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CONTENTS

Abstract 2
1. INTRODUCTION 3
2. LIST OF PARTICIPANTS 3
3. INFORMATION TO THE PLENARY 3
4. STECF INITIATIVES 3
5. ASSESSMENT OF STECF EWG REPORTS 4
5.1 EWG 26-01 Annual Economic Report on the EU Fishing Fleet I and II 4
5.2 EWG 26-03 Methods - Stock assessments in the Western Mediterranean Sea 2026 10
5.3 EWG 26-02 Social Data in EU fisheries 1: further development of the social analysis toolbox (NFPs, indicators) 24
5.4 EWG 26-06 Outermost Regions 29
5.5 EWG 26-07 Evaluation of the Annual Reports for data collection and data transmission issues . 35
6 ADDITIONAL REQUESTS SUBMITTED TO THE STECF PLENARY BY THE COMMISSION 39
6.1 Ad hoc report in support of the 3rd implementation report on the Implementation of the Technical Measures Regulation 39
6.2 original request retracted by Commission 42
6.3 Joint Recommendation of the Northwestern Waters Group concerning technical measures for the conservation of fisheries resources of Celtic Sea, Irish Sea and the Channel – for early advice by 17 July 43
6.4 Evaluation of the Joint Recommendation of the Southwestern Waters High-Level Group aiming to reduce incidental catches of common dolphins in the Bay of Biscay 58
6.5 original request retracted by Commission 79
6.6 West Med MAP Compensation Measures 80
6.7 Testing of Fmsy upper range for West Med MAP most vulnerable stock 90
6.8 original request retracted by Commission 97
6.9 Evaluation of the Otter trawl to Otter Twin Trawl conversion factor under the GFCM Adriatic MAP and on best practices for a future inclusion of OTT gear in the effort regime beyond 2026. 98
6.10 T90 104
6.11 Exemptions under the landing obligation 109
7. ITEMS/DISCUSSION POINTS FOR PREPARATION OF EWGS AND OTHER STECF WORK .. 121
7.1 West MED: Scenarios and drafting ToRs for the modellers 121
7.2 EWG 26-12/13 Economic Report on the aquaculture I and II 122
7.3 Integrating climate change considerations in the scientific advice of RFMOs 123
8. CONTACT DETAILS OF STECF MEMBERS AND OTHER PARTICIPANTS 124

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 82nd plenary from 6 to 10 July 2026.

82nd PLENARY REPORT OF THE SCIENTIFIC, TECHNICAL AND ECONOMIC COMMITTEE FOR FISHERIES (PLEN-26-02)

6-10 July 2026

1. INTRODUCTION

STECF held its summer plenary on 6-10 July 2026 at the Centre Borschette, Brussels. The meeting was chaired by the STECF chair Raúl Prellezo and was held as a hybrid meeting.

2. LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

The meeting was attended in person by 28 members of the STECF and four JRC personnel. Six STECF members and six JRC personell attended online. 19 Directorate General Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG MARE) attended parts of the meeting physically or online.

The STECF member George Tserpes did not attend the plenary meeting.

Section eight of this report provides a detailed participant list with contact details.

3. INFORMATION TO THE PLENARY

STECF – update from DG MARE

DG MARE provided an update on how the advice delivered by STECF during PLEN 26-01 has been used in support of ongoing policy and management processes.

DG MARE also informed STECF about recent developments concerning deductions for water and ice at the time of weighing fishery products.

4. STECF INITIATIVES

No STECF initiatives were addressed.

5. ASSESSMENT OF STECF EWG REPORTS

5.1 EWG 26-01 Annual Economic Report on the EU Fishing Fleet I and II

Request to the STECF

STECF is requested to evaluate the findings of the STECF Expert Working) and make any appropriate comments and recommendations in view of its publication.

STECF Comments

EWG 26-01 took place online 13-17 April 2026 (AER I) and EWG 26-05 took place in Ispra, Italy 8-12 June 2026 (AER II). STECF considers that the EWGs adequately addressed the ToRs and provides the following specific comments:

1. Short summary of the work performed

STECF observes that the 2026 Annual Economic Report (AER) on the European Union (EU) fishing fleet provides a comprehensive overview of the latest information available on the structure and economic performance of the EU Member States fishing fleets based on 2024 data, together with nowcasts for 2025 and forecasts for 2026. Drawing on data submitted by Member States under the EU Multiannual Programme (EU MAP) in 2026, the report examines long term developments in fleet structure, fishing activity, employment, economic performance and productivity, while assessing the principal drivers influencing fleet profitability.

STECF notes that the 2026 AER supersedes all previous AERs. All monetary values have been recalculated to 2024 price levels (the base year of the report) using the Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices (HICP) deflator for each Member State, and the report uses data submitted through the 2026 economic data call. Therefore, comparisons with previous AERs should not be made.

STECF notes that the AER report includes the following main chapters: 2) A structural and economic overview of the EU fishing fleet in 2024, trend analyses for the years 2013-2024 with a nowcast for 2025 and forecast for 2026. There are additional special chapters on sensitivity analysis of fuel price changes in 2026 and age structure of the fishing fleet that were specifically requested by the end users; 3) A regional analysis of the EU fishing fleet by sea basin; 4) A detailed structural and economic overview of each Member State fishing fleet, including qualitative economic performance assessments for 2024 and nowcast for 2025 and forecast for 2026; 5) Data Coverage and Quality; and 6) Methodological annexes.

STECF observes that the results of the analysis show that the EU fishing fleet continued to undergo structural contraction during 2024. Fleet capacity, employment, fishing activity, and landings all declined compared with 2023. The number of active vessels fell by 3% to 51 885 vessels, while gross tonnage and engine power declined by 3% and 2%, respectively.

