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Assessment of the situation relating to the sub-TAC for common sole in Iberian waters

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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. The Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries its report on the Assessment of the situation relating to the sub-TAC for common sole in Iberian waters by written procedure in Ocotber 2026.

(STECF-OWP-26-01) Assessment of the situation relating to the sub-TAC for common sole in Iberian waters

Ocober 2026

Background provided by the Commission

The Council sets fishing opportunities for sole species (common sole, Senegalese sole and sand sole) in Iberian waters (SOO/8CDE34) on a biannual basis. This TAC includes a sub-TAC for common sole (SOL/8CDE34), which is jointly shared between Portugal and Spain. Iberian common sole is a target species under the Western Waters multiannual plan (WW MAP, link).

The current TAC is set in Council Regulation (EU) 2026/249 (link). This year, the TAC for Iberian common sole was exhausted, and the fishery was consequently closed on 19 June 2026. In August, Portugal provided information highlighting that Iberian common sole is caught in mixed fisheries and the resulting choke effect caused by the closure.

In August, DG MARE commissioned an ad hoc contract to assess whether common sole is caught in mixed fisheries and potential choke situations. The contract was also tasked to assess the "total effect" on the fisheries and the economic impact of setting the TAC for Iberian common sole for 2026 and 2027 under different scenarios.

Request to the STECF

STECF is requested to review the ad hoc report and advise the Commission on the level of the sub-TAC for common sole in Iberian waters (SOO/8CDE34):

a) for 2026 that is strictly needed by the fleets engaged in mixed fisheries in that area with catches of common sole to resume as of 30 September or as of 31 October and to then avoid their premature closure, assuming recent effort; and

b) for 2027 that is strictly needed by the fleets engage in mixed fisheries in that area with catches of common sole to avoid their premature closure, assuming recent effort.

In addition, STECF is requested to assess the socio-economic impacts of premature closures, under the scenarios (i) and (ii) described in the ad hoc report; further details are provided in its Section 2.

Summary of the background information provided to STECF

STECF was provided with the final report produced under ad hoc contract 2695, together with the independent review undertaken under ad hoc contract 2698. The main issues

identified during the review had already been addressed in the final version of the report. The following three electronic annexes accompanied the final report:

Annex 1. Data alignment between the FDI and the AER data.

Annex 2. Additional results on fleet-level economic trends additional to those included in the main report.

Annex 3. The code used to reproduce the analyses.

The ad hoc contract was commissioned to address four specific tasks:

- Description of the fishery targeting common sole in Iberian waters, with particular emphasis on the mixed-fishery context.
- Assessment of the impact of four distinct scenarios for 2026 and 2027, each representing a different level of TAC.
- Projection of the outcomes of these scenarios in terms of closure dates, total allowable catches (TAC) and associated economic impacts, benchmarked against a baseline scenario.
- Evaluation of the uncertainty surrounding these projections.

Background documentation is available on: https://stecf.ec.europa.eu/document/36ac440f-0cdb-4b17-934e-6f2677107759

1. Description of the stock management and exploitation

1.1 Management of the stock

Table 1. Current TACs for sole spp. and common sole in Iberian waters.

'Table 23

Species:	Sole *Solea* spp. and *Pegusa lascaris*	Zone:	8c, 8d, 8e, 9 and 10; Union waters of CECAF 34.1.1 (SOO/8CDE34)
Year	**Each 2026 and 2027**		
Spain	185	Precautionary TAC	
Portugal	307		
Union	492 (1)		
TAC	492 (1)		

(1) Within the limits of these quotas, no more than the following quantity of common sole (*Solea solea*) shall be taken (SOL/8CDE34): 190'

Source: Council Regulation 026/786.

The ad hoc contract highlights several key points concerning the management of common sole that are critical for the present request.

Common sole is managed within a combined total allowable catch (TAC) covering three sole species, common sole (*Solea solea*), sand sole (*Pegusa lascaris*) and Senegalese sole (*Solea senegalensis*), under TAC SOO/8CDE34, covering ICES areas 8c, 8d, 8e, 9, 10 and the Union waters of CECAF 34.1.1 (Table 1).

