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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. This report on the evaluation of Work Plans for data collection and data transmission issues has been reviewed by STECF during the 2025 winter plenary meeting.

STECF Report on EWG 25-16 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.

STECF comments

EWG 25-16 met virtually from 3 to 7 November 2025, with a sub-group of five experts (on ToR 3), meeting physically in Oostende, Belgium.

STECF considers that the EWG adequately addressed the TORs and has the following specific comments on the process and the four ToRs addressed by EWG 25-16:

Process feedback

STECF acknowledges that the EWG provided a draft report with draft annexes for STECF immediately following the EWG meeting.

STECF notes that the hybrid set-up for ToR 3 was a challenge, as it demanded substantial effort to cover all the different topics and necessitated fundamental discussions and a broad range of expertise.

ToR 1. Evaluation of Member States' Work Plans 2026–2027 (and 2026–2028 for Austria)

The EWG evaluated the amended Work Plans (WPs) submitted by seven Member States and the new Work Plan submitted by Austria. The evaluation followed Article 10 of Regulation (EU) No 2017/1004 and focused on consistency with Regional Work Plans (RWPs), conformity with the EU-MAP, scientific relevance and the use of appropriate methodologies.

STECF observes that biological data sections were generally compliant, with two Member States showing minor issues which were resolved during the EWG. Three Member States introduced adjustments to their diadromous fish data collection plans; improvements were noted in methodology documentation and the addition of new monitoring components, though several Member States lacked documentation and detailed annexes in English. Sections on surveys and the impact of fisheries on marine biological resources were updated appropriately. Revisions to protected, endangered, and threatened species (PETS) monitoring and baseline surveys were positively received by the EWG. The socio-economic and transversal data sections showed consistency, with no significant deviations or new issues. Austria's new WP (2026–2028) was assessed as fully compliant.

TOR 2. Evaluation of Data Transmission Issues (DTi)

STECF notes that the EWG assessed 81 low and medium-severity Data Transmission Issues (DTi) from the 2024 data calls covering IOTC, ICES, FDI, Aquaculture, and Mediterranean & Black Sea datasets. The DTMT (Data Transmission Monitoring Tool) Guidance (Version 2025.03.24) was applied.

Overall, 25 issues required follow-up (responsible for follow-up was Member State, DG MARE, or END-USER), while 23 were considered satisfactory, 17 unsatisfactory and 16 unsatisfactory – to be revised. Contradictions between Member States and end-user inputs and inconsistent issue classification (coverage vs. timeliness) complicated the assessments.

STECF observes that the information provided in the columns *"End User check"* and *"End User comment"* was very helpful for the assessment of the DTi.

TOR 3. Finalisation of STECF Input to Guidelines and Templates

This TOR summarised the EWG discussions and the suggestions for improvement regarding:

1. Annual Report assessment grid and guidance for evaluators.

   STECF observes that the EWG developed a consolidated Annual Report (AR) assessment grid (Annex 3 of the EWG report) together with accompanying guidance (Annex 4 of the EWG report), forming a single, integrated framework with clearer instructions, examples and evaluation logic.

2. Work Plan and Annual Report guidelines for Member States.

   STECF notes that the guidelines for WP/AR templates have been reviewed and included in Annex 6 of the EWG report.

3. Evaluation of Data Transmission issues and guidance for DTMT.

   STECF notes that the EWG proposed several revisions to the DTMT guidance. These included: modifications to the definition of severity, the addition of two cases in the decision tree, and the introduction of standardized responses in the "End User check" column. Further improvements were also suggested to streamline the DTMT workflows and enhance notifications to Member States.

STECF notes that the EWG also discussed the revision and the evaluation of the AR 'quality' Annexes 1.1 and 1.2 and drafted a roadmap with suggestions for follow-up steps during 2026:

- The first step in this roadmap should involve consultation with RCGs to ensure input from the relevant ISSG RWPs, ISSG End-users and technical coordination groups.
- Building on these contributions, as well as on the work already undertaken by RCG ECON during the 2024 workshop on quality issues, which initiated collaboration with ESTAT[1], a proposal for the revision and evaluation of Annexes 1.1 and 1.2 could be developed through one or more ad hoc contracts.
- The resulting proposal should then be presented and tested during the October EWG on the evaluations of RWP and NWP.

STECF observes that the EWG agreed to incorporate refusal rates into the AR as this would add value for assessing cases of unachieved sampling. As the modification of Table 2.5 of the WP/AR template by adding an additional column for refusal rate reporting was judged too cumbersome at this stage, the EWG suggested that Member States may report refusal rates in the 'AR comments' column of Table 2.5 and may use Text Box 2.5 to provide additional explanation, where necessary. STECF also observes that EWG suggested that Member States should follow the methodology as described in the ICES SGPIDS Report 2012, Chapter 2.4: Quality Indicator 2 "Non-response and Refusal Rates", to ensure consistent application of the methodology for probability-based sampling.

STECF notes that the EWG also produced an overview table of recommendations (Annex 5 of the EWG report) to ensure the continuity between EWGs and the follow-up in a transparent way.

TOR 4. Input on the DCF IT Platform

[1] www.fisheries-rcg.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/REPORT-ISSG-Quality-March-2024_v1.pdf

STECF notes that the IT platform was used successfully for WP submissions and assessments. EWG 25-16 identified a set of validation checks to enhance AR submission consistency, including reference year validation, sampling scheme logic and consistency across population totals and sampling rates.

STECF conclusions

STECF endorses the outcomes of EWG 25-16 presented during PLEN 25-03 and concludes that all ToRs were appropriately addressed.

STECF concludes that for the future, EWGs handling fundamental aspects of the DCF, WP, AR and related topics, should preferably be set up fully in-person.

STECF concludes that the revised assessment grid and the guidance for evaluators can be applied in 2026 for the evaluation of the ARs for the 2025 WP implementation year.

STECF concludes that the DTMT guidance should be amended to include the revisions proposed by the EWG.

STECF concludes that refusal rates should be optionally integrated in the ARs as suggested by the EWG. With regard to the revision and evaluation of Annexes 1.1 (Quality report for biological data sampling scheme) and 1.2 (Quality report for socioeconomic data sampling scheme), STECF agrees with the roadmap suggested by the EWG.