Employment also continued its gradual downward trend, with the fleet supporting 115 161 fishers, equivalent to 71 965 full-time equivalent (FTEs) jobs. Fishing effort declined, with both days at sea and fishing days decreasing, while total landings fell by 3% in both volume and value. Despite these trends, the fleet continued to generate more than EUR 6 billion in first sale value and remained an important contributor to the EU coastal economies.

STECF notes that economic performance remained relatively stable despite lower revenues and reduced fishing activity. Gross Value Added declined marginally by 1% to EUR 3.25 billion, while gross profit also decreased by 1% to EUR 1.05 billion. Net profitability improved modestly, with net profit increasing from EUR 122 million in 2023 to EUR 131 million in 2024. Although this represents only a small improvement in absolute terms, the fleet maintained positive overall profitability following the difficult trading conditions experienced in recent years. Gross Value Added represented approximately 51% of total revenue, while the gross profit margin remained stable at around 16%. The overall net profit margin increased to approximately 2%.

STECF further notes that the principal factor supporting profitability during 2024 was the continued reduction in operating costs, particularly energy expenditure. Total fuel consumption remained broadly unchanged at approximately 1.56 billion litres; however, energy costs declined by 13% compared to 2023, reflecting lower fuel prices. This reduction largely offset declining revenues and landings and helped maintain operating margins across many fleet segments. Nevertheless, investment continued to weaken, declining by a further 12%, while the depreciated value of physical capital also continued its long-term downward trend, highlighting continuing structural challenges faced by the sector.

STECF also observes that economic performance continued to vary considerably across fleet segments, fishing regions and Member States. The large-scale fleet remained the principal contributor to production and economic output, accounting for almost 70% of landings by weight and over 63% of landed value. This fleet recorded a substantial improvement in net profitability compared with 2023. Vessels under 12 metres using active gears also improved their economic performance, particularly in terms of net profit. In contrast, performance within the small-scale coastal fleet remained more variable, reflecting differences in fishing opportunities, stock status, market conditions and operating costs across European sea basins.

STECF recognises that beyond reporting annual economic indicators and trends, the report examines the principal factors influencing fleet performance. These include developments in first sale prices, fuel costs, quota availability, stock status, labour productivity and structural investment. A new chapter examining the age structure of the EU fishing fleet highlights continuing concerns regarding fleet renewal and the long-term resilience of parts of the sector.

The nowcast results indicate an improvement in profitability of the EU fishing fleet in 2025 compared to 2024 primarily driven by cost reduction, particularly fuel costs, despite a decline in production and revenues. However, the outlook for 2026 is considerably less favourable. EU landings are likely to remain constrained, primarily due to continued reductions and structural limitations in fishing opportunities across several sea basins. Forecasts indicate that rising fuel prices and increasing operating costs are expected to place renewed pressure on profitability, with net profits projected to decline sharply.

2. Nowcasting

STECF observes that the new naming conventions has been used in 2026 report distinguishing nowcasts for 2025 and forecast for 2026. In order to highlight substantial differences in data sources different colour formatting were also used to separate official data (up to 2024) from the nowcasts for 2025 and forecast for 2026. These changes are based on the agreement that nowcasts for 2025 (year t+1) should be clearly distinguished from those for 2026 (year t+2). The 2025 estimates are more robust, as they are based on observed data for capacity, landings, and fuel prices. In contrast, the 2026 estimates rely on fish and fuel price information available only for the period January–June and the known agreed TAC and quotas.

Furthermore, STECF notes that nowcast and forecast methodologies have been impacted by the inclusion of new segments or new clusters in the 2025 fleet that were not present in the 2024 fleet (Spain and Portugal). In future AER, similar segmentation should be applied by Member States to report capacity data for year t+2.

STECF notes that the forecast only considers managed stocks and landings from non-quota stocks are kept stable. However, there might be significant changes in some important fisheries, e.g. increase of octopus and squid catches in the Channel and North Sea.

3. Feedback from End Users on Possible Improvements of the AER

STECF highlights that the ToRs for the AER EWGs asked experts to consult stakeholders with practical sector experience to improve the interpretation of the nowcasts and validate their accuracy. Accordingly, representatives from the Market Advisory Council (MAC) and the Mediterranean Advisory Council (MEDAC) attended the EWG 26-05 meeting as observers.

The MAC also presented its advice to DG MARE regarding the 2025 AER, highlighting several recommendations aimed at improving future use of the report. Some of these recommendations have already been incorporated into the 2026 AER, including a dedicated chapter on fleet age structure.

MEDAC emphasized the importance of economic analyses for supporting fisheries management and policy decisions. It also presented the results of a survey conducted among Member States on the impacts of fuel price increases and the mitigation measures adopted by fishing operators and national administrations.

STECF observes that further to working with MAC and MEDAC, discussions with DG MARE on the first day highlighted several areas for improving the AER:

- Final proofreading prior to publication, particularly for the EU Overview, and the possible use of AI-based tools to enhance clarity.
- The nowcasting analysis was particularly considered essential to improve the timeliness and relevance of the analysis.

Furthermore, EWG experts emphasised the importance of better communicating uncertainty, noting that current estimates lack reported uncertainty levels and measures of statistical robustness, which constrains their usability for end users.

STECF also notes that the report structure has not been reviewed for several years, and that the EWG considered reviewing it next year to further improve the report's usefulness, address stakeholders' comments and improve quality of the analysis.

STECF welcomes EWG suggestion to investigate the use of R, or other tools, to free up capacity within the AER group for driver analysis and methodological work. STECF notes that an *ad hoc* contract is needed to investigate partial automation of EU Overview and Member States chapters.