ICES noted that managing several sole species under a combined TAC does not ensure effective control of the exploitation rate of each individual species and may create a risk of overexploitation of one or more component stocks (ICES 2025a). However, here, in addition to this combined TAC, a specific sub-TAC (TAC SOL/8CDE34) is allocated exclusively to common sole. Unlike the combined TAC, the Fishing Opportunities Regulation does not prescribe how TAC SOL/8CDE34 is to be split among Member States.

The latest ICES advice recommends a TAC of 190 tonnes for both 2026 and 2027 under the maximum sustainable yield (MSY) approach (ICES 2025a). Following this recommendation, TAC SOL/8CDE34 (the common-sole TAC) was set at 190 tonnes for 2026 and 2027 in Council Regulation 026/786 (Table 1).

The ad hoc contract highlights that a major source of uncertainty in the stock assessment and management of common sole stems from the difficulty of distinguishing it from the other sole species. This was also explicitly acknowledged by ICES (2025b). In practice, catches of other sole species may be recorded as common sole, leading to an over-estimation of official common-sole landings. To address this, ICES corrects the raw landing data to estimate actual landings of common sole by using biological sampling (ICES 2025b). The ad hoc contract also applied a similar procedure to correct the FDI dataset.

This misidentification affects not only the scientific assessment but also the implementation of TACs. Because reported common sole landings erroneously contain a share of other species, TAC SOL/8CDE34 can be reached artificially early. This may have occurred in 2026. Consequently, the Commission asked for an evaluation of a scenario that assumes the **actual** catches of common sole amounted to only **165 tonnes** by the end of June 2026, the date on which the TAC was declared exceeded, while the official TAC was **190 tonnes**, reflecting the inclusion of other sole species in the reported figures.

1.2 Status of the stock

The *sol.27.8c9a* stock is assessed by ICES as a Category 3 stock using a length-based fishing-pressure indicator and a combined biomass index derived from the Spanish scientific survey and Portuguese commercial LPUE (ICES 2025b). Fishing pressure indicator has remained broadly stable since the early 2010s, at or slightly below the F_{MSY} proxy. The biomass index showed an overall declining trend from 2015 to 2021, followed by interannual fluctuations over 2022–2024. The stock is currently assessed as being below $I_{trigger}$ (Figure 1).

This downward trend in biomass led ICES to recommend a reduction in catch advice for 2026 and 2027.

Figure 1. ICES estimates of catch, fishing pressure and biomass index of the stock of common sole in Iberian Waters sol.27.8c9a.

Source: ICES 2025a.

1.3 Description of fisheries catching common sole

As suggested in the Commission's request, the ad hoc contract used the Fisheries Dependent Information (FDI) database and the Annual Economic Report (AER) to describe the fisheries and to assess the importance of common sole:

- **FDI data (2021-2024):** Landings, fishing effort and fleet-capacity records were extracted. Because of species-classification errors, the contract retrieved records for all sole species (the three sole species and sole identified to genus) and compared the summed annual landings of those species with the common sole landings estimated by ICES. The ratio of these two values provided a correction factor that was applied by the contractor to the FDI data. According to ICES, sole discards are negligible (<1%, ICES 2025b), therefore landings were treated as equivalent to total catch.
- **AER data (2021-2023):** The database was used to compute the economic indicators required by the terms of reference, namely revenue (REV), gross profit (GP), gross value added (GVA) and net profit (NP).

The two datasets were merged according to the methodology described by Bitetto et al. (2022).