STECF concludes that the overview table of recommendations (Annex 5 of the EWG report) should be maintained by DG MARE as a living document, allowing for tracking all STECF recommendations and monitoring their implementation.

STECF concludes that proposals for the improvement of the IT platform as reported in the EWG report (Table 4.1) should be considered for implementation by the Commission.

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[1] - Information on STECF members' affiliations is displayed for information only. In any case, Members of the STECF shall act independently. In the context of the STECF work, the committee members do not represent the institutions/bodies they are affiliated to in their daily jobs.

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REPORT TO THE STECF

Evaluation of Work Plans for data collection and data transmission issues (EWG-25-16)

3-7 November 2025

This report does not necessarily reflect the view of the STECF and the European Commission and in no way anticipates the Commission's future policy in this area

1. INTRODUCTION

The STECF EWG 25-16 met virtually (hybrid with a sub-group of experts in Oostende, Belgium) during 3–7 November 2025. The meeting opened at 09:00 on 3 November and was adjourned at 16:00 on 7 November 2025.

1.1 Terms of Reference for EWG-25-16

Background

The Commission requests the STECF to evaluate DCF work plans and their amendments, prior to their approval[1].

In January 2025, the Commission deployed a dedicated DCF IT platform for drafting, submitting and assessing the WPs and ARs. The IT platform will be used on a mandatory basis by Member States to submit their amended WP for evaluation by EWG 25-16.

EWG 25-16 will report the findings to the plenary meeting of the STECF, which will take place 10-14 November 2025. EWG 25-16 will evaluate:

1) amended WPs 2026-2027 submitted by at least five Member States plus 2026-2028 WP for Austria
2) the data transmission issues (DTi) uploaded on the Data Transmission Monitoring Tool (DTMT)

    81 medium and low severity issues from 2024 data calls (Med&BS EWG 24-10 and EWG 24-12, FDI EWG 24-11, Aquaculture EWG 24-14, ICES, IOTC, ICCAT).

The number of submitted WPs will be confirmed on 16 October, as the submission deadline is 15 October 2025.

Request to EWG 25-16

EWG 25-16 is requested to:

ToR 1: Evaluate the amended WPs 2026-2027 (plus the WP 2026-2028 for Austria) and their link to RWPs

Experts are requested to evaluate the WPs submitted by Member States, in accordance with Article 10 of Regulation (EU) No 2017/1004, considering:

- the consistency of national WPs with regional WPs, as published on RCG/DCF websites (and uploaded in the IT platform)
- the conformity of the WPs with the contents of Articles 6 and 9 of the DCF Regulation, and with the EU MAP from 2022 onwards,

- the scientific relevance of the data covered by the WPs for the purposes laid down in Article 1(1) of the DCF Regulation, and the quality of the proposed methods and procedures,
- the conformity with the format and guidelines on the WP template (for the national WPs).

The experts should pay particular attention if the Member States considered the comments provided by STECF EWG 24-15 evaluating WP 2025-2027, the comments on AR evaluations (EWG 23-08, EWG 24-08, EWG 25-08), and the DTMT comments on gaps in data collection.

During the EWG 25-16, the experts may communicate to the Member States outstanding issues that require clarification and/or resubmission. The Member States will provide explanations and resubmit the WPs if necessary. The communication will be streamlined through the It platform, with a back up in a dedicated feedback table, provided in Teams by the Commission.

The experts will use the evaluation grid (background document 2). They should use clear and neutral language in the evaluation for self-explanatory and fact-based comments. The comments must be aligned among sections and Member States, i.e. similar issues must be assessed and summarised in a similar way. More guidance is included in the stand-alone document of assessment criteria (background document 3), and in the guidelines on the WP/AR templates (background document 4).

The experts should pay particular attention that the submitted national WPs:
- address the issues raised in the assessment grids during past evaluations
- address the comments on data transmission issues concerning the data collection
- consider recommendations from end users, RCGs and STECF

ToR 2: Evaluate medium and low severity issues from 2024 data calls

Following EWG 25-08, the MS were requested to take actions on medium and low 2024 DT issues, and report on these actions in the DTMT.

As a result, EWG 25-16 is requested to evaluate the medium and low severity issues from 2024 data calls (Med&BS EWG 24-10 and EWG 24-12, FDI EWG 24-11, Aquaculture EWG 24-14, ICES, IOTC, ICCAT) where MS should have taken actions (81 issues reported).

The DTMT guidelines with a decision tree must be used for the evaluation; the experts may agree to further modify the guidance if necessary. All changes to guidance must be documented for future reference in a separate electronic annex. The DTMT table and guidance have been modified in 2025, to better capture the follow-up that Member States undertake to address the recorded issues.

ToR 3: Finalise the STECF input to the guidelines and templates

During 2025, the Commission received several proposals to improve guidelines and templates used in WP/AR reporting cycle. EWG 25-16 experts are requested to revise these proposals and finalise to the extent possible the STECF input for further consideration by the Commission. The background documents are:

- EWG 25-08 input on the guidelines and templates (several documents);
- RCG NANSEA recommendation on WP Annex 1;
- EWG 25-10 FDI recommendation on AR template section 2.5
- Ad hoc contract report for DTMT backlog on Med&BS issues.

ToR 4: Provide input on the DCF IT platform

In 2021, the Commission initiated an IT project to build a DCF IT platform for submitting and evaluating the WPs and the ARs. Throughout 2024, the IT platform was tested for AR and WP submission by a group of users from several Member States, and in January 2025, it was deployed in the production environment. The experts as platform users are requested to file their feedback on the encountered problems and on possible improvements.

EWG 25-16 report

The EWG should produce a Word document with general explanations and an Excel file with the assessment grid and comments of each WP. The Word document should include an overview of the assessment and overall evaluation of the Work Plans (horizontal issues, spanning many MS/ sea basins):

1) per Member State (National Work Plans):
   a) an evaluation of the WP amended content (compliance with DCF Regulation, EU MAP and end user needs); in particular, the follow-up on STECF and COM comments from previous evaluations,
   b) conclusions from the consistency check with relevant regional work plans for the amendments,
   c) conclusions from the format check (template guidelines) in general and per WP section;

2) per Member State (data transmission issues):
   a) an evaluation of Member State performance (main and recurring issues) by Member State, complimentary to and following EWG 25-08 findings,
   b) an evaluation of Member States' responses via the DTMT online platform to issues raised by end users of scientific advice. EWG 25-16 is requested to evaluate DTi, and close issues which have been clarified and require no further action,

3) At EU level:
   a) EWG final proposal on guidelines and templates
   b) a feedback on the DCF IT platform.