4. Impact of higher fuel prices in 2026

STECF notes that the ToRs for EWG also requested that particular attention should be given to the potential impact of higher fuel prices in the preparation of the 2026 nowcasts. In response to this request, EWG 26-01 incorporated a fuel price break-even analysis within the national chapters, providing an assessment of the fuel price thresholds beyond which fleet profitability would be compromised. Building upon this work, EWG 26-05 developed and applied a methodology to evaluate the sensitivity of fleet performance indicators to marginal increases in fuel prices. This analysis provides a more robust framework for assessing the vulnerability of EU fishing fleets to fuel market shocks and contributes to enhancing the forward-looking dimension of the AER.

5. Data issues

STECF notes that the coverage and quality of the data submitted by Member States has remained stable in the last two years, some data issues remain. The EWG reported 23 data transmission issues across 10 Member States. Most issues were considered low severity (15), the remaining issues were ranked as medium severity that required an attention prior to publication of the report. 19 issues identified in 2026 were associated with quality of the data submitted. STECF also notes that status of the 31 DTMT issues from 2024 and 2025 data calls were checked and only five improved during the resubmission process.

6. Clustering of distant water fleet

From 2024 France grouped three vessel segments over 40 metres (m) operating in other fishing regions into a single cluster due to confidentiality issues. As a result, demersal trawlers and/or demersal seiners, pelagic trawlers and purse seiners are now reported together as the French distant water fleet cluster. STECF notes that this change in clustering has affected the economic analysis of fleets operating within RFMOs, as indicators can only be calculated and reported at the cluster level. Consequently, these indicators may not accurately reflect the actual performance of the French purse seine fleet in the IOTC.

7. Dashboard Functionality

STECF appreciates that the JRC continued enhancing the dashboards to support dataset publication and assist experts in drafting the report. In particular, the EU and national

dashboards were further improved, while new dashboards were developed to support regional analysis. In addition, a dedicated dashboard for the Outermost Regions was implemented, considering the specific needs and requirements identified by the EWG experts.

8. Publication of datasets and dashboards

STECF welcomes the EWG suggestion to publish data submitted by EU Member States through the data call through the JRC Data Catalogue, accompanied by a database identifier, DOI, and the relevant metadata.

STECF notes that the datasets used for the AER - including those adjusted for inflation and aggregated by fishing activity type, Outermost Regions and other analytical classifications - will continue to be disseminated through the dashboard.

STECF observes that published dashboards should not include nowcast and forecast estimates, as these are not based on actual data provided by Member States and are intended specifically for the AER. It further notes that regional and RFMO dashboards require additional methodological guidance to ensure their correct interpretation and use.

Furthermore, regional analyses are based on a specific allocation of fleet segments to regions, derived from predefined landings and species thresholds, which may not be sufficiently transparent for a general audience without appropriate documentation and lead to unappropriated use and interpretation.

STECF observes that the EWG suggested to follow Fisheries Dependent Information (FDI) EWG proposed route to publish economic data through the JRC Data Catalogue under a single, consistent reference. In support of the FAIR data principles, the EWG also suggests following EWG 25-05 recommendation that a DOI be linked to the data, with a standard citation of the form: EU STECF AER EWG XX-XX (YYYY). EU Fishing Fleets Economic Data. European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC), Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF). Dataset. https://doi.org/XXXX.

STECF Conclusions

STECF concludes that the two EWGs addressed all ToRs, and STECF endorses the report.

STECF concludes that stakeholder involvement and feedback facilitate continued improvement of the report. STECF further concludes that review of the report structure and analysis next year during EWG (AER I) meeting could further facilitate report evolution and its usefulness for the end users.

STECF reiterates its support for integration of the nowcast and forecast protocols to the database thereby streamlining the process and simplifying analysis of the time trends.

STECF also concludes that further automation of the AER production could also facilitate the process in the future. It suggests exploring this possibility through an *ad hoc* contract(s) that should be implemented based on EU overview and some national chapters using AER 2026 data as reference.

STECF concludes that considering recent analyses (including the one developed under EWG 26-05) highlighting the ageing fleet and low renewal rates, there is a scope to undertake a more in-depth assessment of investment and financial position indicators as part of AER analysis next year.

STECF concludes that the publication of the AER data following the FDI example through JRC Data Catalogue with unique DOI will facilitate future understanding of data use.

STECF concludes that the resubmission of the data through 2026 economic data call did not significantly change the data quality (only 5 out of 31 DTMT issues raised in 2024 and 2025 were resolved during data resubmission in 2026).

5.2 EWG 26-03 Methods - Stock assessments in the Western Mediterranean Sea 2026

Request to STECF

STECF is requested to evaluate the findings of the STECF Expert Working Group meeting, and make any appropriate comments and recommendations in particular on the following points:

TOR 1

- On the basis of the work carried out, can STECF PLEN 26-02 advice on valid F reference points for the stocks of MUT7 and DPS567 in EMU1?