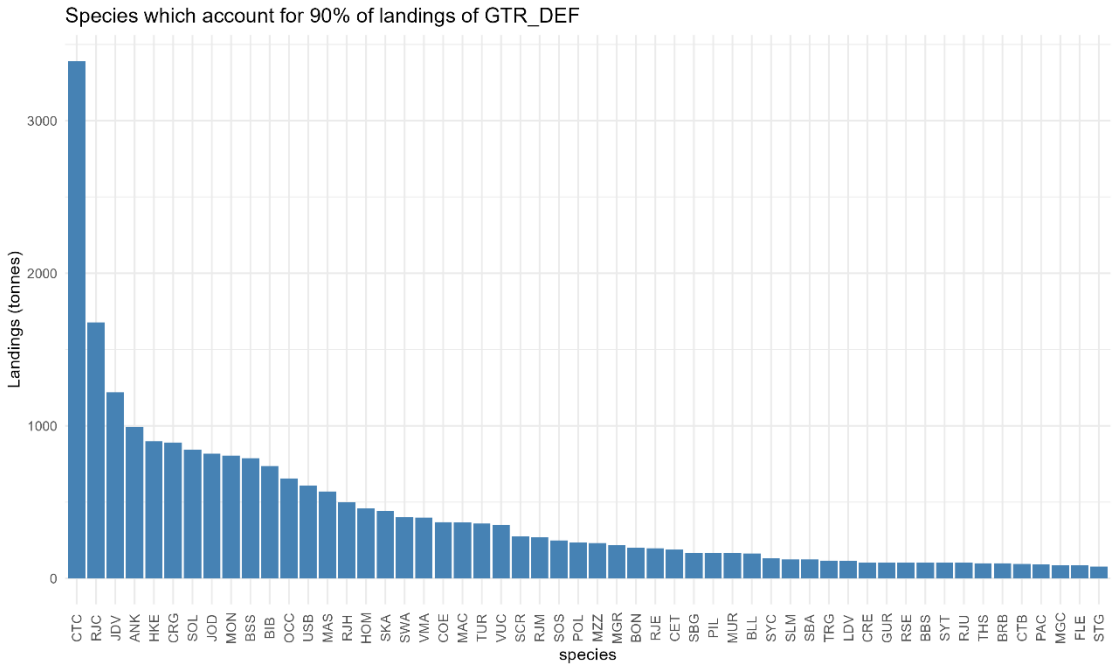
The FDI data show that common sole (SOL), together with *Solea senegalensis* and *Pegusa lascaris*, are taken by the demersal mixed-fishery that is dominated by Spain and Portugal (France contributes only a marginal share). Two main métiers capture these species:

- trammel nets (GTR - **Figure**), that harvest sole with *Sepia officinalis (CTC), Raja clavata (RJC), Zeidae (JDV), Lophiidae (ANK), Merluccius merluccius (HKE), Carcinus maenas (CRG), Zeus faber (JOD), Lophius* spp. (MON), *Dicentrarchus labrax (BSS)*; and

- set nets (GTN - **Figure**): that harvest sole with *Sepia officinalis (CTC), Octopus vulgaris (OCC), Scomber colias (VMA), Conger conger (COE), Dicentrarchus labrax (BSS), Trisopterus luscus (BIB), Raja clavata (RJC), Diplodus sargus (SWA), Lepidorhombus* spp (MGR).

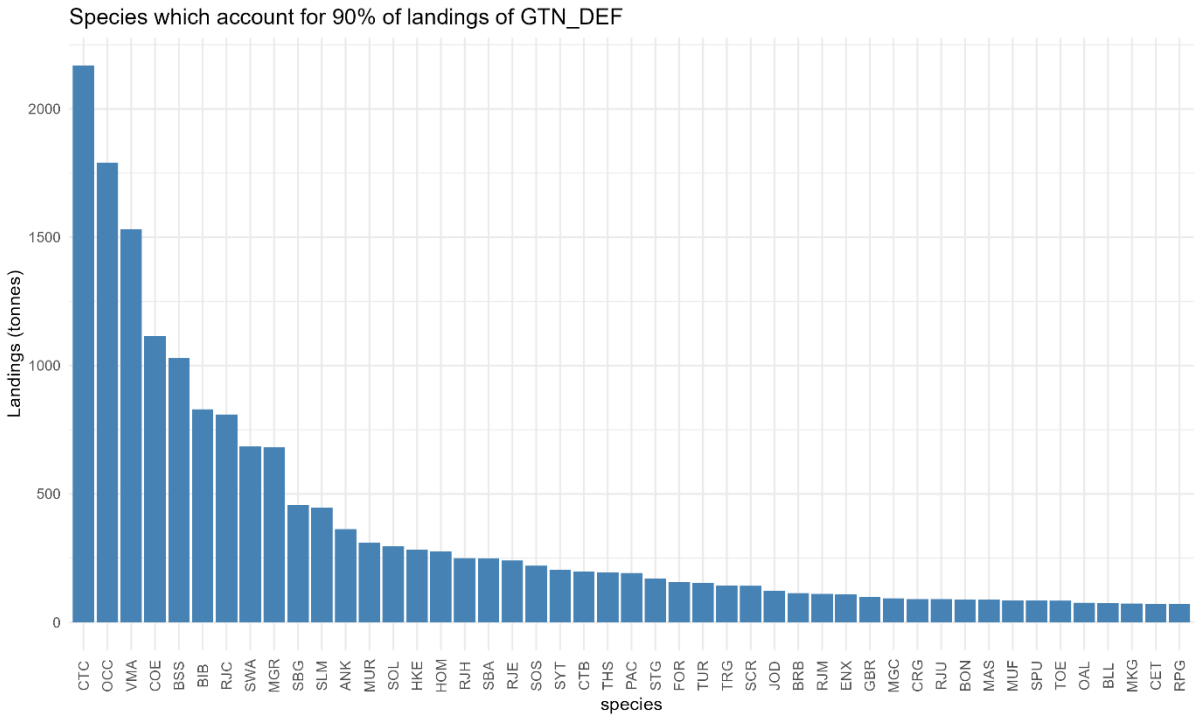
Both métiers harvest a wide variety of species, and the relative dominance of each species varies with vessel size. Landings of common sole display a clear seasonal pattern, with the highest volumes in Q1, followed by Q2, Q4 and finally Q3.

