benchmark primarily for the stock of HKE 1-5-6-7, and possibly HKE 8-9-10-11. Previous benchmarks of European hake in the Mediterranean Sea basin were done by GFCM.

STECF concludes that the European hake stocks are not the only stocks under the West Med MAP requiring further revision of the stock boundaries, biological parameters and potentially of the modelling framework and that the whole process of stock assessment within STECF should undergo a revision.

STECF concludes that the stock assessment modelling framework should be selected during the benchmark process, taking into consideration updated biological knowledge and the available historical information on the fisheries on the targeted stocks.

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6.9 Evaluation of the ad-hoc contract on the FishGenome Roadmap for and the potential use genomic data to supplement stock assessment

Background provided by the Commission:

The Tender contract “FishGenome: Improving cost-efficiency of fisheries research surveys and fish stocks assessments using next-generation genetic sequencing methods” aimed to investigate whether next-generation DNA sequencing methods can:

2) Reduce the need for conventional trawl-based fishing surveys for demersal or benthic fish stocks in EU waters;
2) Support faster and cheaper fish stock’s assessments and biodiversity analyses of marine species assemblages.

FishGenome assessed the suitability of the genomic data to provide key parameters for fisheries stock assessment such as:

- Stock absolute abundance and survival from Close Kin Mark Recapture (CKMR) data,
- Age from epigenetic DNA methylation (DNAm) data,
- Biomass (relative abundance) from environmental DNA (eDNA) data,
- Stock structure, connectivity and sexing from restriction site Associated DNA Sequencing (RAD-Seq) data.

Accordingly, FishGenome performed six reviews on these genomic tools which were used as the foundation to design Pilot studies to test these tools in a relevant context. Following the reviews and the pilot studies, a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis was performed and resulted in a proposed timeline for the short, medium- and long-term application of these genomic methods, presented in the FishGenome Roadmap. The roadmap identifies the implementation needs, actions and objectives, appropriate strategic pillars (genomic techniques, survey and logistics, scientific advice and stock assessment, financial and economic aspects, governance and other policies), time frame and potential outcomes.

This roadmap provides key information on whether and how genomics could become part of the methodological tools applied to samples from regular research surveys, describing the potential steps, the pathway and the timeline for a progressive implementation of the genomic methods in stock assessment.

Background documents including the FishGenome report and the roadmap were shared with STECF after the STECF PLEN 23-02 and after the STECF PLEN 23-03.

The outputs and final report of the FishGenome project are published on: Improving the cost-efficiency of fisheries research surveys and fish stocks assessment using next-generation genetic sequencing methods (europa.eu)

Background documents are published on: https://stecf.ec.europa.eu/meetings-calendar/past-meetings

Request to the STECF

During the STECF PLEN 23-02, DG MARE presented the FishGenome project results and introduced the roadmap to the STECF committee. During the STECF PLEN 23-03, DG MARE initiated a discussion on the FishGenome roadmap, presenting those aspects of the roadmap of relevance to STECF, and where the consortium considered STECF to play a role. Drafting ToR for FishGenome follow up was highlighted as one of the next steps. This ToR was presented during the STECF PLEN 24-03, during which the launch of an ad-hoc contract was agreed on. In this contract, the experts were requested to: (1) extract the relevant points from the roadmap that directly refer to, or are related to STECF; (2) propose possible ways to follow-up on these actions described in the FishGenome Roadmap and the role that STECF could play in this process, (3) for those actions that cannot be followed up by STECF presently, explain the reasons why and/or propose a tentative timeline for future action and /or an alternative appropriate (4) argue on the benefits and challenges of using genomic data (similar to those used in FishGenome) for stock assessment, based on their experience.

Therefore, STECF is requested to evaluate and discuss the outputs of the STECF expert's ad-hoc contract on FishGenome Roadmap and make any appropriate comments and recommendations.

Summary of the information provided to STECF

The FishGenome Roadmap as well as the ad -hoc contract report reviewing the roadmap were provided to STECF by the Commission.

STECF comments

Recent advances in genomics

STECF notes that recent advances in genomic techniques have a high potential to provide additional data for supporting marine biodiversity studies, conservation and stock assessment. In earlier descriptions of the FishGenome project goals (call for tenders' announcement), it appeared that the expectations were to replace traditional data acquisition by these new techniques. STECF, however, considers that the new data streams stemming from genomics have a high potential to complement and enhance the current stock assessment process, but they have to be scrutinised before entering stock assessments.

STECF notes that next-generation genetic methods, such as epigenetic ageing, etc., are still at an emerging scientific stage and need to be demonstrated and validated by further studies.

STECF notes that several test studies in the national and regional Work Plans 2025-2027 were included under the Data Collection Framework (DCF). STECF notes that these will be helpful for exploring the potential of sampling, processing and using genomic data.

STECF further notes that especially eDNA-based studies offer a non-invasive method to investigate potential presence of Endangered, Threatened and Protected (ETP) and non-indigenous species, and could provide novel insights for data poor stocks and areas, such as Outermost Regions.

STECF notes that part of the genomic sequencing and data processing is currently occurring outside EU countries through private companies. Therefore, it will be crucial to secure skills and resources to conduct these analyses within EU laboratories and to secure that genetic databases, primers and protocols will be stored in maintained, traceable and publicly accessible databases fulfilling the necessary data security requirements.

Implementing the FishGenome roadmap – next steps

STECF acknowledges the review of the FishGenome roadmap in the ad-hoc contract report and draws the attention to the table in the report listing the actions where STECF is expected to play a role in the implementation of the roadmap (see below). STECF has added a column with priorities in terms of timing and grouping of the follow-up steps.

Table 6.9.1. Synthesis of the review of the FishGenome roadmap actions considered to be relevant to STECF by the ad-hoc experts and evaluated for their implementation in term of potential: connections with STECF work, risks or other involved actors. * Level of priority: Low, Medium or High; Timeline: Short-term (1-3 years), Mid-term (3-5 years) Long term (5-10 years or more).**Grouping of actions in terms of follow-up steps.