TOR 2 (Methodologies for the evaluation and advice for the WMed MAP)

- Evaluability
    - EWG 23-06 gave a preliminary possible classification of the evaluability of 2026 compensation measures and anticipates testing the effect of compensation measures individually and in combination both in the intermediate year and in the advice year (in TOR 2.3). In view of providing Q1 level estimations, STECF is requested focus in priority on the individual effects.
- Intermediate year/2027 projection assumptions:
    - STECF is requested to carefully evaluate the need to have two scenarios for possible effort reductions (effort reductions homogeneous across segments or according to pF/landings by GSA) and to advise if only one option can be retained to reduce the number of scenarios and the range of uncertainty
- Modelling approaches
    - STECF is requested to carefully evaluate the appropriateness of what EWG 26-03 proposed in terms of options for identifying the MVS by EMU/GSA by also adding one further level of granularity by possibly looking at a different MVS in the coastal and in the deep fishery.
    - EWG 26-03 put forward a possible dual approach for providing MSY days for 2027, e.g. one based on the current Bioeconomic Economic models (which should be able to account for intermediate year effects of compensation mechanisms) and a regression approach (F~E and partial F) to derive individual stocks Fmsy fishing days by EMU. As an averaging approach is envisioned, STECF should advise if for a 2027 projection the two approaches consistently account for the 2026 compensation measures assumptions.
- Forecasting MSY days 2027 considering compensation measures in 2027

MARE has requested to streamline the approach for the future EWG Effort to move away for highly dimensional strategic scenarios to evaluate trade-offs between different compensation measures in the advice year. In the FO 2026 the Council has maintained the compensation mechanism stemming from Art 8 (Council Regulation (EU) 2026/266) and it contains a capping of fishing days at the 2024 level to prevent upwards compensations not based in

science. For 2027 EWG 26-03 has identified SQ scenarios providing advice in terms of fishing days at F_{MSY} by fleet segment. Considering that likely a compensation mechanism will also be in place in 2027, STECF is requested to advise on the possibility for the EWG Effort to also provide days at F_{MSY} with some compensation measures and to advise on a capping mechanism that would ensure F_{MSY} with and without compensation measures.

STECF Comments

The STECF Expert Working Group (EWG 26-03) met as a hybrid meeting at the Joint Research Centre (JRC) in Ispra, Italy, 4th-8th May 2026. A total of 23 experts participated in the meeting, including six STECF members and three JRC staff members. Among the participants were also the four co-chairs of EWG 26-09 Stock assessments in the Western Mediterranean and EWG 26-10 Fishing effort regime for demersal fisheries in the Western Mediterranean.

The EWG was held in response to the STECF who identified a list of methodological and procedural issues affecting the assessment of the stocks included in the Western Mediterranean (WestMed) Management Plan (MAP) (PLEN 25-03). STECF PLEN 26-01 also observed that the current implementation of Reg. EU 2019/1022 (WestMed MAP) and related annual Fishing Opportunities (latest Reg. EU 2026/266) introduces a level of complexity that cannot be fully captured by the existing modelling frameworks applied in the STECF EWGs on the evaluation of the WestMed MAP.

In this context, the EWG had four groups of ToRs:

1. Methodologies for stock assessment.
2. Methodologies for evaluation and advice for the WestMed MAP.
3. Coordination between the assessment and effort EWGs.
4. Future work framework.

STECF notes that the EWG included simulation testing, method development and exploratory analysis, as well as discussions on how the workflow can be improved between the EWGs. The delivery of scientific advice by the EWGs was also discussed with the aim of streamlining and increasing the interpretability for end users.

STECF has the following specific comments on the four groups of ToRs addressed by EWG 26-03:

1. ToR 1 – Methodologies for stock assessment

1.1 Estimation of B_{lim} using Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE)

STECF observes that the EWG developed a methodology for conducting full feedback Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) that runs via bespoke R code within the Fisheries Library in R (FLR) framework (Kell et al. 2007). This is a tool that can be used to evaluate management objectives and reference points. In this case, the MSE methodology was used to compare the calculation of B_{lim} using three different methods:

1. Setting B_{lim} at the breakpoint of the segmented regression,
2. setting B_{lim} as 20% of the max spawner-per-recruit (SPR) based on the geometric mean of recruitment,
3. setting B_{lim} as 20% of the max SPR using a segmented regression stock recruitment relationship,

and was applied to 11 demersal stocks in the Western Mediterranean. Within each MSE, Fishing Mortality (F) was set at F_{MSY} or its stock-specific proxy ($F_{0.1}$ or F_{max}) and the biomass reference points were calculated as part of the management procedure at specified time intervals, either every year or every three years.

STECF notes that the motivation for this work was linked to recent changes in the estimated B_{lim} for certain stocks which resulted in large and sudden changes in estimated stock status. Consequently, only the stability of the estimated B_{lim} over time was evaluated.

STECF notes that stability is only one desirable characteristic of a biomass reference point and its testing doesn't provide any information on whether or not that reference point achieves its biological/management objective. Specifically, in the context of B_{lim}, its stability doesn't inform on whether it represents a biomass below which recruitment will be impaired or a biomass that a stock can readily recover from. Such objectives can be tested with the developed MSE methodology, and STECF supports future efforts to do this, as well as the estimation of other biological reference points including B_{PA}, especially within the context of the safeguards within the WestMed MAP, that link reductions in F levels to biomass levels below B_{PA} or B_{lim}.

STECF observes that in all cases, SPR reference points scaled by the geometric mean (option 2 from above) resulted in either much more stable estimates of B_{lim} or equivalent levels of stability to the other tested options. It also resulted in estimates of B_{lim} that had lower levels of uncertainty, as described by the coefficient of variation.

STECF observes that, based on these results, the EWG suggested that the option of setting B_{lim} at the breakpoint of the segmented regression should be removed from the decision tree for setting B_{lim} that was agreed on and applied in EWG 22-03. Moreover, the EWG suggests that 25% of SSB at F_{MSY} or its stock-specific proxy ($F_{0.1}$ or F_{max}) conditioned on the geometric mean of recruitment should be the primary method used to set B_{lim} for stocks in the Western Mediterranean. STECF considers both of these aspects to be relevant updates, especially in cases when the breakpoint of the segmented regression is unidentifiable, when the experts at the assessment EWG can't discern an appropriate stock recruitment relationship, or the stock is in a transition period, all of which can cause instability and uncertainty in the estimation of B_{lim}.