Figure 2. Summary of total landings by species for demersal targeting trammel net fisheries (GTR_DEF) in Iberian waters (2021-2024).



Source: ad hoc contract based on FDI data.

Figure 3. Summary of total landings by species for demersal targeting set net fisheries (GTN_DEF) in Iberian waters (2021-2024).



Source: ad hoc contract based on FDI data.

2. Simulations of the scenarios and results of projection

2.1 Description of the scenarios

The ad-hoc contract was asked to evaluate four possible common sole catch-limit scenarios:

- scenario 1 (baseline): Catch limit set at 165 tonnes (i.e., below current TAC). The 165 tonnes baseline is an estimate provided by DG MARE of common-sole landings up to the end of June 2026. It was calculated by applying a correction factor of 0.71 to the 231 tonnes reported under the Control Regulation. This factor represents the average ratio between ICES estimates of common-sole landings and reported catches for 2022–2024.
- scenario 2: Catch limit set at 190 tonnes (i.e., equal to the current TAC level).
- scenario 3: Catch limit set at 270 tonnes (i.e., above the current TAC level and the ICES advice) which corresponds to the landings in 2025.
- scenario 4: Catch limit set to a level that would allow reopening the fishery for Q4, i.e. a catch-limit that would allow the catch of 165 tonnes, plus extra-catches required for the sole fishery to operate in Q4.

While the three first scenarios specify the TAC level, scenario 4 requires an extra assumption regarding the volume of common sole catches in Q4. The ad hoc contract considers two reopening scenarios: (i) scenario 4 reopening 1: adding the Q4 2024 landings to the baseline 165 tonnes, resulting in a TAC of 230 tonnes; and (ii) scenario 4 reopening 2: adding the

average Q4 landings over the 2022–2024 period to the baseline 165 tonnes, resulting in a catch limit of 223 tonnes.

To assess the potential impacts of the scenarios, the ad hoc contract assumed that the quarterly distribution of effort and landings in 2027 would follow the pattern observed in the 2024 FDI data, the most recent available FDI data. Under this assumption, the analysis estimated the quarter in which each catch limit would be reached.

2.2. Projected common sole catches associated with reopening in Q4 2026

Based on the seasonal patterns considered in the ad hoc analysis, common sole catches during Q4 amounted to 57 tonnes in 2022, 51 tonnes in 2023 and 65 tonnes in 2024, with an average of 58 tonnes over 2022–2024. Accordingly, approximately 51–65 tonnes of additional common-sole catches would be projected if catches of common sole continued throughout Q4 under the historical patterns examined. The figure refers only to the corrected common sole landings and does **not** upscale the TAC to compensate for any residual species-misreporting.

However, STECF notes that any positive additional allocation would formally allow catches of common sole to resume. The catch quantities estimated in the ad hoc report should therefore not be interpreted as the minimum allocation required to reopen the common sole fishery.