Priority/ Group**	Action name	Relevance to STECF*	Expertise	STECF involvement	Pros and Cons	Interaction with other fora
Review of results from genomic work of STECF relevance	1.4 Testing eDNA for abun dance	Medium Mid Term	eDNA Fisheries genomics Research surveys Stock assessments	• ToRs for STECF for input or feedback on the results of testing the robustness of eDNA methodology vs regular scientific surveys to estimate abundance (final step) • Specific ToRs to STECF EWG on Workplans . • Possible additional contributions from STECF qualified experts to join the dedicated workshops scheduled in Action 4.10)	• eDNA to estimate abundance does not require necessarily to collect the samples on fisheries research surveys; other surveys and the commercial fleet are potential sources of eDNA samples • The readiness of the technique is not at the highest • Time constraint, human and financial resources to attend the workshops and follow the progress	JRC /ICES/GFCM experts in stock assessment RCGs, IBTSWG, MEDITS Steering Committee, etc.
Review of results from genomic work of STECF relevance	1.5 Testing genomic for stock structure	Medium Short-Mid term	Stock identification Connectivity Larval ecology Population genomics Stock assessment	• ToRs for STECF for input or feedback on the results of testing the robustness of genomics methodology to stock structure and connectivity	• • These methods are easily implemented in surveys without altering much the protocols and without having an impact on time series • Time constraint, human and financial resources to attend the workshops and follow the progress	Expertise in modelling the effects of climate change on stock assessment JRC expert in stock assessment and ecosystems

Review of results from genomic work of STECF relevance	1.6 Testing CKMR for abundance	High Mid-Long term	Population genomics and dynamics Reproductive biology & ecology Stock assessment	• Additional advice from STECF experts with dedicated skills in case studies species or data limited species • ToRs for STECF PLEN and EWG Med stock assessment	• This method is easily implemented in surveys without altering much the protocols and without impacting the time series, as this action does not replace current survey goals • The action relies mostly in bioinformatics; if chips are not properly developed, sequencing must be outsourced (non-EU countries) • Time constraint, human and financial resources to attend the workshops and follow the progress	JRC experts in stock assessment
Review of results from genomic work of STECF relevance	2.1 Protocolization	High *Short-Mid term*	Genomics experts	• • Participation of STECF representatives to dedicated workshops	• The designation of a number of laboratories through a selection mechanism, as well as the representativeness of the Committee of experts involved on this task • This pivot action have to be revised in a regular manner to maintain the methods up to date with the recent research findings and secure EU harmonization of the uses for assessment and management. • This action allows to overcome the lack of standardisation of the HTS methods, identified as a weakness, facilitating their adoption	ICES WGAGFA

					• Time constraint, human and financial resources to attend the workshops and follow the progress	
Review of results from genomic work of STECF relevance	2.2 Refinement and optimization	High Short term	Genomics and fisheries experts	• ToRs for STECF to review refinement of the procedures and protocols •	• This pivot action have to be revised in a regular manner to maintain the methods up to date with the recent research findings and secure all aspects of genomic tools are useful to EU stakeholders • Need for a dedicated working group that guarantees the implementation of up-to-date knowledge, contributes to achieving the right balance between technology and management and policy	JRC/ICES/GFCM ICES WGAGFA
Review of results from genomic work of STECF relevance	2.3 Alternative u se of genomic for advice	Medium Short term	Genomics and fisheries experts	• ToRs for STECF for Input or feedback on the use of epigenetic for ageing • Experts contributing to assessment or indicators for STECF EWGs (Med assessments, Balance capacity) should be able to integrate new assessment results or new stocks in their evaluations. (stock assessment model, and new biological reference points used in SAR/SHI calculation) • Results can enhance stock coverage related to traceability of Fish product indicators proposed by STECF EWGs (under Farm to Fork project)	• It does not modify the current assessment and advice practices, but provides alternative indicators • e DNA and CKMR are not expected to be able to provide stock abundance in short term • Time constraint, human and financial resources to attend the workshops and follow the progress	JRC experts in stock assessment

Review of results from genomic work of STECF relevance	2.4 Studies of epigenetics in age data limited species	Medium Short-Mid term	Genetics & bioinformatic Life history of related species Age-determination	ToRs for STECF -for Input or feedback on the identification of the needs for new species. Plenary can review ToRs for dedicated workshops or research activities	• • Possible novel insights for Balance capacity EWG (e.g., reference points for species with missing information, such as sensitive species or stock in OMR) • This pivot action have to be revised in a regular manner to maintain the methods up to date • • For species lacking age information some increase or update in data collection sampling scheme may be necessary (number of species or number of individual per sex/length classes) • Time constraint, human and financial resources to attend the workshops and follow the progress	• Experts in sclero chronology of related species • Dedicated workshops for validation of double ageing technic (genomic vs traditional)
Access and use of genomic data	2.9 Development of workflow for genomic information	High *Short-Mid term*	Advisory bodies and RFMOs Fisheries & genomic scient ists	• Advisory ToRs for STECFfor ethical discussion on the accessibility of the genomic data	• This action is aimed at overcoming weakness related to cost-efficiency and technical requirements for the genomic techniques • The outputs of the discussion (whatever decision) may affect the degree of commitment of the different stakeholders and hence the success of	• Adding experts in social and legal sciences • Inclusion of vision from civil society on transparency in science may be of interest as well

					the new genomic tools effectiveness in the future	
Setting up governance structure for genomic data in fisheries advisory work	3.1 Strategy network	*Short term*	stakeholders	• STECF representatives can express the vision of STECF on the strategic decision for the roadmap ToRs for discussion during STECF EWGs , while STECF members are potentially included in the FishGenome coordination network		
Setting up governance structure for genomic data in fisheries advisory work	3.2 Building Stakeholder network	Medium *S hort term*	National Labs Data collection & stock assessment experts DG MARE RFMOs &advisory bodies	• STECF for input on the implementation of the stakeholder network • Possible additional contributions from STECF qualified experts to join the dedicated workshops or seminars	• This Actions is aimed at bridging the gap between academic research and the science-policy advice process • Need to approach policy makers and MSs for a kind of "lobbying" as huge resources will be demanded for lab facilities, R&D (including partnership with private companies), promotion of careers (bioinformatics, etc.) • The way the stakeholder are included can affect the efficiency o f the network and thus the appropriation of the project outputs • Some specific attention should be drawn on OMR territories to secure equal commitment despite remoteness and specific	Social scientists, experts in facilitation technics as well as communication specialist can reinforce effectiveness (to ensure all audiences are properly targeted)
Access and use of	3.4		STECF	• ToRs for STECF (in combination with 2.9) for discussion and	• This action can be part of a work plan set up for an interdisciplinary research	Specialists in legacy aspects of research and data security may help to better define the boundaries

