

Skates & Rays Management

Background

The management of skates and rays has been subject to ongoing review and research, including requests to the STECF to evaluate possible changes to TAC setting and wider management approaches (STECF 15-01, EWG 17-01, STECF 17-16).

A large proportion of skate and ray species are currently managed under a group TAC with the code “SRX”. Historically, ICES has provided biennial catch advice for skates and rays at this very general level. Over the past ten years and more, ICES have been able to provide catch advice at the species level for more and more stocks. The single species advice and stock distribution is not necessarily consistent with the group TAC areas, which complicates the translation of the advice into TAC setting.

Under paragraph 5 (e) of the 2021 Written Records, the parties agreed that they ‘would work through the SCF, and with ICES as appropriate, to seek to agree the most appropriate way to interpret the ICES advice for the setting of the skates and rays group TACs SRX/07D, SRX/2AC4-C and SRX/67AKXD, and to work jointly to adopt a possible in-year amendment to the TACs to reflect the agreed interpretation of the advice’. The Parties reconfirmed this commitment for 2022 in the 2022 Written Record, with a view to applying this to existing and emerging ICES advice throughout 2022 for TAC setting for 2023.

Orientation

For the 2021 EU-UK consultations, the EU proposed to maintain the current SRX approach, whereby individual stock advice trends are used to reach a composite TAC figure for the SRX group TAC for a given management area. The UK proposed a different approach, basing their position on the tonnages of the individual stock advice sheets for the relevant management area.

The Parties agreed to work in the EU-UK Specialised Committee on Fisheries (SCF) to agree on a way forward. Following a positive conclusion of this work, this should then provide the basis for the approach to SRX in the annual consultations for 2023. In the context of the SCF, the EU will therefore engage with the UK with a view to, as a first step, consider the various options of translating the scientific advice into the group TAC setting. The output of this work should help inform the Commission in its preparation of the engagement in the SCF.

As a second step, a more comprehensive discussion in the SCF should be held on alternative management approaches to the SRX group TAC. This should be coupled with an update of the application of the landing obligation and the possible use of the prohibited species list. The work should be based on the best available science, but also consider the broader management challenges, as well as socio-economic and internal quota allocation issues in the short term for EU member states and fishing fleets. The established EWG should carry out a number of tasks in this regard.

Terms of Reference – Expert Working Group

1. To consider the appropriateness of the current EU approach in terms of ensuring the sustainable exploitation and conservation of all skates and rays species falling under the SRX group TAC. This should include an analysis of ICES catch statistics, and any other data deemed relevant (e.g. surveys, logbooks), for an appropriate reference period to help assess current exploitation of the different species in the SRX group TAC, by area, including the examination of the exploitation of vulnerable species and possible implications for their conservation.
2. To consider adaptations to the current SRX group TACs, including the use of additional single species sub-TACs
3. To consider bespoke management plans as a replacement to SRX group TACs
4. To consider progress made in underpinning the exemption to the landing obligation and next steps, by species and by gears. This should assess catch data, discard survival rates, methods for improving avoidance, selectivity and survival.
5. To consider transparent criteria to classify skate and ray species as prohibited species

The STECF should discuss pros and cons of each approach considered, especially in light of achieving conservation objectives, but also in terms of *inter alia*, relative stability and socio-economics, species identification and reporting.

The work should build on the EWG 17-01 report and any additional knowledge from more recent years.