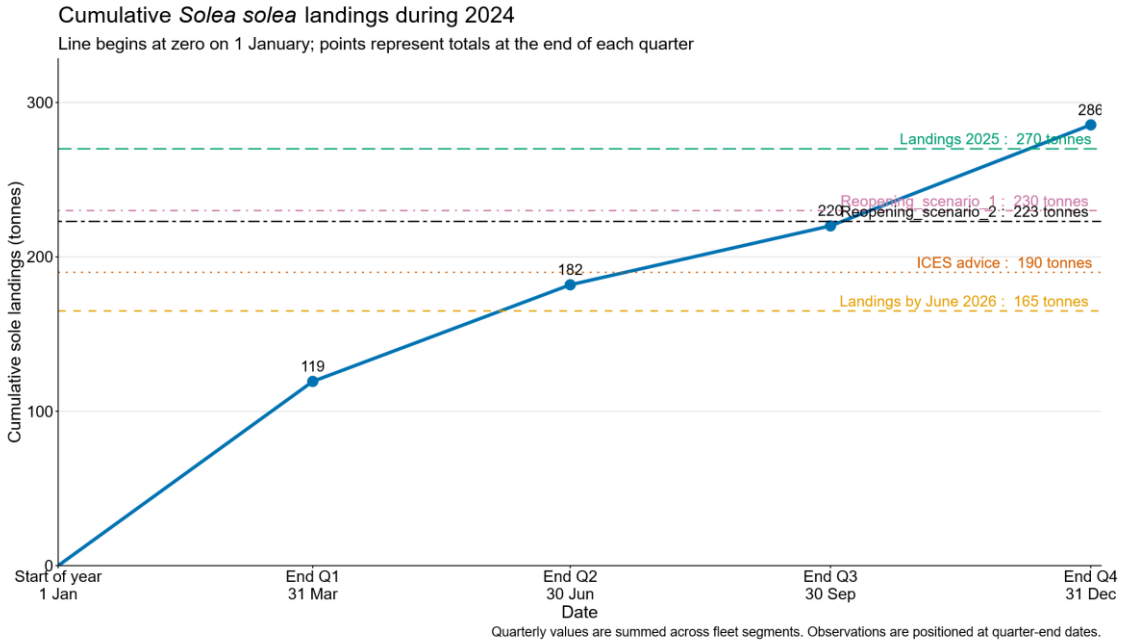
STECF further notes that as the available landings and effort data are aggregated by quarter, the analysis can estimate catches for Q4 as a whole but cannot provide robust separate estimates for reopening on 30 September and 31 October.

2.3 Projected timing of common sole sub-TAC exhaustion

According to the results of the ad hoc contract projections, in every scenario the quota would be exceeded before the end of 2027, but the timing differs across the scenarios:

- **Scenario 1 (baseline, 165 tonnes):** the fishery would have to close during **Q2**.
- **Scenario 2 (190 tonnes, ICES advice): fishery** closure during **Q3**.
- Scenario 3 (270 tonnes, landings in 2025): Fishery closure during Q4.
- **Scenario 4 – reopening 1 (TAC = 230 tonnes)** and reopening **2 (TAC = 223 tonnes):** the fishery would close during **Q4**.

Figure 4. Cumulative landings of common sole (blue line) in 2024 according to FDI data after correction for species assignments. The horizontal lines correspond to the different levels of TAC stipulated in the scenario.



Source: ad hoc contract based on FDI data.

STECF notes that these projections refer to exhaustion of the common sole sub-TAC and the consequent closure of common sole catches. They do not necessarily imply that all activity by the fleets operating in the mixed fisheries would cease.

STECF notes that as also stated in the ad hoc report, the projected timing of quota exhaustion should be interpreted with caution. The analysis assumes that the seasonal distribution of catches follows the 2024 pattern and that the allocation between Spain and Portugal remains unchanged. It cannot fully account for subsequent changes in stock availability, catchability, fleet behaviour, effort allocation, market conditions, quota management, quota transfers or opportunities to redirect activity towards other fisheries.

2.4 Economic impacts of the scenarios

The ad hoc contract compared the economic indicators produced by the different TAC scenarios for 2027 with the AER average values for 2021-2023 (Table 2). Still using 2024 as a reference year (and more specifically its quarterly landing patterns), the ad hoc contract assessed in which quarter the different TACs would be reached and assumed that the fleet would completely stop fishing.

To perform this comparison, the contract modified the “reopening scenario” used in the earlier analysis to prevent the fishery to close prematurely before the start of Q4. For the “reopening scenario 1”, TAC was set equal to the sum of landings recorded in Q1, Q2 and Q3

of 2024 (i.e. at 220 tonnes). For the “reopening scenario 2”, TAC was set equal to the average of the summed Q1-Q3 landings over the period 2022-2024 (i.e., at 236 tonnes).