Background documents

For WP assessment ToR 1:

1) amended WP 2026-2027 submitted by the MS and RWPs 2025-2027 submitted by RCGs (folder 01)
2) WP evaluation grid (as used by EWG 24-15)
3) Stand-alone document for WP evaluation (approved by EWG 21-17: https://datacollection.jrc.ec.europa.eu/documents/d/dcf/wp-assessment-instructions-for-evaluators)
4) Guidance on WP/AR templates (COM Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/39, updated September 2024 online: https://dcf.ec.europa.eu/wps-and-ars/wpar-templates_en)

For DTi assessment ToR 2:

5) datacollection.jrc.ec.europa.eu/documents/d/dcf/dtmt-guidance-version_2025-03-24
6) DT issues recorded in the Data Transmission Monitoring Tool: https://dcf.ec.europa.eu/dtmt_en (Excel export file will be provided)
7) STECF EWG 24-03 and EWG 24-07 report (Annual Economic Report)

For guidelines and templates ToR 3:

8) EWG 25-08 proposals
9) RCG NANSEA/Bal recommendation
10) EWG 25-10 proposal
11) DTMT backlog ad hoc report – sections on DTMT guidelines and cycle

For DCF platform ToR 4:

12) https://work-plans-reports.dcf.ec.europa.eu/work-plans

Additional background documents:

The experts should consider relevant assessment files from previous STECF EWGs, including EWG 23-08 (AR), EWG 24-15 (WP), EWG 24-08 (AR), EWG 25-08 (AR).

The experts may also consult previous WPs and ARs:

https://dcf.ec.europa.eu/wps-and-ars/work-plans_en
https://dcf.ec.europa.eu/wps-and-ars/annual-reports_en

and other relevant documents (e.g. ICES reports for meetings relating to the relevant data calls, Liaison Meeting and RCG recommendations etc.)

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[1] The legal base for the process is set in articles 6, 9 and 11 of Regulation (EU) No 2017/1004 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 May 2017 on the establishment of a Union framework for the collection, management and use of data in the fisheries sector and support for scientific advice regarding the common fisheries policy and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 199/2008. (consolidated version of 14.07.2021).

2. EVALUATION OF MEMBER STATES' WORK PLANS 2026-2027 (AMENDMENTS)

2.1 Introduction

In contrast to the EWG 24-15, where the original national Work Plan (WP) submissions 2025-2027 for all Member States (MS) were evaluated, the EWG 25-16 evaluated only WP amendments for 2026-2027 submitted by seven MS, and a new Austrian WP 2026-2028.

2.2 Background information

To carry out the evaluation, the EWG was provided with the Work Plan (WP) tables and text boxes of eight MS which submitted WPs for 2026-2027 (Austria 2026-2028) in October 2025. The EWG used various supporting information such as relevant EWG reports, guidelines and templates, see ToRs above. No pre-screening of the WPs has been conducted.

2.3 Evaluation criteria

The EWG used the evaluation sheets (assessment grids) and guidance for evaluators developed by STECF during 2020-2022 (mainly within the EWG 20-18).

2.4 Sub-groups and task allocation

The evaluation of WPs was split by sub-groups and experts were allocated to each sub-group according to their expertise. Each sub-group was tasked with the assessment of particular sections of the WP according to Table 2.4.

Table 2.4 1 EWG 25-16 sub-groups by sections and expertise

Sub-group	Section	Expertise
1	Biological data (sections 2.1, 2.2 and 2.5), corresponding parts of Annex 1.1	Biologists
2	Diadromous species (section 2.3), Recreational fisheries (2.4), corresponding parts of Annex 1.1	Biologists
3	General information (section 1), Research surveys at sea (section 2.6), Impact of fisheries on marine biological resources (section 4), corresponding parts of Annex 1.1	Biologists
4	Fishing activity data (section 3), economic & social data (sections 5, 6 and 7), corresponding parts of Annex 1.2	Economists

Source: Own elaborations

2.5 Evaluation process

During the EWG, issues to be solved were identified by the EWG experts and transmitted to the MS (via the IT platform with a backup sent by e-mail through DG MARE), seeking for clarification and re-submission of WP files. The MS then replied within a short deadline (from the end of the first meeting day to the end of the third meeting day) and submitted revised WP tables and text, when requested. This 'ping-pong' information exchange was completed

at the end of the meeting, leaving no issues to be dealt with bilaterally between Commission and MS. The assessment grids for the eight MS are included in the electronic annex 2.

2.5.1 General information

Five Member States adjusted the time period for the WP to 2026-2027, while two MS kept the time period 2025-2027. Such inconsistencies should be solved once all WPs are submitted through the IT platform. In addition, one land-locked MS (Austria) supplied a new workplan for the period 2026-2028.

The EWG considered all amendments in section 1, made by seven MS, acceptable. Amendments included changing the contact details of the National Correspondent, removing and/or adding specific test studies, aligning the timeline of test studies and adjustments to Table 1.1 or Table 1.2.

2.5.2 Biological data

Of the eight WPs that were resubmitted, four included declared amendments to the sections covered under biological data. These were assessed in a sub-group plenary which allowed for an in-depth look at all aspects.

Responses from MS regarding requests for clarification or for a re-submission were received during the meeting from all relevant MS. These were checked to see if the response received was sufficient and the evaluation grid was updated accordingly. Only two countries had minor issues, which were solved during the EWG.

The EWG identified an inconsistency between WP resubmissions depending on whether the IT platform is used or not. When the IT platform is used, the WP years are automatically set to 2026-2027; it is not possible to select 2025-2027, and the 2025 rows in the tables are automatically removed. However, this is not the case for MS that do not use the IT platform (e.g. Spain). Since this situation only occurs during the transition period, this inconsistency will be tolerated, and MS will not be asked to manually remove the 2025 rows to avoid increasing the risk of errors.