However, STECF reminds that at least one stock (European hake in GSA 1,5,6,7) within the Western Mediterranean currently uses the breakpoint approach to set B_{lim}. Moreover, at least one stock (striped red mullet in GSA 5) uses the option of setting B_{lim} as a percentage of the estimated B_0. In these cases, STECF suggests that the assessment EWG 26-09 calculate B_{lim} using the described geometric mean/SPR methodology so the resulting values can be compared during PLEN 26-09/10 mini. Such comparisons will better inform discussions on the decision tree for the setting of B_{lim}, as it is currently unknown whether the different methods will result in different stock-specific values of the limit reference point. In addition,

STECF reiterates that the current stock-specific methods for those stocks that currently don't use a SPR method to set B_{lim} should be used during EWG 26-09 to assess stock status in 2025.

1.2. Method to estimate stock status in the most recent year

STECF observes that the EWG developed a new R function that can be used to calculate the spawning stock biomass (SSB) on the 1st day of the year immediately following the last data year. This allows the effects of fishing in the final data year to impact the estimated stock status and is particularly relevant for those stocks that estimate SSB on the 1st day of the year. Prior to this, the estimated SSB didn't incorporate the effects of fishing in the final data year, as noted in PLEN 25-03 for European hake in GSA 1,5,6,7.

STECF supports the development of this function into an R package with associated documentation and help files that can be readily used by future EWGs.

1.3. Effects of environmental drivers

STECF observes that several exploratory studies were carried out by the EWG on the possible environmental drivers of stock productivity. Specifically, these studies were carried out for three demersal stocks (DPS1, DPS567 and MUT7), all of which have recently experienced large changes in estimated stock status, calling into the question the validity of their stock assessments and associated reference points.

STECF notes that these exploratory studies indicate a positive relationship between temperature and SSB and recruitment for both DPS stocks, and the same for total recruitment and SSB for MUT7. In DPS567, and to a lesser extent for DPS1, there has also been a recent increase in estimated recruit-per-spawner, which indicates a positive correlation between warmer conditions and stock productivity (also found in Bitetto et al. 2025). In comparison, the estimated relationship between warming and recruit-per-spawner in MUT7 is negative, which is at odds with recent scientific studies that link warming to increases in stock productivity (Panzeri et al, 2024). Other important oceanographic / environmental processes could explain this unexpected pattern in GSA 7 (Quattrocchi et al, 2024). For instance, the winter ocean convection characteristic of the Gulf of Lions (GoL) has been demonstrated to positively affect MUT (e.g. Kerametsidis et al. 2024). Also, the GoL is known to act as a demographic source area with very low retention, implying that GSA 7 might be operating as a source recruitment area and providing new recruits to the more northern GSA 6 (a demographic sink, e.g. Kerametsidis et al. 2026).

STECF observes that the EWG also re-estimated $F_{0.1}$ for different historical productivity periods for all three stocks. The motivation behind doing this is to test whether the estimated reference point would differ between periods of low and high productivity, thus rendering it unsuitable for tracking changes in F over different productivity regimes. The EWG found that the estimated $F_{0.1}$ was consistent across all productivity periods within a given stock, however, STECF reminds that no changes in selectivity nor weight-at-age were considered in the different productivity periods. Thus, the finding of a consistent yield-per-recruit reference point is not surprising.

STECF reminds that the validity of $F_{0.1}$ or other F reference points could be calculated for DPS1, DPS567 and MUT7 using the MSE methodology developed in ToR 1.1.

On the topic of stock connectivity, STECF observes that the EWG ran several merged stock assessment scenarios for both DPS and MUT. The results from these scenarios indicate distinct dynamics for DPS in EMU 1 and EMU 2, which contradicts findings of a single population in the Western Mediterranean based on genetic analysis (MED_Units; Spedicato et al. (2022) and on literature and data analysis (StockMED; Fiorentino et al. (2015)). In comparison, the results support a delineating of MUT into a single stock in GSA 6, 7 and 9, which corroborates the findings of the StockMED project.

STECF notes that the EWG also conducted initial investigations into the use of bottom temperature in the assessment model of each stock, either as covariate in the stock recruitment relationship, as a separate recruitment index, or as a causal driver of changes in natural mortality.

1.4. Streamlined stock assessment report

STECF observes that the EWG proposed a simpler structure for the reporting of the assessment EWG outcomes. The proposed approach splits the reporting into two parts, with the core results being communicated via stock-specific summary sheets, whereas the more complex details of the assessment including methods, data preparation, assumptions and more detailed results should be moved into electronic annexes.

STECF notes that the development of this more streamlined approach is ongoing and will require collaboration between members of the assessment EWG and those tasked with data preparation via *ad hoc* contracts. The EWG also highlights that the current stock-specific summary sheets will need to be updated to include the reporting of partial Fs.

STECF suggests that electronic annexes should be reviewed and updated on a semi-regular basis to ensure that the reporting of the assessment approaches remain updated and reproducible.

2. ToR 2 – Methodologies for evaluation and advice for the WestMed MAP

STECF notes that one of the main outcomes from this part of the EWG 26-03 report is the proposal of a new strategy for the calculation of fishing days at MSY. This new proposal is structured in the following steps:

1. A scenario that achieves F_{MSY} for the Most Vulnerable Stock (MVS), including the intermediate year, is first identified and selected. This scenario will include the compensation measures that have already been applied by Member States.
2. This scenario is then used as the baseline from which forecasts of the advice year are made. These forecasts will include uncertainty in biological factors and the presence or absence of compensatory measures.
3. Based on these forecasts, the corresponding effort levels expressed in fishing days in the advice year can be deduced and reported by fleet segment and area.