Results of the ad hoc show how, under the assumption that the fleets are not able to change their behavior to avoid sole, the impacts become increasingly severe as the TAC becomes more restrictive. Despite the seasonal closures, total revenue was projected to be higher in every scenario than the 2021-2023 average.

The decline in sole related income is likely more than offset by larger landings of other species in 2024. However, two fleet segments (**ESP NAO PMP0010 NGI** and **PRT NAO DTS2440 NGI)** still experience a revenue drop in all scenarios (**Figure**).

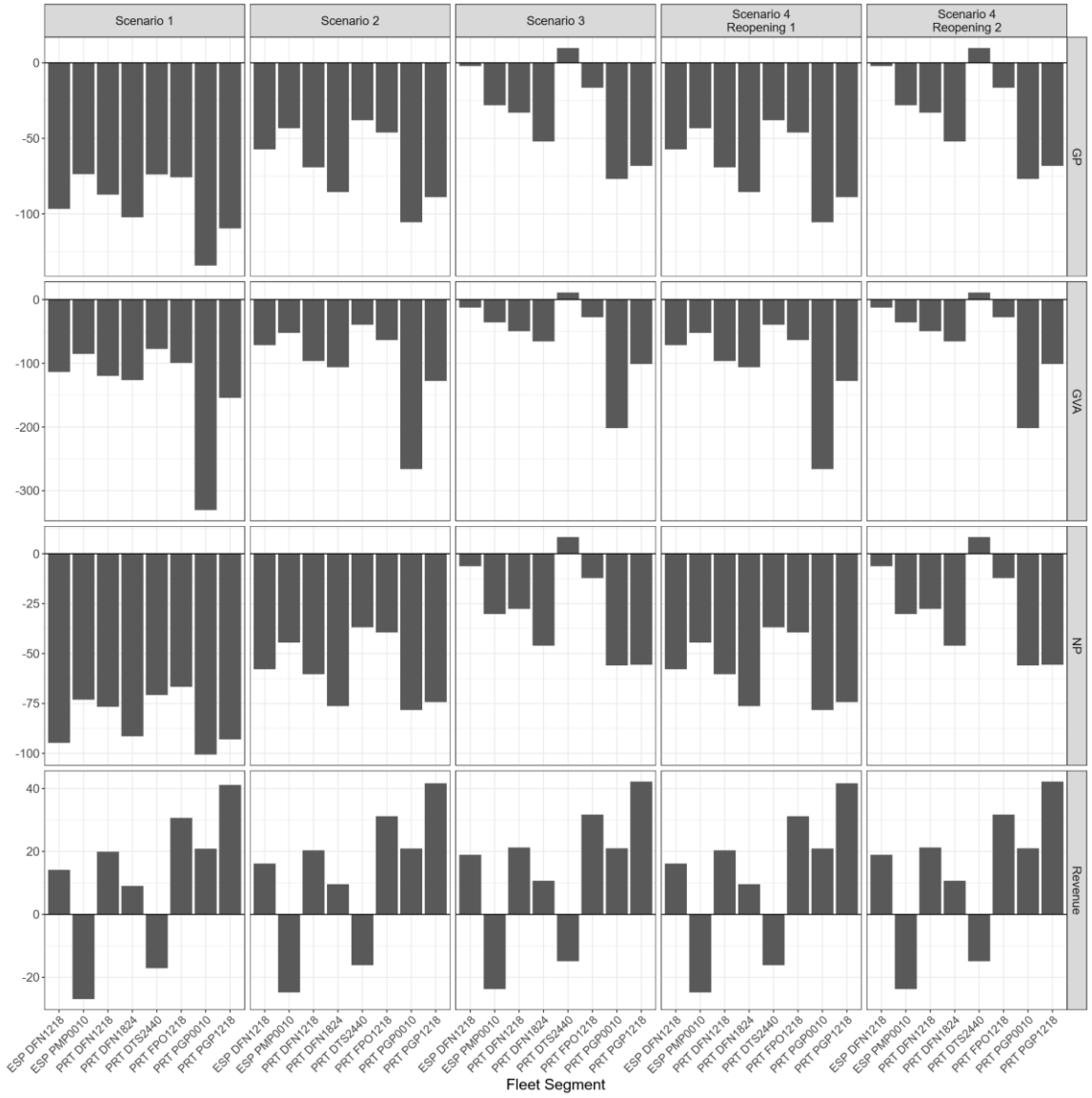
Table 2. Summary of variation of economic indicators for different scenarios compared to the 2021-2023 average.