genomic data	Data policy and management plan	Medium Short term	RFMO's SFPAs	recommendation on balance between data openness and protection	network, as those under the COST scheme • This action contributes to achieve the principle: sample once and use the data several times, with positive effect on cost-efficiency	of the data management plan and secure technical e nforcement
Setting up governance structure for genomic data in fisheries advisory work	4.10 Workshop on genomic applied to stock ass essment (2025)	Low *Short term*	Expert in genomic methodologies Fisheries scientists	• STECF members with related skills in stock assessment and genomic may be able to join the dedicated workshops • Some regular linkage can be promoted through regular ToR for discussion during STECF EWGs , while STECF members are potentially included in the Fishgenome workshops for genomic integration in stock assessment	• Time constraint, human and financial resources to attend the workshops	JRC experts in stock assessment
Practical guidance for acquiring genomic data	4.11 Workshop on survey on design & protocols	Medium *Short term*	Experts in surveys	• The contribution of STECF experts in scientific survey design to the dedicated workshops can enhance a better integration of genomic sampling in the surveys related to EU fleets EWG on DCF Work Plans)	• This action will facilitate the work that needs to be done to integrate genomic sampling into survey protocols by experts in genomics and in fisheries • Possible synergies with ongoing and future actions on the field of the decarbonisation of the fishing fleets/research vessels (see cell above) • Time constraint, human and financial resources to attend the workshops	
Cost-benefit analysis for	5.3 Cost-benefit/Cost-	Medium	Fisheries economists	• ToRs for STECF to review methodology to develop data collection for cost -benefit analysis	• Results of the Cost-benefit/Cost-effective analysis should be used for advice and revi sion	

genomic data	effective analysis	*Mid-Long term*		• The related analysis can be proposed to Ad-hoc contracts for which ToRs can be discussed during STECF Plenary , once standardized data collection and methodology have been agreed	of the future phases of the FishGenome implementation • Inclusion of new approaches for data collection should be considered such as the used of additional vessels than the regular research vessels (low carbon small research units such as hybrid or sailing oceanographic boats; commercial vessels, or even citizen science) which can decrease sampling coasts while increasing geographical coverage. • This would request development of simple sampling tools and research&Development for innovation of different range of sampling devices able to cope with standardization protocols	
Setting up governance structure for genomic data in fisheries advisory work	5.5 Mitigation Plan	Medium *Short-Mid term*	All stakeholders	• The prevention of risk can be submitted to STECF Plenary through ToRs (combined with ToRs on Action 4.10) or bureau may mandate some experts to attend the dedicated workshop on mitigation plan	• This action will highlight the relevant issues to facilitate the progressive application of the new techniques and procedures • A Coordination and Support Action shall be set up to steer the process	• Socio-economists can help in evaluating the mitigation plan scenarios
Setting up governance structure for genomic data in	5.7 Ecosystem case studies	High	All roadmap actors Ecosystem based fisheries	• Considering the importance of the action in providing a synthesis of the implication genomic tool for fisheries advice and management, ecosystems	• A number of policies, strategies and initiatives that could benefit from the increase and new information available	• JRC experts in ecosystems • NGOs, citizen science

fisheries advisory work		*Mid Term*	Fisheries management Marine ecology Marine strategy Marine policy Economists Financial managers	conservation, etc. , a dedicated EWG may be organized, with ToRs agreed at STECF PLEN level.	(e.g., MSFD, EU Green Deal, Horizon Europe program, etc.) • The selection of experts covering the whole area of expertise may be challenging and the design of the ToRs should be carefully discussed to cover such a wide topic	

Data source: adhoc report and own elaborations.

STECF conclusions

STECF concludes that recent advances in genomics have a high potential to complement and enhance the current stock assessment process. However, there is still a need to fully understand how to integrate results generated through genomic methods in the stock assessment process, as well as testing their advantage to make the stock assessment process more robust and precise.

STECF further concludes that once new data streams from genomics are available, their consistence with historic time series of input data for stock assessments, where available, should be thoroughly analysed. STECF further concludes that in data poor areas such as Outermost Regions, new data series generated with genomic methods could offer a cost-effective alternative to build up time-series of stock assessment data.

As such, STECF concludes that of the 16 actions proposed in the FishGenome roadmap with relevance for STECF, broadly grouped into five categories for follow-up (see Table 6.9.1), it is important to give first priority to those related with short coming scientific review of results from genomic work of STECF relevance and develop proof-of-concept case studies of their integration in the stock assessment process, which encompasses the following actions:

1.4 Testing eDNA for abundance

1.5 Testing genomic for stock structure

1.6 Testing CKMR for abundance

2.3 Alternative use of genomic for advice

2.4 Studies of epigenetics in age data limited species

STECF concludes that considering the current fast development of genomic methods, the follow-up of any implementation of validated protocols, genomic tools and related databases would require, while available, some attention to secure that knowledge and skills produced are securely available within the EU and for EU end-users.

6.10 Assessment of joint recommendation contacting a request for de minimis exemption for lemon sole

Background provided by the Commission

Following the TAC alignment for lemon sole in December 2023, the Commission services suggested that the North Western Waters and the Scheveningen Regional Groups would act promptly to compile a joint recommendation seeking a de minimis exemption for lemon sole. In response to this suggestion, the Regional Groups submitted a joint recommendation to the Commission, which the STECF evaluated in STECF 24-04.

Based on the subsequent report from the STECF 24-04 it was requested to provide more and better data in support of this JR. This, combined with the reactions from MS to the STECF report drove to the adoption by the North Western Waters and the Scheveningen Regional Groups of a new JR submitted to the Commission on 25 October. This renewed Joint Recommendation requests a de minimis exemption for catches of lemon sole by vessels using beam trawls (TBB) of mesh sizes equal to and above 80 mm equipped with the Flemish panel in Union waters of ICES subareas 4 and 7d, on the basis of avoiding disproportionate costs due to the handling of unwanted catches, considering the challenges the fishing sector will face due to the TAC alignment. The request is for a quantity of lemon sole which shall not exceed 5% of the total annual catches of that species in this fishery.

It was calculated in the JR that the increase in mesh size has profound negative economic implications for sole. For the Belgian beam trawlers, an economic loss of 640 773 Euro in sole in 7d is calculated if nets of 90mm are used instead of 80mm. For the ICES area 4 there would be a loss of 341 000 Euro in sole if nets of 90mm were used. An 8% and 12% loss in yield respectively.

Taking account of the cost in sorting the lemon sole, no possibility for more selectivity and the low discard percentage, the regional groups request that the joint recommendation for exemptions to the 2024-2027 landing requirement can be expanded to include a de minimis exemption for lemon sole for beam trawlers (TBB) using mesh equal to or above 80 mm and equipped with the Flemish panel in ICES areas 4 and 7d.

Background documents are published on: https://stecf.ec.europa.eu/meetings-calendar/past-meetings

Request to the STECF

To satisfy the request from the STECF and to ensure a swift process, the launch of an ad-hoc contract was agreed on. In this contract, the expert was requested to (1) collate

and finalise a draft review, based on the joint recommendation for lemon sole, STECF 19-01 and the EWG 24-04 (including the use of FDI data to quality control the total tonnage values outlined in the Joint Recommendation), of the supporting (catch data) documentation for **de minimis exemption** on the basis of avoiding disproportionate costs of handling unwanted catches, and (2) in the event of the data provided being insufficient for a comprehensive assessment, provide suggestions in the draft conclusions on how the assessment could be enhanced.