2.5.3 Diadromous species and recreational fisheries

Of the eight WPs that were resubmitted, three included declared amendments to the sections covering diadromous data and recreational fisheries.

Three MS introduced adjustments to their diadromous fish data collection plans. Updates included removal of salmon rivers where fishing will be prohibited, addition of new eel monitoring and fishery-dependent data collection, and refinement of implementation timelines for salmonid sampling. In some cases, new fishery-independent surveys were added to improve eel stock and escapement assessments. For salmon, plans were expanded to include a “rolling” smolt monitoring programme in data-limited rivers, in line with ICES recommendations.

Revisions were made to clarify non-participation in the GFCM Research Programme on Recreational Fisheries due to overlap with national data collection. The relevant annex was updated with the correct recreational fisheries sampling scheme identifier, English documentation of the off-site survey methodology, and revised links.

The EWG requests for WP revisions concerned the need to complete and clarify descriptions in the annexes related to recreational fisheries and diadromous species. It was noted that

several sections in Annex 1.1 (e.g. Sampling design, Implementation, Data storage, and Processing) were missing. The EWG requested the provision of a detailed description of the nationally applied methodology for the annual off-site survey instead of referring only to a general handbook. MS were also asked to provide working links and documentation in English.

The EWG pointed out that changes in Table 2.3 were neither indicated nor explained, making them difficult to trace and that some documentation and links in Annex 1.1 were available only in national languages. It was therefore requested to submit an updated Table 2.3 with tracked changes and to ensure that all quality documentation is available in English.

Responses to the EWG comments were received during the meeting. These were reviewed to determine whether the responses provided were sufficient, and the WP assessment grid was updated accordingly. Three MS still have minor issues to be corrected in future submissions.

As general observation, it has to be pointed out that there are still no links to documentation in English, despite the “action needed” comments made in previous WP and AR evaluations. This is a recurring issue, and if it is not addressed, it is likely that MS will continue to receive STECF requests for clarification in the future.

2.5.4 Surveys

Three MS amended section 2.6. Amendments included adjustments of specific values in Table 2.6. Furthermore, one MS added a new non-mandatory survey which should provide an essential baseline to establish monitoring programmes to their amended WP. As this concerns a baseline study, the MS was asked during the EWG to consider placing this survey under a test study rather than in section 2.6. The MS responded positively to this comment and placed the survey under test studies.

2.5.5 Impact of fisheries on marine biological resources

For section 4, Croatia amended Text Box 4.2. The revised text aligned the PETS monitoring activities with the outcomes of the PETS BYC 2022-2024 study. A description of the structure and function of their national bycatch database and the estimation procedures developed under the PETS BYC 2022-2024 study were also added. The EWG supported and encouraged the amendments made.

Another MS aligned the temporal coverage for several rows in Table 4.1.

Furthermore, one MS postponed the implementation of a sampling scheme by one year, as they are awaiting distribution maps of vulnerable sharks that will be available by late 2025 to early 2026. This resulted in an amendment in the timing of the relevant sampling scheme in Annex 1.1. The MS was asked during the EWG to also make this amendment for the relevant sampling scheme in Table 2.5. The MS responded positively and made the amendment accordingly.

2.5.6 Transversal, economic and social data

For the seven MS with WP amendments, no substantial modifications were introduced in the socio-economic sections (Sections 5, 6 and 7) nor in Annex 1.2. The subgroup confirmed that these Work Plans remained consistent with the requirements of Regulation (EU) 2017/1004

and with the template and guidance set out in Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/39, and that previous STECF comments were either already addressed or not applicable due to the absence of changes.

One MS (Austria) submitted a new WP for 2026-2028. The subgroup carried out a full assessment of this WP in line with the evaluation grid and guidelines. The WP was found to be consistent with the EU-MAP, and no issues requiring clarification or resubmission were identified.

No horizontal issues were identified for the socio-economic components.

3. EVALUATION OF DATA TRANSMISSION ISSUES (DTI)

The low- and medium-severity issues from data calls in 2024 were assessed during the EWG 25-16 meeting. From the 81 DTi overall, 11 DTi were from IOTC, 19 DTi from ICES, 5 DTi from the Aquaculture data call, 12 DTi from the Mediterranean and Black Sea data call, and 34 DTi from the FDI data call. There were no high-severity issues from Fleet Economics (AER) to be assessed. The Guidance document (DTMT Guidance Version 2025.03.24.pdf) was used when assessing these issues.

When the information provided by end-users and MS is contradictory and there is no evidence to allow the EWG to give an assessment, the DTi are assessed as FOLLOW-UP NEEDED. IOTC had 10, ICES 7 and FDI 8 DTi that were assessed as FOLLOW-UP NEEDED. In these cases, responsible for follow-up was MS, DG MARE, or END-USER.

For some of the data issues marked as “late reporting” by the IOTC, the EWG could not assess whether the delay originated from the MS or from DG MARE. This uncertainty arises due to the data transmission chain which involves the MS sending the data to DG MARE, who then forwards it to the end-users. Therefore, in such cases, DG MARE is also indicated as responsible for the follow-up.

When the end-user did not correctly mark the issue type (coverage, quality, or timeliness), the EWG was not able to strictly follow the decision tree outlined in the guidance. For example, in some cases, the end-user classified an issue as “timeliness,” indicating a delay in data submission, while the data had not been reported at all. In such situations, the issue should have been marked as “coverage”.

The EWG 25-16 emphasizes the need to follow the DTMT Guidelines when reporting DTi.

In cases when the MS failed to collect or transmit data and had not followed up on its commitment to re-upload data, the issues were assed as UNSATISFACTORY or UNSATISFACTORY- TO BE REVISED. IOTC had 1, ICES 1, Mediterranean and Black Sea data call 7 DTi and FDI 8 DTi that were assessed as UNSATISFACTORY. For the DT issues assessed as UNSATISFACTORY- TO BE REVISED, the follow up responsible was indicated as MS in all cases.

The information provided in the columns *“End User check”* and *“End User comment”* was very helpful for the assessment of the DTi. When the relevant working group that initially raised the issue was able to verify whether the MS had resubmitted the revised data, it was much easier for the EWG to assess the overall outcome. Whenever possible, the groups should therefore check and report if the expected data have indeed been submitted by the MS, as this ultimately supports the main objective of all checks and DTi – ensuring the highest possible quality of data in the respective reporting.