Scenario	Revenue %	NP %	GVA %	GP %
ICES advice (190 t)	12.4	-58.5	-102.9	-66.8
Landings 2025 (270 t)	13.4	-28.2	-60.4	-33.4
Landings by June 2026 (165 t)	11.5	-83.4	-138.3	-94.2
Reopening scenario 1 (220 t)	12.4	-58.5	-102.9	-66.8
Reopening scenario 2 (236 t)	13.4	-28.2	-60.4	-33.4

Source: ad hoc contract based on FDI and AER data.

Despite the increase in revenue, all scenarios lead to a reduction in profitability (NP, GP and GVA – Table 2), although the magnitude varies by fleet and by scenario. The three fleets that seem to be the most exposed across the whole set of scenarios are **PRT NAO PGPG 1218 NGI**, **PRT NAO PGP0010 NGI** and **PRT NAO DFN1824 NGI** (**Figure**).

Figure 5. Changes (in percentage) in economic performance indicators by fleet segments (GP: gross profit, GVA: gross value added, NP: net profit) compared to the 2021-2023 average according to different scenarios.



Source: own elaboration, based on table build by the ad hoc contract using FDI and AER data.

The ad hoc contract assessed the economic indicators specified in its terms of reference, namely revenue, gross value added, gross profit and net profit. As no social indicators or corresponding data were included in the analysis, STECF is not in a position to assess the wider consequences for employment quality, households, livelihoods or fishing communities. This limitation reflects the scope of the information requested and available, rather than a failure by the contractor to address its terms of reference.

STECF comments

STECF considers that the ad hoc contract addresses the requested analytical tasks and provides a comprehensive assessment based on the information available. The report documents the principal data sources, assumptions and uncertainties and provides supporting material and code to reproduce the analysis.

STECF nevertheless notes that the results are constrained by the timeliness, resolution and consistency of the available data. The fisheries analysis relies principally on FDI data up to 2024, while the economic analysis uses AER information up to 2023. The results may therefore not fully reflect subsequent changes in stock availability, fleet behaviour, quota management, operating costs or market conditions.

STECF notes that common sole is caught within mixed demersal fisheries and that exhaustion of its species-specific sub-TAC may constrain the retention and landing of common sole and may affect fishing opportunities for co-caught species. This creates a potential choke risk. However, the available evidence does not demonstrate a choke event resulting in the cessation of all mixed-fishery activity (see PLEN 24-03 and PLEN 25-02).

STECF notes that uncertainty in the identification and reporting of common sole, Senegalese sole, sand sole and catches recorded as *Solea* spp. is a major limitation for both scientific assessment and quota management. This uncertainty affects estimates of common sole catches, quota uptake, fleet dependence and closure timing. This information should not be interpreted as a validated correction of the underlying fisheries records. Furthermore, the relationship between recorded and actual species composition may not remain constant when the common sole sub-TAC becomes restrictive.

For 2026, STECF notes that any positive additional allocation would formally allow catches of common sole to resume. Based on the seasonal landing patterns examined in the ad hoc analysis, approximately 51–65 tonnes of common sole catches would be expected over Q4 (58 tonnes corresponding to the 2022–2024 average and 65 tonnes under the 2024 pattern). These quantities represent projected Q4 catches associated with fishing patterns rather than the minimum allocation required to reopen the fishery.

The available quarterly data do not allow separate estimates for reopening on 30 September and 31 October. Nor can the projected catches be converted reliably into an equivalent level of reported sub-TAC uptake using a single correction factor, given the uncertainty in species identification and reporting.

However, STECF notes that any total common sole catches above 190 tonnes would exceed the current ICES catch advice under the MSY approach. Furthermore, increasing the catches above those advised by ICES may have a negative impact in the stock biomass potentially pushing it to lower levels and triggering even more restrictive catches in the future.

For 2027, the available analysis does not provide a sufficiently robust basis for identifying a minimum common sole sub-TAC that would prevent quota exhaustion before year-end. Assuming continuation of the 2024 seasonal fishing pattern, all catch limits explicitly evaluated in the ad hoc report, including the 270 tonnes scenario based on reported 2025 landings, result in projected exhaustion of the common sole sub-TAC before the end of 2027.