The STECF is requested to evaluate the results of the ad-hoc contract and review the joint recommendation underpinning de minimis exemption for lemon sole, and make any appropriate comments and recommendations.

Summary of information provided to the STECF

The information provided to STECF consisted of:

1. A joint recommendation (JR) of the NWW and Scheveningen regional groups for amending details of the landing obligation for certain fisheries in the Western Waters and the North Sea 2024-2027 (version 25.10.2024).

   The JR contained a proposal for a de minimis exemption for catches of lemon sole by vessels using beam trawls (TBB) of mesh sizes equal to and above 80 mm equipped with the Flemish panel in Union waters of ICES subareas 4 and 7d. The request is for a quantity of lemon sole which shall not exceed 5% of the total annual catches of that species in this fishery. The exemption is motivated by disproportionate costs of handling lemon sole catches and difficulties to increase selectivity. A previous JR-version (dated 26.04.2024) with the same de minimis request was evaluated by EWG 24-04.

2. A report of an ad hoc contract consisting of an assessment of the JR above: “Evaluation of joint recommendations on the landing obligation for Lemon Sole” (Ad hoc contract no. 2499). The contractor was requested to:

a) Collate and finalise a draft review, based on the joint recommendation for lemon sole by the NWW and Scheveningen Member States Regional Groups, the STECF 19-01 and the EWG 24-04 (including the use of FDI data to quality control the total tonnage values outlined in the Joint Recommendation), of the supporting (catch data) documentation for de minimis exemption on the basis of avoiding disproportionate costs of handling unwanted catches.

b) If the event occurs in which the data provided is insufficient for a comprehensive assessment, the draft conclusions should provide suggestions on what could enhance the assessment.

In the ad hoc contract report the JR evaluation is presented following a framework developed and used by STECF in previous assessments of proposed exemptions from the landing obligation (EWGs 15-10, 16-10, 17-08, 18-06, 19-08, 20-04, 21-05, 22-05, 23-04, 23-06, 24-04; and STECF PLEN 14-02, 19-02). The format breaks down the evaluation into two elements: general observations and more specific observations relating to the *de minimis* exemption. The components evaluated being:

- A detailed overview of the problem.
- Comprehensive data on catches and fleets pertaining to the relevant stock and fishery for which the exemption is sought.
- An assessment of what this data reveals regarding the prevalence of unwanted catches in the fishery, both in terms of relative terms (discard rates) and absolute terms (volume of unwanted catches).
- Indications of Member States' utilization of the exemption.
- A review of previous supporting studies/literature reviews provided for the exemption, as well as any newly available information.
- Details regarding research endeavours aimed at enhancing selectivity.
- Information on the degree of disproportionate costs associated with implementing the landing obligation.
- Evaluation of the impact/risk of the exemption within the context of the fishery.
- Plans for forthcoming research intended to support the exemption.

The general observations reported by the ad hoc were:

- The exemption could only be fully evaluated for Belgian fleets for which discard rates were supplied for gears and selectivity devices (Flemish panel) which relate to the proposed exemption. It is unclear for other fleets how the Flemish panel would impact discard rates if and when implemented.
- The relationship between the *de minimis* volume requested and the level of unwanted catches reported in the JR is unclear. The JR does not contain any indication of the measures to be taken to reduce unwanted catches of Lemon Sole.
- As highlighted by e.g. EWG 24-04, evaluation of disproportionate costs of handling unwanted catches remains a judgement call when costs can be defined as ‘disproportionate’ (see STECF 2013, p. 10, STECF 2014 (EWG 13-17), p. 10). Therefore, there is no objective threshold for ‘disproportionate costs’. The JR itself notes that Lemon Sole constitutes a relatively small part of the overall catch, however there is no explanation as to what specific aspects of the fishery are driving the sorting time, only that Lemon Sole occurs in these catches and

that all extra sorting time of unwanted catches is attributed to the lemon sole only.

- A reiteration of the observation by EWG 24-04 that Member States should base such exemptions on the wording contained in Article 15 which states, "*To avoid disproportionate costs of handling unwanted catches, for those fishing gears where unwanted catches per fishing gear do not represent more than a certain percentage, to be established in a plan, of total annual catch of that gear*". EWG 24-04, and this ad hoc, interpreted this to mean that disproportionate costs are a given and the focus should be on defining the percentage of unwanted catches that could be justifiably discarded under such an exemption rather than whether costs are disproportionate or not.
- No Member State provided sufficient information to calculate *de minimis* volumes. In most cases discard rates have been supplied, many of which exceed the proposed value of a 5% exemption. The ad hoc cannot adjudicate whether this is a correct interpretation of Article 15.
- As highlighted by EWG 24-04, *de minimis* exemptions can provide an incentive for vessel operators to continue discarding unwanted catches at sea and only retain unwanted catches on board if they are inspected on hauling. The lack of reporting and recording of unwanted catches discarded would strongly suggest this is the case.
- The ad hoc notes that the proposed *de minimis* exemption could be availed by a large number of vessels; and covers a very wide area. This means that the monitoring of discards under the exemption is potentially challenging given that in these cases the volume of discards per vessels is likely to be very low, particularly given that a number of MS could not provide discard rates or totals for this species due to low sampling and lack of information on who is using the Flemish panel.

As a comparison, the ad hoc report also presented the main findings of the expert's evaluation of the current version of the JR (dated 25.10.2024) and the evaluation by EWG 24-04 of the previous version of the JR (dated 26.04.2024). The comparison is summarized in table 6.10.1 below:

Table 6.10.1. A comparison of the assessment for each of the different evaluation considerations by EWG 24-04 and by the current ad hoc report.

Evaluation considerations	EWG 24-04	Ad hoc 2499
A detailed **overview of the problem**.	Limited	Limited – Justification centered on SOL fishery
Comprehensive data on **catches and fleets** pertaining to the relevant stock and fishery for which the **exemption is sought**.	Limited	Limited - Improved data quality, however only Belgium could provide complete information in terms of catches and sampling. MSs stating this could not be improved.
An assessment of what this data reveals regarding the **prevalence of unwanted catches** in the fishery, both in terms of relative terms (discard rates) and absolute terms (volume of unwanted catches).	Limited	Limited - Improved data quality, however only Belgium could provide complete information in terms of catches and sampling. MSs stating this could not be improved.
Indications of Member States' **utilization of the exemption**	NA	NA
A review of previous **supporting studies/literature** reviews provided for the exemption, as well as any newly available information.	Limited	Limited - Improved quality (references supplied and accessible), however studies are not focuses on LEM and do not provide supporting information to this derogation.
Details regarding research endeavors aimed at **enhancing selectivity**	None	None – JR states it is not possible due to economic loss of target species SOL

Information on the degree of **disproportionate costs** associated with implementing the landing obligation	Limited	Limited – No relevant information. Statement in JR: *"it must be taken into account that it is very difficult to give an estimate of the real cost and to deduct the exact part of lemon sole out of the total, but fact is that the proportion of this species in the total catch is limited"*
Evaluation of the **impact/risk** of the exemption within the context of the fishery.	None	None - Justification focuses on economic losses of target species SOL
Plans for forthcoming research intended to **support the exemption**	None	None

Source: EWG-24-04 and adhoc report.