STECF notes that this new proposal is a significant departure from previous effort EWGs where numerous possible scenarios were first run including a wide range of biological uncertainties and possible compensatory measures, and only after was the scenario that achieves F_{MSY} for the MVS and associated effort levels in terms of fishing days calculated. STECF remarks that by anchoring the work on a single intermediate year scenario, this new approach should reduce the work load during the effort EWG and ensure that the experts have time to discuss and evaluate the findings of the forecasts, leading to a more robust and comprehensive delivery of advice for the WestMed MAP.

STECF notes that the calculation of fishing days at MSY is highly dependent on several data sources. This includes the outcomes of the assessment EWG which should be delivered based on the agreed protocol described in ToR 3. VMS and logbook data by Member State, and FDI data are also required to condition each bioeconomic model. Further to this, data is needed on what compensatory measures have been applied by Member States in the intermediate year, as well as a list of compensatory measures that are most likely to be applied in the advice year. STECF acknowledges that this list of compensatory measures in the advice year will be uncertain but reminds that this list should be non-exhaustive and should remain within the bounds of what is feasible within the time frame of the modelling *ad hoc* contracts and the capabilities of the individual bioeconomic models.

STECF notes that the calculation of effort in the advice year requires an underlying methodology via which the effort allocated to different fleet segments is reduced to ensure that the target of fishing days at MSY for the MVS is reached. In 2025, a homogenous reduction in fishing effort was used, whereby the MVS was first identified at the EMU level, and then all fleet segments were reduced uniformly across the EMU until the cumulative number of days matched the target. EWG 26-03 report points out that this homogenous approach can result in effort reductions for fleet segments that don't necessarily exploit the MVS nor operate within its spatial distribution. This discrepancy is obvious when a stock only occurs in one GSA and a fleet segment doesn't fish in that area. However, it may also occur for more widely distributed stocks which may only occur in a small part of a GSA but are found throughout the entire EMU.

To address this, STECF notes that the EWG proposed an alternative approach via which effort reductions are made proportional to landings of the MVS. Thus, a fleet segment that exploited the MVS at a higher rate in 2025, would have its effort in 2027 reduced proportionally more. In the case where a widely distributed MVS is used (e.g., European hake) this alternative approach could be readily applied at the EMU level. However, if the MVS is not distributed throughout the whole EMU, as was the case in 2026 where the MVS was Norway lobster in GSA6 in EMU1, this approach would result in effort changes being applied to fleet segments that exploit the MVS only. Thus, no effort reductions would be applied to fleet segments in other GSAs. Such an alternative approach might overcome the discrepancy between effort and exploitation rates of the MVS, however, it would cause a different discrepancy between the advice and the management implementation, as the WestMed MAP specifies that fishing days at MSY should be given at the EMU level and not at the GSA level.

STECF observes that the EWG proposed that the proportional reduction in effort approach could instead be applied exclusively at the GSA level, such that MVSs are identified per GSA

in a cascading manner, and then the proportional reduction in effort is applied per GSA. This approach would require data on the number of vessels per GSA, as well as economic data at the GSA fleet segment level. In addition, in the case of widely distributed MVSs that span multiple GSAs, a method would be needed to resolve the stock status (F/F_{MSY}) by GSA and exploitation rate per fleet segment and GSA. A method to aggregate effort by GSA at the EMU level would also be needed to ensure that provision of effort advice to the WestMed MAP, which operates by EMU, matched the management implementation.

STECF notes that such methods are yet to be developed and tested and therefore suggests that the aforementioned homogenous reduction in effort approach should be used to give advice in the effort EWG in 2026. The proportional approach should only be considered for exploratory purposes with the aim of learning more about what uncertainty is caused by the choice of effort reduction method. If there is interest in further developing the proportional effort reduction approach in the future, simulation testing of this management procedure should be done to ensure that the aggregation level of the available data matches the behaviour of the fleet segments and can be used to provide advice at the GSA or EMU level.

STECF recalls that mixed fisheries approaches are used to provide advice in other regions (Bay of Biscay, Celtic Sea, North Sea, Iberian Waters and Irish Sea; ICES 2025). Research in these areas have demonstrated that the level of aggregation of input data (space, time, metier, stock) used to define the fleet behaviour and dynamics in the forecast years has a strong impact on the robustness of the final scenario outcomes (ICES 2024, Davie et al. 2024). If fleet behaviour is restricted to a level of aggregation that does not reflect the real dynamics of the fleet, it can create false technical interactions within the model and can lead to the loss of fishing opportunities. Therefore, any decisions around the appropriate level at which to aggregate and define the fishing behaviour (GSA/EMU, coastal/deep, species/stock) needs to be tested and justified with quantitative analysis (i.e. Moore et al 2019). Although restricting the level of aggregation of the fleet to the variables identified in the WestMed MAP provides a useful tool for implementation by policy, it can (if not tested) create artefacts in the final estimates and may affect the robustness of the final advice.

STECF reminds that a key assumption of any approach at the GSA level is that stock delineation is known with high certainty, which is unlikely to be true. In fact, in ToR1 of the EWG, the connectivity and stock structure of three stocks is questioned and explored. Moreover, reducing the granularity of the MVS identification further, for example to coastal or deep-water fisheries within a GSA is contradictory to the known distribution of certain stocks within the WestMed MAP, which frequently occur in both coastal and deep water.

STECF notes that the EWG also discussed how best to proceed in situations where a stock lacks an analytical assessment or its assessment has been rejected by the assessment EWG. In these situations, alternative indicators (e.g., biomass targets) or abundance indexes might serve as alterative input data, however, tests on how, and if, they can be incorporated into some of the bioeconomic models (BEMTOOL or SMART) are needed. STECF observes that FLIndex objects, as well as data on growth and catch-at-age have been requested by the effort EWG for those stocks without analytical assessments and will be provided as part of the delivery of data by the assessment EWG.