It would be useful if the end-user used a standardized answer in the column “End User check,” such as: “*The data was successfully resubmitted in the database and the issue could be closed*.” By stating this, the end-user confirms that they have verified the information in the database and that no further action is required from the MS. This approach would ensure consistency in reporting and facilitate the assessment of the overall outcome of the DTi.

Table 3.1 1 Assessment of the DT Issues from the data calls 2024, evaluated by EWG 25-16.

Data Call 2024	STECF EWG DTi Assessment	Number
IOTC	FOLLOW-UP NEEDED	10
	UNSATISFACTORY	1
Total		**11**
ICES	FOLLOW-UP NEEDED	7
	SATISFACTORY	9
	UNSATISFACTORY	1
	UNSATISFACTORY – TO BE REVISED	2
Total		**19**
FDI	FOLLOW-UP NEEDED	8
	SATISFACTORY	13
	UNSATISFACTORY	8
	UNSATISFACTORY – TO BE REVISED	5
Total		**34**
Aquaculture	UNSATISFACTORY – TO BE REVISED	5
Total		**5**
Med and BS	SATISFACTORY	1
	UNSATISFACTORY	7
	UNSATISFACTORY – TO BE REVISED	4
Total		**12**

Source: Own elaborations

3.1 Link between DTi and WP

The EWG checked the list of DTi with a focus on the relevance for the current WP in relation. Overall, the EWG found no DTi which referred to gaps in WPs which have been used as explanation for failure in data transmission.

4. FINALISE THE STECF INPUT TO THE GUIDELINES AND TEMPLATES

This section reports on the EWG discussions and suggestions for improvement of the:

1. Annual Report assessment grid and guidance

2. Work Plan and Annual Report submission template and guidelines for Member States

3. Evaluation of Data Transmission issues and guidance for the Data Transmission Monitoring Tool (DTMT)

The EWG has used various background documents, working files and recommendations from previous DCF-related EWG meetings, the EWG on Fisheries-Dependent Information (FDI) and from the Regional Coordination Group (RCG) on the North Atlantic, North Sea and Eastern Arctic (NANSEA)/Baltic.

4.1 Annual Report assessment grid and guidance

During 2025, DG MARE received several proposals to improve guidelines and templates used in the WP/AR reporting cycle. EWG 25-16 experts were requested to revise these proposals and finalize to the extent possible the STECF input for further consideration by the Commission. ToR 3 was addressed in a hybrid form, with five experts attending the meeting in-person in Oostende, Belgium. The hybrid set-up was a challenge for the EWG, as it demanded quite some effort to handle all the different topics the experts needed to address under this ToR, as fundamental discussions and a broad range of expertise was needed. For the future, EWGs handling fundamental aspects of the DCF, WP, AR and related topics, should preferably be set up fully in-person.

The EWG 25-16 received diverse recommendations, from EWG 25-08, from the EWG on FDI and from the RCG NANSEA/Baltic. To keep track of the recommendations received, their implementation and the follow-up in a transparent way, the EWG decided to develop an overview table (Electronic Annex 05). As basis for this table, the Excel file created by EWG 25-08 was used and further developed by adding extra columns to indicate the source of the recommendation (e.g. DCF EWGs, FDI, RCG, other), whom is it addressed to, actions to be taken, follow-up, etc.. Recommendations are inventoried in the table as a ‘living document’ kept up to date by EWGs when new recommendations are received or when an ongoing EWG sent out recommendations to a receiver (e.g. RCG, FDI, MS etc.).

The EWG 25-16 reviewed the current guidance and compiled one AR assessment grid master template (Electronic Annex 03), accompanied by a short background document (Electronic Annex 04). The approach was to develop a single Excel table, where guidance and examples for the experts evaluating the AR is given in detail (by evaluation question). Where the EWG deemed it necessary to elaborate the assessment with examples, these are also included in the table. During the EWG, the finalised assessment grid was tested by several experts using examples from the 2024 Annual Reports, who provided comments for further updates and ultimately gave positive feedback on the proposed changes. For the next EWG on AR evaluation (in June 2026), the master template should be used as basis for creating individual MS sheets in the AR assessment workbook (Electronic Annex 03).

4.1.1 RCG NANSEA/Baltic recommendation on AR ‘quality’ Annexes 1.1 and 1.2

The EWG 25-16 was requested to check an RCG NANSEA/Baltic recommendation against the current ‘quality’ Annex 1.1 template and suggest best wording (clear and simple) and location of the new questions.

The RCG NANSEA/Baltic recommended (rec. 02) to add to the NWP/RWP/AR Annex 1.1 the following questions/information: '*Was there an effort to optimize the sampling design and sampling protocols?*' and '*Documentation of efforts to optimize the sampling design and sampling protocols*'.

The EWG agrees on the need for optimization and harmonization on regional level but not to put it in the MS national WP/AR Annexes. The decision on optimization and harmonization of sampling design should be taken on regional level. The RCG NANSEA is requested to liaise with the ISSG RWP (under the RCG NANSEA/Baltic) to address this further and to provide a revised Annex 1.1 (as a document with track changes).

4.1.2 Roadmap for the assessment of Annexes 1.1 and 1.2

After discussing the options for progressing on the assessment of the ‘quality annexes’ 1.1 and 1.2, the EWG 25-16 recommends setting up ad-hoc contracts during spring 2026 in order to further develop the guidelines for the evaluation of the annexes.

The objective of the ad-hoc contracts is two-fold:

(1) to take the Annexes 1.1 and 1.2 of the already existing RWP 2025-2027 as basis for developing guidelines for the evaluation of these annexes, and

(2) to develop the guidelines for assessing the RWP 2028-2030, including the Annexes 1.1 and 1.2 in the new NWP and RWP 2028-2030.

To ensure a coherent and fit-for-purpose evaluation approach for Annexes 1.1 and 1.2, structured consultation with the RCGs is essential. Each RCG should identify the relevant reference methodologies for its region and end-users, where such methodologies exist and have been jointly agreed at regional level. These may include established methodological protocols (e.g. the DCRF Handbook, MEDITS and MEDIAS survey protocols), agreed minimum coverage levels for sensitive species, regionally coordinated optimisation of sampling effort, or other RCG recommendations relevant for the biological, transversal and economic components of data collection.