Based on these observations and assessments the ad hoc expert concludes that:

- Although there have been some improvements in the catch information submitted in the revised JR, the information provided does not objectively demonstrate the suggested economic losses to the fleet in the absence of the proposed de minimis exemption. For a meaningful assessment of the implications of the exemption to be possible, evidence of the outcomes of fishing with the proposed selectivity device (Flemish panel) should be demonstrated in terms of landings and discards.
- No species and/or gear specific evidence was supplied to support the argument of disproportionate costs associated with unwanted catches of lemon sole. To validate an argument of disproportionate cost all drivers of sorting time would need to be considered, including but not limited to proportions of other wanted and unwanted species.
- The JR provide no information which would indicate that selectivity improvements are not possible for lemon sole.
- The Lemon sole TAC is historically underutilised (ICES 2024a), and there is currently little evidence of the species being targeted in the North Sea and the Eastern English Channel (ICES 2023b). Despite being considered a valuable bycatch species in a mixed fishery, discard rates are considered high for this stock with discard total estimated to be between 10% and 38% in most years

(ICES 2024a). This proposed derogation would impact the beam trawl fleet which accounted for 23% of landings and 36% of discards in 2023 (ICES 2024a).

- The stock status of lemon sole is declining, even though fishing pressure on the stock is below the FMSY proxy, and the stock size indicator is above Itrigger (Figure 1)(ICES 2024a). The proposed exemption could have a negative impact on this stock and lead to potential increases of lemon sole discarding in this fishery. If implemented this proposed derogation could also have a negative impact on other targeted flatfish stocks in this area such as sol.27.7d which is considered to be outside safe biological limits, with biomass below Bpa/Blim (ICES 2024c)

These conclusions are in line with those of the previous version of the JR that was evaluated by EWG 24-04.

STECF comments

STECF notes that the ad hoc contractor adequately addressed both terms of references: (1) a draft review of the supporting documentation for de minimis exemption based on avoiding disproportionate costs of handling unwanted catches and (2) if the provided information is deemed insufficient to also provide suggestions on what could enhance the assessment.

STECF notes that the ad hoc contractor also reviewed the de minimis proposal on the basis of difficulties to increase selectivity although this aspect was not specifically requested in the ad hoc terms of references. STECF commends this initiative as both disproportionate costs and difficulties to increase selectivity are used in the JR to motivate the proposed exemption and are the two alternative conditions for granting de minimis exemptions.

STECF observes that the Lemon sole TAC is historically underutilised (ICES 2024a), and there is currently little evidence that the species is being targeted in the North Sea and the Eastern English Channel (ICES 2023b). Despite being considered a valuable bycatch species in a mixed fishery, discard rates are considered high for this stock with discard total estimated to be between 10% and 38% in most years (ICES 2024a). This proposed derogation would impact the beam trawl fleet which accounted for 23% of landings (and 36% of discards) in 2023 (ICES 2024a).

STECF also notes (as reported by EWG 24-04 and by the ad hoc contractor) that the stock status of lemon sole is declining, although fishing pressure on the stock is below the FMSY proxy, and the stock size indicator is above Itrigger (ICES 2024a), the proposed exemption could have a negative impact on this stock and lead to potential increases of lemon sole discarding in this fishery. In addition, if implemented this proposed derogation could also have a negative impact on other targeted flatfish stocks in this area such as sol.27.7d which is considered to be outside safe biological limits, with biomass below Blim (ICES 2024c).

STECF observes that an earlier JR-version containing this de minimis request was evaluated by EWG 24-04. The current JR contained some new information and reasoning in response to some issues reported by EWG 24-04. Despite these updates, STECF considers that important inadequacies and lack of clarity still remain. More specifically:

STECF observes, in line with the ad hoc contractor, that the revised JR contained some new information and improved data quality about catches and fleets, including the prevalence of unwanted catches and more detail about the sampling. The information was however only complete for Belgium whereas the other Member States reported a lack of sufficient resolution in the logbook recordings to follow up gear specificities (such as the Flemish panel). STECF agrees with the suggestion in the ad hoc contract that Member States that currently lack requirements to report gear/selectivity device details with a sufficiently high resolution are encouraged to include this information in the national logbooks and to also improve the reporting of such gear details/selectivity to FDI details of these specifications are outlined in Appendix 11 of the FDI datacall[11]

STECF agrees with the ad hoc contractor that, despite some new reasoning and references, objective evidence is still lacking to support the disproportionate costs of handling unwanted catches of lemon sole as basis of the proposed de minimis. In this respect STECF considers that the reasoning used in the JR to motivate that handling of undersized lemon sole constitutes a disproportionate cost is flawed as it is not reasonable to attribute all costs of handling unwanted catches to lemon sole solely. Especially as the JR shows that lemon sole only constitutes a small part of all unwanted catches in the fishery. STECF agrees with the ad hoc contractor and considers that to validate an argument of disproportionate cost, all drivers of sorting time would need to be considered, including but not limited to proportions of other wanted and unwanted species.

STECF reiterates that it remains challenging to evaluate a de minimis based on disproportionate costs as there is no way of assessing objectively at what level costs becomes disproportionate. For this reason, in assessing de minimis exemptions, the relationship between the de minimis volume, the actual level of unwanted catches and the overall status of the stocks involved is in focus for STECF in these evaluations. Due to missing information and inconsistencies in the provided information to STECF as summarised above, STECF was unable to make such an evaluation.

STECF notes and agrees with the ad hoc contractor that the JR also lacks information in support of the argument that selectivity improvements are not possible for lemon sole. Only immediate losses of common sole (*Solea solea*) with increased mesh size were cited as a barrier to the improvement of selectivity for lemon sole, which is not of direct relevance to the evaluation of this exemption. Furthermore, STECF would like to

11 https://datacollection.jrc.ec.europa.eu/documents/d/dcf/fdi_datacall_annex_2024-1

reiterate that the main objective in the implemention of the landing obligation should be the reduction of unwanted catch through enhanced selectivity or alternative avoidance methods (EWG 24-04). While acknowledging that improving selectivity may lead to some loss in revenue, such revenue decrease should be considered within the broader context of medium and long-term benefits, including enhanced stock sustainability through increased selectivity, reduced risk of choke events, and improved utilization of quotas to capture a higher proportion of more valuable catches.