On the topic of evaluability of compensatory measures, STECF refers to the classification that has already been established which ranks compensatory measures as Q1 if fishing days

equivalent to the compensatory measure can be estimated, and Q2 and Q3 in cases when it can't, and also to the ToR 6.6 of this plenary report. STECF also recalls its previous comments from PLEN-26-01 'that conditional on data availability, "evaluability" can correspond to class Q1 (i.e. the best "evaluability" category) in the case of compensatory measures related to selectivity improvements, permanent spatial closures, gear substitution, and minimum conservations reference size increases. STECF agrees that for the spatial closures in deep sea waters and for the permanent cessation, it is not possible to evaluate their effect fully the way they are defined in the fishing opportunities (FO) EU Reg. 2026/266 Article 8…' (see also ToR 6.6 of this plenary report).

STECF notes that the evaluability of compensatory measures at the Q1 level can practically be done at both the combined and individual level. However, the testing of individual effects in a factorial design may require the running of numerous scenarios that might be beyond the scope of the effort EWG. STECF reminds that the evaluation of the combined measures is, however, a fundamental part of the aforementioned strategy for the estimation of fishing days at MSY for the MVS, as the scenarios in both intermediate and advice year will consider combined compensatory measures.

STECF notes that the EWG does suggest that the linear relationship between fishing days and effort (F-E) by fleet segment and GSA could provide a more data driven way of assessing the past effect of compensatory measures. The rationale being that any discrepancy between the expected F-E relationship in a given year when one or several compensation measures have been applied, may provide an indication of the effect of those measures, which can then be compared to the basis used to set them. Such an empirical hindcasting analysis may inform on the past effect of the applied compensatory measures for a given fleet segment however, it wouldn't allow individual effects to be teased apart nor inform on future effects. STECF also notes that F-E relationships cannot account for any changes in catchability.

The EWG report also discusses how F-E relationships could be used as tactical short-term tools for the provision of advice in terms of fishing days at MSY, with the bioeconomic models employed as longer-term strategic options in an MSE type format. The exact method of doing this requires further investigation.

STECF observes that in 2025, a cap was used to constrain the fishing days at MSY to the levels set in 2024. No methodology to calculate this capping is detailed in the EWG report and therefore STECF cannot comment on its use nor its scientific justification. If a cap was agreed upon in the future and had scientific justification, it could be tested using the bioeconomic models as part of the effort EWG, as could deviations of that cap. Despite this, STECF reiterates that the objective of the WestMed MAP is to ensure fishing days are set at MSY for the MVS, and therefore any effort level that exceeds MSY is not fulfilling this objective.

Finally, STECF observes that the EWG was requested to describe a shift in approach toward providing a single advice on fishing days at MSY per EMU. On this topic, STECF notes that the EWG states it's "aim is to deliver a single, clear effort metric, streamlining complex bio-economic modelling outcomes". Moreover, STECF agrees with the EWG who emphasised "that such a simplification must not overlook the inherent complexity of setting an effort regime, particularly where species and fisheries overlap (i.e., for a mixed-species fishery)". In

fact, the EWG states that it would rather “provide several numbers or ranges, such as short-term projections for 2027, and longer-term projections to 2035”.

3. ToR 3 – Coordination between the assessment and effort EWGs.

STECF observes that the assessment EWG and the effort EWG agreed on a protocol for the delivery of data between the two EWGs. Within this protocol, data is detailed by assessment type and at what resolution it is needed (Table 5.2.1). Dates are also specified in the agreed protocol, with a meeting scheduled on the Wednesday after the assessment EWG (9th September 2026) between the chairs of the two EWGs followed by the delivery of data by the JRC the day after (10th September 2026).

Table 5.2.1. Stock specific data to be delivered to the effort EWG by the assessment EWG by assessment type.

Assessment type	**Data to be delivered**
Analytical assessment	FLStock object Partial Fs by gear and GSA Reference points
Partial analytical assessment	FLStock object Partial Fs by gear and GSA
Biomass production model or indicator assessment	SSB/Bref and F/Fref series
No analytical assessment	FLStock object FLIndex object Catch-at-age by gear and GSA Growth models

Source: EWG 26-03 report.

STECF notes that the EWG also discussed ways in which the outcomes of the two EWGs could be delivered to DG MARE. Specifically, the EWG was asked to explore ways to simplify the policy option table and clarify expected deliverables. Based on these discussions, the assessment EWG agreed to no longer provide advice on catch options (i.e., no short-term forecast will be run), except for those stocks that use them or when they can inform currently implemented remedial measures (e.g., ARA in EMU1), to avoid any unwanted confusion between the advice given by the two EWGs.

STECF also notes that some clarity is needed from DG MARE as to whether or not catch advice for European hake in GSA 1, 5, 6 and 7 should be provided by the assessment EWG

to inform current catch limits for vessels using gillnets and trammel nets in the FO (e.g. FO 2025 Article 9).

ToR 4 – Future work framework.

STECF observes that the EWG formulated a list of outstanding points that should be discussed and considered by future method EWGs. Within the remit of ToR 1, this list includes the two deprioritised sub-ToRs on the assessment of data-limited stocks and the expansion of the work done in EWG 25-01 on the correction of t_0. The list also includes several suggestions for further investigations on environmental drivers, stock connectivity scenarios and biomass reference points within ToR 1.3.

STECF Conclusions

STECF concludes that the EWG adequately addressed the four groups of ToRs, although two sub-ToRs within ToR 1 were previously deprioritised and were not considered in 2026 due to limitations in terms of time and amount of people present at the EWG.