Consultation with RCGs should be complemented, where appropriate, by inputs from dedicated ISSG RWPs, ISSG End-users, or annual technical coordination groups. These mechanisms can act as the communication channels for identifying the expectations of end-users and ensuring that the evaluation criteria for Annexes 1.1 and 1.2 adequately reflect the needs of scientific working groups that rely on high-quality data for generating robust scientific advice. For specific or highly technical issues, direct engagement with end-users should also be foreseen to clarify methodological expectations or data requirements.

EWG 25-16 considers it useful to allocate dedicated time to the formulation of guidelines for the assessment of Annexes 1.1 and 1.2 of the RWP/NWP. Since the EWG on WP amendments in October 2026 will most probably only have to evaluate a few MS WP amendments for 2027, time could be allocated on that EWG for finishing the guidelines, taking into account the results of the abovementioned ad-hoc contracts and end-user feedback.

The ad-hoc contract should also include a “pilot assessment” of selected RWP/NWP entries in the platform environment to test the clarity, feasibility and consistency of the new guidelines.

EWG 25-16 emphasises the need for a clear, harmonised, and operational set of evaluation criteria, including minimum quality thresholds, expectations for sampling design justification, cross-checks with submitted coverage tables, and alignment with RCG recommendations reflecting main end-user needs, in order to support both evaluators and the MS, and to ensure consistent assessment across regions.

4.1.3 EWG 25-10 (FDI) recommendation on AR template section 2.5 - Refusal rates

Within the DCF, refusal rates were formally introduced in 2016 through Decision (EU) 2016/1701, as part of the quality assurance framework for biological data. This responded to a long-standing need identified by sampling expert groups, aiming to prevent repeated selection of the same PSUs within a given sampling frame. Later, this was endorsed by the STECF EWG on Quality Assurance for DCF data (STECF 17-11), using refusals as a tool for evaluating potential sampling bias. In the current regulation (Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/39) the recording of refusals is considered as the quality assurance elements, where in Annual Reports (ARs) deemed to be indicated whether refusal rates recorded and provided with the corresponding documentation by MS when this quality criteria is available or indicate the year when it will be available.

For FDI, refusal rates were introduced in 2018 as a quality indicator for assessing the reliability and coverage of discard estimates in fisheries data. Following the SGPIDS methodology (ICES 2012, 2013), the refusal rate measures the proportion of skippers who declined observer participation after being contacted. It reflects industry cooperation and potential bias in data collection; higher refusal rates indicate reduced data reliability.

However, accurate calculation of refusal rates depends on a probability-based vessel selection system. Without it, bias and variance cannot be properly estimated. Many Member States face challenges reporting refusal rates consistently due to non-probability sampling designs.

Given these difficulties, EWG 25-05 and STECF PLEN 25-02 recommended to discontinue Table B from future FDI data calls, while recognizing the continued value of refusal rates. They recommended including this information rather in ARs than in WPs for understanding of sampling quality. EWG 25-10 highlighted that coordination between FDI and AR expert groups is required to determine how best to integrate currently available data into AR.

The EWG 25-10 noted that while a few MS have adopted probability-based sampling designs and calculate refusal rates according to established standards (e.g. ICES, 2013), the majority rely on non-probability-based approaches, which do not support valid statistical estimation of refusal rates. MS are rarely used refusal rates as a tool for national quality assurance or planning, and methodological transparency remains limited.

The EWG 25-16 observed that some MS (e.g. Poland) already included refusal rate details in their AR as free text in Section 2.5 to justify lower-than-planned sampling achievements. Countries such as France adopted a relatively large number of sampling frames. In such cases, reporting the refusal rates would require including an extensive list of quality indicators in the text box. Therefore, it would be more practical to integrate this information into Table 2.5 instead of Textbox 2.5.

The EWG 25-16 discussed the potential challenges associated with incorporating refusal rates into the AR:

- Different definitions of PSU and refusal rate methodologies might lead to non-comparable results across MS.
- Refusal rates may frequently be derived from non–probability-based sampling designs, thereby reduce their statistical reliability and interpretability.
- Member States employing probability-based vessel selection methods apply a consistent calculation methodology.

The EWG noted that incorporating refusal rates into the AR would add value for assessing cases of unachieved sampling.

During EWG 25-16, two options were considered for the inclusion of refusal rates in the Annual Report:

- Member States include the refusal rate as free text in Text Box 2.5, with corresponding references in the 'AR comments' column of Table 2.5, to explain the underlying causes of deviations from planned sampling achievements.
- Member States include the refusal rate in 'AR comments' column of Table 2.5, presenting the calculated value, and may use Text Box 2.5 to provide additional explanation, where necessary.

As the modification of Table 2.5 to add an additional column for refusal rate reporting was judged too cumbersome at this stage, EWG 25-16 agreed that, in cases where a large number of sampling frames are used, MS may report refusal rates in the 'AR comments' column to explain insufficient sampling coverage.

Such reporting would be appreciated in all cases, as it helps to understand whether refusals are affecting the sampling. Additionally, it should be particularly relevant in situations where Member States use refusals as a justification for not achieving the planned sampling targets.

For consistent application of the same methodology for probability-based sampling, EWG 25-16 guide MS to follow the SGPIDS methodology as described in the ICES SGPIDS Report 2012, Chapter 2.4: Quality Indicator 2 "Non-response and Refusal Rates" (ICES, 2012).

Currently, the implementation of refusal rate reporting is indicated by Member States in Annex 1.1 at the Sampling Scheme Identifier level. As only a limited number of Member States have adopted probability-based sampling designs, EWG supports the optional reporting of detailed refusal rate information in Table 2.5 and Text Box 2.5.

EWG 25-16 sees another potential use of refusal rates by Working Groups that use RDBES and RDBFIS. This could provide additional value for assessments. The EWG 25-16 recommends the WGRDBESGOV and RDBFIS to consider submitting refusal rates to RDBES (and RDBFIS), once the RDBES and RDBFIS are fully operational.