In an overall assessment of the JR STECF considers that the motivation behind the sought de minimis exemption is not entirely clear. The background text paragraph in the JR, and also the background text to this term of reference provided by the Commission, mentions the decision in December 2023 to split the former joint TAC for e.g. lemon sole and witch flounder into two separate TACs by species. The JR states that there is a risk that future catches of lemon sole could exceed the quotas. STECF also recalls that the species in focus in the JR-sections that describe disproportionate costs and selectivity, is common sole and not lemon sole. Taken together STECF considers that when these sources of information are combined they suggest that the justification of de minimis is unclear.

STECF conclusions

STECF concludes that the ad hoc report covered the ToRs and was helpful for the evaluation by PLEN 24-03.

STECF concludes that no relevant additional material was supplied in the JR to justify the proposed de minimis exemption based on disproportionate costs of handling unwanted catches of lemon sole. To validate an argument of disproportionate cost all drivers of sorting time would need to be considered, including but not limited to proportions of other wanted and unwanted species.

STECF concludes that the JR lacks information to support the justification that selectivity improvements are not possible for lemon sole. STECF considers that evidence based on selectivity for lemon sole is needed to underpin this argument.

STECF concludes that the overall justification for this exemption is unclear and recalls that the two legal bases for a de minimis exemption according to Art. 15(5) of the basic regulation are either difficulties to increase selectivity or to avoid disproportionate costs of handling unwanted catches.

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6.11 Assessment of Joint Recommendations on directed fisheries for squid

Background provided by the Commission

At STECF PLEN 24-02 the Scheveningen Group and the North Western Waters Member States Regional Group proposed to increase the minimum mesh size applicable to vessels engaged in directed fishing for squids. Following this plenary, STECF evaluated that in principle increasing mesh size is one way to improve selectivity of the fisheries. However, STECF was not able to assess the potential effects of the proposed increase in mesh size as no supporting information was provided to STECF.

Following this, the NWW submitted a revised JR on 29 October 2024, which proposes increasing the current mesh size of towed gear in directed fishing for squid (at least 40 mm in the whole area) to at least 80 mm for bottom trawls and seines in ICES divisions 7a-e, 7g-h and 7k, while keeping the baseline mesh size of at least 40 mm for towed gear in ICES subareas 5 and 6, for pelagic otter trawl within the 12 nautical miles zone in ICES division 7e, and for bottom trawls and seines in ICES division 7j. It will do so by amending Part B (“Mesh sizes”) of Annex VI (“North Western Waters”) of the Technical Measures Regulation (EU) 2019/1241 that establishes a framework for technical measures for the conservation of fisheries resources and the protection of marine ecosystems.

This revised JR includes more scientific analysis from France, the Netherlands and Ireland on catch data, ICES areas and gear use of their respective fleet. Considering that the improvement in selectivity is fairly intuitive, the High-level group does not submit any additional scientific studies or data related to this joint recommendation.

Background documents are published on: https://stecf.ec.europa.eu/meetings-calendar/past-meetings

Request to the STECF

The STECF is requested to review and evaluate this revised Joint Recommendation submitted by the North Western Waters Member States Regional Group following the conclusions of STECF PLEN 24-02, and make any appropriate comments and recommendations to the proposed measures.

STECF comments

STECF notes that the JR has requested a modification of the derogation from the baseline mesh size for directed fisheries for squid, currently authorised for towed gears of a 40mm mesh size. The JR notes that this modification is expected to improve the selectivity in the area and to address control issues.

STECF notes that the UK has increased the mesh size of the directed fisheries targeting squids (belonging to families Loliginidae and Ommastrephidae) from 40 mm to 80 mm within the English zone of the United Kingdom waters since the 24th of October 2023 (The Sea Fisheries (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2023). STECF notes that the English zone of UK waters corresponds to part of ICES divisions 4bc, 7a, 7d-h, 7j and 8d.

STECF notes that the definition of 'directed fishing' in Regulation (EU) 2019/1241 means "fishing effort targeted at a specific species or group of species and may be further specified at regional level in delegated acts" and that "by-catches of cod, haddock and saithe do not exceed 20 % of the total catch in live weight of all marine biological resources landed after each fishing trip".

STECF notes that the NWWAC website provides a reflexion on directed fisheries definition[1] in which the AC specifically mentioned "The NWWAC points out that the lack of agreement on the conditions that determine the use of the mesh sizes without a directed fishing definition, can present a danger, as small mesh sizes may be used for other species. This can lead to unintended consequences that need to be avoided, including the potential different interpretation of a definition by different Member States".

STECF notes that limited landings data has been supplied in the JR for the Netherlands, Ireland and France. However, the provided data does not cover all of the area and mesh sizes identified in the JR. To supplement this, Fisheries Independent Data (STECF 2023) was used to identify the fishing patterns of the fleets and gears operating in this fishery.

STECF notes that to evaluate the proposed increase in mesh size STECF considered the following:

- A detailed overview of the proposal,
- Comprehensive data on catches and fleets pertaining to the relevant stock and fishery for which the exemption is sought,
- An assessment of what this data reveals regarding the prevalence of unwanted catches in the fishery, both in terms of relative terms (discard rates) and absolute terms (volume of unwanted catches),
- Indications of Member States' utilization of the exemption,
- Evaluation of the impact/risk of the exemption within the context of the fishery,
- Plans for forthcoming research intended to support the exemption.

Table 6.11.1. STECF summary of JR proposed changes to Technical Measures Regulation; the evidence of current fishing patters (landings tonnage reported to FDI for 2020, 2021 and 2022); and the potential impact.