Under that specific fishing pattern, a level above 270 tonnes would be required to accommodate the projected annual common sole catches. However, the precise quantity was not estimated, and a level above 270 tonnes would exceed the current ICES catch advice of 190 tonnes. The 270 tonnes scenario should therefore be interpreted as an empirical scenario based on recent reported landings, rather than as a demonstrated minimum level or a recommended TAC.

STECF further notes that these projections depend on the assumption that the 2024 seasonal fishing pattern continues. Changes in stock availability, catchability, fleet behaviour, effort allocation, quota management or opportunities to redirect fishing activity could alter both the timing and quantity of projected catches.

STECF notes that the ad hoc contract compares the outcomes of early fishery closures with average AER values for 2021-2023. They rely on quarterly fisheries data and do not model changes in fleet behaviour following quota exhaustion. Most importantly, the analysis assumes that all activity attributed to an affected fleet segment ceases once the common sole sub-TAC is exhausted. This represents a conservative modelling assumption likely overestimating realised impacts if fleets can adapt their activity or redirect effort towards other fisheries.

STECF notes that as requested by the terms of reference, the ad hoc contract focused on the common sole sub-TAC and did not assess the potential consequences of alternative levels of the combined SOO/8CDE34 TAC. STECF notes that managing morphologically similar sole species under a combined TAC, together with a species-specific limit for common sole, requires reliable and timely information on species composition. Effective implementation would benefit from improved species identification, biological sampling and monitoring of catches by species, Member State, métier and period.

STECF conclusions

STECF concludes that the ad hoc contract addresses the requested analytical tasks and provides a comprehensive assessment of the potential fishery and economic implications of alternative common sole catch limits. The analysis documents the principal data sources, assumptions and uncertainties and includes supporting material and code to reproduce the calculations.

STECF concludes that Iberian common sole is caught within mixed demersal fisheries. Exhaustion of the common sole sub-TAC may restrict the retention and landing of common sole and may affect fishing opportunities for co-caught species, thereby creating a potential choke risk. However, the evidence does not demonstrate a complete choke event resulting in the cessation of all mixed-fishery activity.

STECF concludes that the projections provide indications of the potential effects of different catch-limit scenarios, although they are subject to several sources of uncertainty (e.g. recent changes in the stock or in the fishery, economical context, quota management or opportunities, species identification), as acknowledged in the ad hoc contract report.

STECF concludes that the frequent misidentification of the three sole species constitutes a critical obstacle to both the scientific assessment and the effective management of the stock, and it especially undermines the effective implementation of the TAC.

For 2026, STECF concludes that any positive additional allocation would formally allow catches of common sole to resume. Based on the seasonal landing patterns considered in the ad hoc analysis, approximately 51–65 tonnes of common-sole catches would be expected over Q4, with 58 tonnes corresponding to the 2022–2024 average and 65 tonnes to the 2024 pattern. These quantities represent projected catches rather than the minimum allocation required to reopen the fishery. Owing to the quarterly resolution of the data, separate estimates cannot be provided for reopening on 30 September and 31 October.

For 2027, the available analysis does not provide a sufficiently robust basis for identifying a minimum common sole sub-TAC that would prevent quota exhaustion before year-end. Assuming continuation of the 2024 seasonal fishing pattern, all scenarios explicitly evaluated in the ad hoc report, including the scenario based on 270 tonnes of reported 2025 landings, project exhaustion of the common sole sub-TAC before the end of 2027. Under that specific pattern, a level above 270 tonnes would be required to accommodate the projected annual catches, but the precise level was not estimated.

STECF concludes that the quantities estimated for 2026 and 2027 describe projected common sole catches under the assumptions of the ad hoc analysis and should not be interpreted as recommendations for TAC levels. Any total common sole catches above 190 tonnes would exceed the current ICES catch advice under the MSY approach and may have a negative impact in the stock biomass, potentially pushing it to lower levels and triggering even more restrictive catches in the future.

STECF concludes, that the economic projections indicate heterogeneous effects across fleet segments, with the more restrictive scenarios generally producing less favourable profitability outcomes. These results are conditional on the assumption that all activity attributed to an affected fleet segment ceases once the common sole sub-TAC is exhausted. Actual impacts may differ if fleets adapt their fishing location, timing, métier, effort or catch composition, or redirect activity towards other fisheries.

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