4.2 Work Plan and Annual Report submission template and guidelines for Member States

The EWG 24-15 and 25-08 suggested some changes in the WP/AR template guidelines for MS to fill in when drafting their WP/AR. These changes have not been discussed in STECF plenaries and are not incorporated yet in the official online guidelines. EWG 25-16 has revised the proposals and incorporated all relevant changes which could further improve the clarity of the guidelines for the MS to draft and/or fill in their WP/AR. The EWG checked the guidelines also with the consistency of the revised AR assessment grid and the guidance in there. This resulted in a revised and complete set of guidelines for MS to fill in their WP and AR (electronic annex 6) and should be used by DG MARE to update the interactive guidelines.

4.2.1 EWG Proposal for updated formulas for the AR section of Table 2.2

The existing formulas used in the AR section of Table 2.2 for the validation of MS reported data required a correction to address a gap in the checks applied to cases where the number of individuals measured for opportunistic samples was reported as zero. The EWG 25-16 proposed updates to the formulas applied in columns R and S of Table 2.2.

For column R, the proposed formula is:

=IF(AND(M4="N/A",P4="N/A"),"N/A",IF(AND(M4="N/A",P4=0),"0",IF(M4<>"N/A",P4/M4,"")))

The logic of the formula begins by checking whether both columns ‘Number of individuals to sample’ and ‘Achieved number of individuals measured’ contain the text “N/A.” If this condition is met, the formula returns ‘N/A’, indicating that data is not available for calculation. If not, the formula evaluates the second condition, which checks whether ‘Number of individuals to sample’ is ‘N/A’ and ‘Achieved number of individuals measured’ equals zero. When both these conditions are true, the formula returns ‘0’. If neither of the first two conditions applies, the formula proceeds to the third condition. If ‘Number of individuals to sample’ contains a valid numeric value, the formula performs the division ‘Achieved number of individuals measured’ / ‘Number of individuals to sample’ to calculate the ratio. If the Number of individuals to sample is “N/A” and the Achieved number of individuals measured is a numeric value greater than 0, the formula returns an empty string, leaving the cell blank.

For column S, the proposed formula is:

=IF(R4="","",IF(R4="N/A","N/A",IF(OR(R4<0.9,R4>1.5),"X","")))

The logic begins by checking whether ‘Achieved % of individuals measured’ is empty. If the cell is blank, the formula also returns a blank value. If ‘Achieved % of individuals measured’ is not empty, the next condition checks whether that column contains ‘N/A’. When this is true, the formula returns ‘N/A’. If ‘Achieved % of individuals measured’ contains a numeric value, then there is checking if ‘Achieved % of individuals measured’ is less than 0.9 or greater than 1.5. If either case is true, the formula returns “X” to indicate the requirement for comments on insufficient achievements by the MS. If the value is within the range, the cell is left blank.

Together, these proposed formulas enhance the robustness of the data validation process in Table 2.2. The approach ensures that deviations from expected values are immediately visible to MS and evaluators.

4.3 Improvement for the DTMT Guidance document

The EWG 25-16 looked at the 2025 DTMT ad-hoc contract input on improvements, which was provided as a background document under ToR 3 and agreed to propose the following changes into the DTMT Guidance document.

4.3.1 Modification of the definition of severity

The EWG 25-16 agrees with the ad-hoc contractors, suggesting improvements to the DTMT Guidance by revising the definitions of severity from:

‘Low’ not important impact on the conduct or output of the EWG.

‘Medium’ has influence on the conduct of the EWG or the results, such that time has been wasted, or the results are in error but not in a major way.

‘High’ should be chosen where the results of the EWG have been influenced in an important way, such as errors in the output or delays in the conduct of the meeting or the preparation of the report.

To:

‘**Low**’ implies no impact on addressing the ToRs by the EWG.

‘Medium’ has an influence on addressing the ToRs because time has been wasted in fixing the issue.

‘High’ should be assigned in very rare cases when the EWG was unable to address the ToRs in any way (high impact in addressing the ToR).

4.3.2 Addition of cases for the decision tree

The EWG 25-16 suggests including these cases in the updated decision tree of the DTMT guidelines. The main cases are listed below:

1) Issues that have been acknowledged by the MS, with a promise of correction and resubmission, but these corrections have not occurred or have only been partially completed.
2) The issues listed in the DTMT have been corrected and the data were resubmitted, but a new relevant issue was identified during the review of the dataset.

4.4 Suggestions to streamline the DTMT workflow

4.4.1 Process for reporting and evaluating issues in the DTMT (STECF EWG on DTi)

The JRC focal point should check and revise the issues listed for the DTMT after the closure of the EWG meeting. It has to be checked that the issues are clearly defined and reported correctly following the DTMT guidelines. The final list of issues will be added to the DTMT by JRC.

The EWG 25-16 emphasizes that it would be beneficial for the process if DG MARE informs the MS once the DTi are uploaded to the DTMT. This could be done through DG MARE sending an email to the National Correspondents of the MS for which DTi have been entered, allowing them sufficient time to react and provide their comments. Alternatively, the process could be automated so that, once a DTi is entered to the DTMT, the system automatically notifies the relevant national correspondent, similar to the notification e-mails generated by the IT Platform for WPs and ARs. The EWG suggests, however, that MS should consult DTMT on a regular basis for updates, and especially before the upcoming data calls/WP/AR evaluation periods.

During the STECF EWG DTi, access to the Med&BS data would be beneficial to check whether the data have been resubmitted. To ensure proper assessment, the datasets should be available during the meeting, and experts should be present to interpret the issues and

cross-check them against the MS actions. These experts must be familiar with the tools developed in different contexts (STECF, QUALITRAIN and RDBFIS) and be able to use them effectively for data cross-checking. According to the current DTMT cycle, the Med&BS data call issues from year N must be cross-checked in the year N+1 during the WP evaluation meeting, which is usually scheduled for the end of October/beginning of November (regardless of the severity of the issues).

4.4.2 Suggestion to improve the data quality process for the Med&BS

The suggestions below aim to improve data quality for all Med&BS countries.