Row in JR	Currently	Proposed amendment	Evidence - analysis of current fishing patterns	Potential impact
Fourth	**Mesh:** 80 mm **Area:** 7de **Conditions:** Directed fishing for whiting, mackerel and species not subject to catch limits and which are not covered elsewhere in the table, using bottom trawls.	**Mesh:** 80 mm **Area:** 7de **Conditions:** Directed fishing for whiting, mackerel and species not subject to catch limits including squids and which are not covered elsewhere in the table, using bottom trawls.	Information provided indicates that the Netherlands, France and Ireland would be impacted by this proposed amendment. FDI data indicates that the highest landings of squid within area 5,6 and 7 comes from 7d with a total of 7788 tonnes landed between 2020 and 2022), followed closely by 7e (1856 tonnes). The majority of this was taken by otter trawlers (OTB) and seine netters (SSC) utilising 80-100 mm mesh range, classified with both cephalopod target assemblage (5402 tonnes) and demersal target assemblage (3792 tonnes).	This proposal is unlikely to impact the current fishing patterns in this area, as these patterns are established.
Fifth	**Mesh:** 40 mm **Area:** whole area **Conditions:** Directed fishing for squid (*Loliginidae, Ommastrephidae*)	**Mesh:** 40 mm **Area:** Subarea 5 and 6 **Conditions:** Directed fishing for squid (*Loliginidae, Ommastrephidae*)	Information provided indicates that Netherlands, and Ireland would be impacted by this proposed amendment. FDI data indicates that the landings of squid in area 5 and 6 total 787 tonnes between 2020 and 2022. The majority (99%) of this was taken by otter trawlers (OTB, OTM, OTT, PTM) and seine netters (SSC) utilising mesh size ranges of 32- 70 mm (574 tonnes) and 120+ mm (184 tonnes), classified as demersal (504 tonnes) and crustacean target assemblage (269 tonnes).	This proposal is unlikely to impact the current fishing patterns in this area, as these patterns are established.
New	**Mesh:** 40 mm **Area:** whole area **Conditions:** Directed fishing for squid (*Loliginidae, Ommastrephidae*)	**Mesh:** 80 mm **Area:** ICES divisions 7a, 7b, 7c, 7d, 7e, 7g, 7h, 7k **Conditions:** Directed fishing for squid (*Loliginidae,*	Information provided indicates that Netherlands, France and Ireland would be impacted by this proposed amendment. FDI data indicates that the landings of squid in area 7a, 7b, 7c, 7d, 7e, 7g, 7h, 7k total 11,485 tonnes between 2020 and 2022. The majority of which is taken by otter trawlers (OTB)(7136 tonnes) and seine netters (SSC)(2247tonnes) utilising mesh size ranges of 80 to 100 mm (8104 tonnes), 100 to 110 mm (1889 tonnes), with some landings from smaller mesh such as 32- 70 mm (635 tonnes).	This proposal is unlikely to impact the current fishing patterns in this area, as these patterns are established.

		Ommastrephidae) with bottom trawls and seines		
New row	**Mesh:** 40 mm **Area:** 7e **Conditions:** Directed fishing for squid (*Loliginidae, Ommastrephidae*)	**Mesh:** 40 mm **Area:** 7e **Conditions:** Directed fishing for squid (*Loliginidae, Ommastrephidae*) with pelagic otter trawls (OTM) in the 12m.n. zone	Information provided indicates that Netherlands, France and Ireland would be impacted by this proposed amendment. FDI data indicates that the landings of squid in area 7e taken totalled 188 tonnes between 2020 and 2022, of which pelagic otter trawls (OTM) utilising mesh size ranges of 32 to 70 mm landed 27 tonnes. It was not possible to determine which part of this was taken within the 12 natical mile zone due to the spatial resolution of the data.	This proposal is unlikely to impact the current fishing patterns in this area, as these patterns are established.
New row	**Mesh:** 40 mm **Area:** 7j **Conditions:** Directed fishing for squid (*Loliginidae, Ommastrephidae*)	**Mesh:** 40 mm **Area:** 7j **Conditions:** Directed fishing for squid (*Loliginidae, Ommastrephidae*) with bottom trawls and seines	Information provided indicates that Netherlands, France and Ireland would be impacted by this proposed amendment. FDI data indicates that the landings of squid in area 7j total 4475 tonnes between 2020 and 2022. The majority of which is taken by otter trawlers (OTB, OTT) (4470 tonnes) utilising mesh size ranges of 100 to 110 mm (3105 tonens) and 32 to 70 mm (415 tonnes), with a target assembalage of demersal fisheries (4014 tonnes) and some cephlopod (CEP) (443 tonnes).	This proposal is unlikely to impact the current fishing patterns in this area, as these patterns are established.

Source: Documentation provided by the Commission, FDI data calls 202-2022, and own elaboration.

STECF conclusions

STECF concludes that there is evidence to show that the proposed increase to 80mm mesh is already the dominant mesh used by fisheries landing squid in ICES divisions 7a, 7b, 7c, 7d, 7e, 7g, 7h, 7k. Therefore, this proposal is unlikely to change current fishing patterns and is at least equivalent to current selectivity characteristics.

STECF concludes that there is evidence to support the retention of 40mm mesh for directed squid fisheries in 7e for small scale fleets, which currently target squid in this area. Therefore, this proposal is unlikely to change current fishing patterns and is at least equivalent to current selectivity characteristics. However, it was not possible for STECF to assess the extent of the current usage of 40mm mesh size within 12 nautical miles of the shore, as data was not available at this spatial resolution.

STECF concludes that there is evidence to support the retention of 40mm mesh for directed squid fisheries in ICES subareas 5 and 6 where the mesh size range is currently used to land squid as part of cephalopod targeted trips. Therefore, this proposal is unlikely to change current fishing patterns and is at least equivalent to current selectivity characteristics.

STECF concludes that there is evidence of 40mm mesh being used by fisheries landings squid in ICES division 7j, with the majority of the squid landing coming larger mesh ranges (100-110m). Therefore, this proposal is unlikely to change current fishing patterns and is at least equivalent to current selectivity characteristics.

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7. ITEMS/DISCUSSION POINTS FOR PREPARATION OF EWGS AND OTHER STECF WORK

7.1 Preparation of EWG on VMEs

Background provided by the Commission

In the context of the review of the established list of areas where VMEs are known to occur or are likely to occur (1) building on the opinion of the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee on Fisheries in 2023 (2), the European Commission has requested the STECF to carry out a refined analysis of the socio-economic impacts of the VMEs closures according to scenarios presented in the ICES advices (3), namely to analyse and compare the current closures (2021 advice) and the closures under Scenarios C and D (2024 advice4). This exercise has been launched early 2024 with the creation of an STECF Expert Working Group (EWG 24-09) and a scoping meeting on 20 February 2024 with Member States and Advisory Council. It is expected to include a literature review, an analysis based on the DISPLACE model and to collect feedbacks from the Advisory Councils in October 2024. The Expert Working Group will be meeting on 17-21 February 2025, preparing for the expected conclusion of this work at the STECF Plenary of March 2025.

Request to the STECF

In view of the EWG, apreliminary report on the state of play and future advancement prospects of the process is requested, taking stock of the first deliveries such as the literature review and the first discussions held with the Advisory Councils in the month of October.

If possible, the response could outline some preliminary findings from the DISPLACE model projections.