1. A dedicated procedure should be established to check the quality of the Med&BS data.
    - A priority stock list could be provided to the dedicated STECF EWG by DG MARE linked to the management process. (This list should include all the stocks under MAPs (EU/STECF, GFCM), priority stocks in the assessment working groups (STECF and GFCM) and key stocks driving the fishery, even if they have not yet been assessed.
2. This exercise could be assigned to the ISSG Quality Group, as was done for several priority stocks indicated by MS in 2025. In this case, it should be noted that national experts currently review their own country's datasets within the ISSG Quality group.
3. It is suggested to establish several ad-hoc contracts to carry out the above-mentioned EWG exercise. In this case, it may also be necessary to plan a STECF mini-plenary or to add a Term of Reference to the STECF summer plenary if the exercise is completed in time. Nevertheless, seeking STECF endorsement might delay the process.

The suggestions below aim to improve the data quality for the stock assessments carried out by the EWG.

1. In this case, immediately after the Med&BS data call legal deadline, the official datasets stored in the JRC database should be made available to the ad-hoc experts. These experts will conduct thorough checks, using the tools developed in the STECF, QUALITRAIN, and RDBFIS frameworks, on the stocks to be assessed in September.
2. Another proposal is to assign this exercise (i.e. checking the WestMed MAP stocks and/or other stocks) to the ISSG Quality group, as was done this year for several priority stocks identified by MS. In this case, the cross-checks would be carried out by a broader group of experts and reviewed by a dedicated team, however it would not be possible to include additional stocks/country combinations.

5. PROVIDE INPUT ON THE DCF IT PLATFORM

The IT platform has been fully utilised by the ÈWG for the submission and assessment of the WP updates 2026-2027 (*cf.* section 2 on ToR 1).

Mainly during the compilation of the revised AR assessment grid (*cf.* section 4.1 on ToR 3), however, the EWG collated a list of AR checks that should be added to the IT platform, see Table 5.1.

Table 5.1 1 AR checks to be added to the IT platform

#	**Check to be added**	**What the platform should validate**	**Current validation rules**
1	Reference year validation	• Check that the AR reference year in Tables 3.1/5.1/5.2/6.1/7.1 is consistent with the reference year specified in Table 1.1. for each of the tables • In the format of the WP/AR, a dropdown list titled "WP table" should be added to Table 1.1 to ensure that all MS reports are filled out consistently.	**Noted as to do** for future validation improvements, although not always clear match between data sets in 1.1 and variables in 5.2/6.1/7.1. What if some variables collected for another reference year?
2	Sampling scheme logic	In Tables 3.1/5.2/6.1/7.1 verify that Census = total population; all other schemes have planned/updated sample number < total population.	Census = 100% **coverage check implemented**: rules 313, 368, 410; for other schemes response number check: rules 310, 408; missing for **aquaculture, to be added**
3	Population totals 5.1 vs 5.2	Validate consistency of population totals across Tables 5.1 and 5.2 (including at activity and supra region level).	The segment code must match identically for an automatic check. Name consistency rule: 341. **Number consistency check rule noted as to-do**
4	Segment/cluster naming consistency	Validate that segment names, cluster names, supra-region labels, and activity-level labels match between Tables 5.1 and 5.2. (at WP and AR level)	**Noted as to do** for consistently named segments (cascade validation)
5	Validation of newly added AR rows	In Tables 1.1/1.2/1.3/2.1/2.2/2.5/3.1/5.1/5.2/6.1/7.1 check that new (grey) AR rows comply with WP and AR rules, contain mandatory fields, and use “NA” only where applicable.	New AR rows are **checked** with WP/AR rules
6	Updated planned sample rate and number	In Table 5.2 verify consistency: updated rate, updated planned sample number = population × updated rate, and the updated/planned rate ratio.	The updated sample number is calculated with a formula in the template, so **already done**.
7	Response deviations	In Tables 3.1/5.2/6.1/7.1, check that rows with response rates below 50% have an AR comment.	**Implemented in formulas**, so no need for validation rules, only guidelines for templates. Please **propose text based on current guidelines**.

8	Completion of AR subsections in Text Box 3.1	Check that “Deviations from the work plan” and “Actions to avoid deviations” are completed when complementary data collection is not implemented.	Checks on text **not possible** in the platform, but other tools available.
9	Completion of AR subsections in Text Box 5/6/7	Check that “Deviations from the work plan” and “Actions to avoid deviations” are completed.	Checks on text **not possible** in the platform, but other tools available.

Source: Own elaborations

6. REFERENCES

ICES. 2012. Report of the Study Group on Practical Implementation on Discard Sam-pling Plans, 18–22 June 2012, ICES HQ, Copenhagen, Denmark. ICES CM 2012/ACOM:51. 87 pp.

ICES. 2013. Report of the Study Group on Practical Implementation of Discard Sam-pling Plans (SGPIDS), 24 June – 28 June 2013, Lysekil, Sweden. ICES CM 2013/ACOM:56. 142pp.

7. CONTACT DETAILS OF EWG-25-16 PARTICIPANTS

[1] - Information on EWG participant's affiliations is displayed for information only. In any case, Members of the STECF, invited experts, and JRC experts shall act independently. In the context of the STECF work, the committee members and other experts do not represent the institutions/bodies they are affiliated to in their daily jobs.

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List of Annexes

Electronic annexes are published on:

https://stecf.ec.europa.eu/document/70cf2fd2-3feb-4e6a-903e-9df8eda04fd4

List of electronic annexes documents:

EWG-25-16 – Annex 01 – Declarations of interests

EWG-25-16 – Annex 02 – Work Plan assessment by Member State (Excel file)

EWG-25-16 – Annex 03 – Revised Annual Report assessment grid (Excel file)

EWG-25-16 – Annex 04 – Revised Annual Report assessment guidance (Word file)

EWG-25-16 – Annex 05 – Recommendations for amendments of guidance and templates, as well as changes/additions suggested for the IT platform (Excel file)

EWG-25-16 – Annex 06 – Revised Work Plan and Annual Report submission guidance (Word file)

List of Background Documents

Background documents are published on:

https://stecf.ec.europa.eu/document/70cf2fd2-3feb-4e6a-903e-9df8eda04fd4

List of background documents:

EWG-25-16– Doc 1 - Declarations of invited and JRC experts (see also the section of this report ‘Contact details of EWG-25-16 participants’)

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