STECF comments

STECF observes that the proposed meeting dates for EWG 24-09 (17-21 February 2025) would be too early to allow for a thorough discussion of the results from the DISPLACE modeling exercise. If the meeting is postponed to 3-7 March that would also allow for a better timing of the interviews with stakeholders.

As the available input data for the DISPLACE model is not detailed enough to separate vessels fishing on deep-sea stocks from other vessels, STECF notes that it is currently not possible to assess if the results from the DISPLACE model will provide accurate results on the economic impacts of the VME closures. In order to validate the results of the modeling exercise STECF therefore emphasize the need for the participation of data experts at the EWG 24-09.

STECF notes that even though the purpose of the stakeholder interviews, as previously discussed, were to discuss the modeling results, the interviews would still be helpful to better understand the effects of the closures on the fishing fleets.

STECF notes that regarding the socio-economic impacts on the small-scale fleet the regional studies provided to STECF do not include information on the reaction of the vessels to the closures (displacement effects). Furthermore, the study from Asturia provided to STECF is calculating negative impacts of the closures by assuming additional closures that have not been implemented.

STECF notes that an extra analysis of the FDI data from 2013 to 2023 could be used to assess possible differences between the years 2022 and 2023, before and after the closure. This analysis could give an indication about how fleets operating in the area of the VMEs, especially the small-scale fleet, reacted to the closures. The longer time-frame is necessary to distinguish possible differences between 2022 and 2023, from longer-term developments or yearly variability. Furthermore, STECF notes that it would be beneficial if experts on small-scale fishing fleets discussed the outcome of the analysis during the EWG.

STECF notes that the literature review provided to STECF includes a publication regarding the impacts of longlines on bottom habitats. STECF notes that an assessment of the impact of longlines on bottom habitats is outside of the scope of the EWG. However, STECF is aware that this is an important topic that also influences the discussion on the socio-economic impacts of VMEs.

STECF conclusions

STECF concludes that in order to progress on the analysis on the socio-economic effects on VMEs, DG MARE should ask Member States to provide additional information on the fleets that fish in deep waters.

STECF concludes that in order to interpret the results of the modeling of the displacement effects of vessels etc., it is of great importance that data experts from the Member States participate at the EWG.

STECF concludes that an ad hoc contract for a FDI data analysis should be issued to do a fisheries footprint analysis to detect changes between 2023, the year after the closures, and 2022, the year before the closures. This analysis should also include the years 2013-2021 to try to distinguish longer-term developments and yearly variability from the impacts of the closures.

Terms of References for EWG 24-09

TOR 1: Provide an overview of the process to date, what has been done, what has been achieved, and what is required to analyse socio-economic impacts of the closures of the VMEs. This will also provide an opportunity to document and discuss lessons learned.

TOR 2: Provide a description of the fleets operating in deep waters, with a special attention to those affected by the closures of the VMEs, including (but not limited to): number of vessels in a segment; fishing gear; catch composition; home ports; qualitative information on economic regional importance. Information from the available regional studies can be incorporated into this overview, providing valuable qualitative and quantitative information.

TOR 3: Provide a summary of fleet behaviour using Fisheries Dependent Information database (FDI), before and after the closure (2022 - 2023). The outputs of an ad hoc contract will be reviewed by the EWG to determine if the data provided by the ad hoc contract are representative of the current fishing patterns in areas affected, including (but not limited to) the representativeness of trends in small scale fleets; deep water catches; and fleet segments targeting hake.

TOR 4: Provide a summary of the spatio-temporal modelling completed to assess the impact of displacement on the fleet. The outputs of the ad hoc contract to apply the DISPLACE model will be reviewed and validated by the EWG. Particular focus will be given to identifying data gaps and actions/tools required to resolve these. Participants are encouraged to prepare for this in advance of the meeting by reviewing the ad hoc reports provided, in particular the data used to parametrise the model.

Part of the background information to experts will include the stakeholder feedback (especially interviews) gathered before the EWG meeting.

TOR 5: Provide a summary of the provided information on ecosystem services evaluation regarding deep-sea ecosystems and include especially information on the monetary values of ecosystem services. Detailing the different methodologies, the pros and cons of taking those values into account in, for example, a cost and benefit analysis. Discuss if time allows also possible trade-offs between different value categories.

TOR 6: Discuss direction of future work in case of new similar requests, including preparatory work and data needs as well as process streamlining.

7.2 Assessment of changes in types of and topics for requests to STECF

Background provided by the Commission

The mandate of the current STECF has started on 1st July 2022 and runs until the first Plenary of 2025, with a view to be renewed as of the 2025 July Plenary. Compared to previous periods, the current STECF has been consulted during the current mandate on more sustainability related requests from the COM. Other topics that depart from the “classical” fisheries related requests, such as fleet management or elements of CFP evaluation, have also gained in frequency.

Request to the STECF

Against this background, the STECF is asked to outline the main challenges which have been encountered during the current mandate with respect to the expertise necessary to address the ensemble of requests and consultations that have been received. STECF should assess how the existing distribution of fields of expertise in the committee relate to the distribution of the types of/topics for requests that were received. It should also be evaluated, in a longer-term historic perspective, what type of work and topics have become more or less prevalent during the last couple of mandates of STECF and, related to this, what scientific expertise has been in more or less demand.

STECF comments

STECF was requested to outline the main challenges which have been encountered during the current mandate (November 2021 to the date of submission of this report) to address whether the expertise of the committee is in line with the requests provided to STECF and to evaluate, in the longer run, what topics that have been more frequent and what scientific expertise have been in more or less demand.

STECF answered the requests by analysing: (i) requests to STECF since November 2021, ii) answers of STECF members to a questionnaire issued by the STECF chair and vice-chairs before the plenary meeting, and iii) points of thoughts from the current STECF chair and vice-chairs from their personal experience over the last years. In addition, and in relation to challenges for the STECF committee during the current mandate, STECF is also providing its points of view as regards the type and number of ToRs requested for plenary. The request has been submitted to DG MARE as a separate standalone document.

STECF proposes that DG Mare and the STECF bureau follow up on the the finalised document after PLEN 24-03.

8. CONTACT DETAILS OF STECF MEMBERS AND OTHER PARTICIPANTS

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EU law and related documents

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EU open data

The portal data.europa.eu provides access to open datasets from the EU institutions, bodies and agencies. These can be downloaded and reused for free, for both commercial and non-commercial purposes. The portal also provides access to a wealth of datasets from European countries.

STECF

The Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) has been established by the European Commission. The STECF is being consulted at regular intervals on matters pertaining to the conservation and management of living aquatic resources, including biological, economic, environmental, social and technical considerations.

Science for policy

The Joint Research Centre (JRC) provides independent, evidence-based knowledge and science, supporting EU policies to positively impact society

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