STECF has the following conclusions by ToR group:

1. Methodologies for stock assessment

STECF concludes that among the methodologies tested, setting B_{lim} based on 20% of the max spawner-per-recruit scaled to the geometric mean of recruitment leads to the most stable estimate of the limit reference point.

STECF concludes that the MSE framework developed by the EWG provides a powerful tool which could be used to evaluate management objectives and reference points within the WestMed MAP. However, STECF reminds that the current MSE application only considers the stability of the method used to calculate B_{lim} and not the value of B_{lim} nor whether it achieves its management objective of preventing impaired recruitment.

STECF concludes that the assessment EWG 26-09 should calculate the value of B_{lim} using the proposed 25% of SSB at F_{MSY} or its stock-specific proxy ($F_{0.1}$ or F_{max}) conditioned on the geometric mean of recruitment so the values can be compared and discussed during PLEN 26-09/10 mini. This is particularly the case for those stocks that currently use alternative methods to set B_{lim}. STECF reiterates that the current stock-specific method used to set B_{lim} should be used during EWG 26-09 to assess stock status in 2025.

STECF concludes that in absence of a stock recruitment relationship that has been accepted by the assessment EWG, B_{lim} should be set at 25% of SSB at F_{MSY} or its stock-specific proxy ($F_{0.1}$ or F_{max}) conditioned on the geometric mean of recruitment.

STECF concludes that the development of code capable of estimating stock status at the end of the most recent data year is a significant advancement and ensures that the effects of fishing in the final data year are incorporated. This is particularly relevant for those stocks that estimate SSB on the 1st day of the year and in 2025 only provided an estimate of stock status for 2024 (and not 2025).

STECF concludes that the reference point $F_{0.1}$ doesn't provide a reliable proxy for F_{MSY} for DPS1, DPS567 and MUT7 in EMU1. This is because the analysis into the effect of stock productivity on the estimation of $F_{0.1}$ didn't account for changes in selectivity and weight-at-age.

STECF concludes that the studies conducted during the EWG demonstrate a positive relationship between temperature and SSB and recruitment for both DPS stocks and MUT7. Further, increases in recruit-per-spawner in DPS567 supports scientific findings of a positive relation between warming and stock productivity in this thermophilic species.

2. Methodologies for evaluation and advice for the WestMed MAP

STECF concludes the newly proposed strategy for the calculation of fishing days at MSY for the MVS is a significant departure from what was done during the effort EWG in 2025. This new strategy moves away from running highly dimensional scenarios for both the intermediate year and the advice year. Instead, it first identifies a single scenario that achieves MSY for the MVS in the intermediate year and then uses this as the basis for forecasting the effects of biological uncertainties and the presence or absence of compensatory measures in the advice year.

STECF concludes that this new approach should reduce the workload of the experts during the effort EWG, as the majority of the modelling work should be completed prior to the EWG as part of the *ad hoc* contracts. STECF considers this newly proposed strategy to be advantageous and comments that the potential for additional time to discuss and evaluate the results of the bioeconomic model forecasts during the effort EWG should lead to more robust scientific advice.

STECF concludes that the list of compensatory measures that might be applied in 2027 should be non-exhaustive and should remain within the bounds of what is feasible to be evaluated within the time frame of the modelling *ad hoc* contracts and the capabilities of the individual bioeconomic models. STECF further concludes that the outcomes of the assessment EWG should be delivered as per the protocol for data delivery agreed in ToR 3.

STECF concludes that the new proportional approach proposed by the EWG for reducing fishing effort by fleet segment, used to calculate fishing days at MSY for the MVS, may better address potential discrepancies between future effort reductions and the fleet segments that actually catch the MVS. However, STECF notes that it may require the identification of multiple MVSs within an EMU, and if applied at the GSA level, will require methods capable of identifying a MVS per GSA and its exploitation rate per fleet segment. Further, STECF notes that any effort advice that is split by GSA would require an aggregation procedure, as advice on fishing days at MSY for the MVS is currently requested by EMU as part of the WestMed MAP. Based on all this, STECF concludes this new approach requires further development and testing before it can be used to provide advice, and as a consequence the currently used homogenous approach should be used to give advice on fishing effort in 2026.

Further STECF concludes that, if time and resources allow, the proportional reduction scenarios should be run as part of the modelling *ad hoc* contracts and discussed as part of the effort EWG and PLEN 26-09/10 mini. Such scenarios should only be considered as exploratory at this stage and may provide insightful information on the uncertainty in advice caused by the choice of effort reduction method. In addition to this, STECF concludes that

future methods EWG should be tasked with developing and testing this new proportional reduction in effort approach.

STECF concludes that separating MVSs into coastal and deep-water fisheries within a GSA is not possible as it contradicts the known distribution of certain stocks within the WestMed MAP, which frequently occur in both coastal and deep water.

On the topic of evaluability of compensatory measures, STECF reminds that fishing days equivalent to the compensatory measure can only be estimated for those measures classed as Q1 (i.e. the best “evaluability” category) and reiterates its conclusions from PLEN 26-01 that conditional on data availability these measures include selectivity improvements, permanent spatial closures, gear substitution, and minimum conservations reference size increases.

Further, STECF concludes that the effects of compensatory measures classified as Q1 can be assessed individually or in combination in both the intermediate year and the advice year. However, STECF remarks that a comprehensive assessment of individual effects in a factorial design could require the exploration of a substantial number of scenarios, which may not be feasible within the scope of the effort EWG.

STECF concludes that, while the effort EWG described two possible approaches for calculating advice on fishing days at MSY by EMU -namely bioeconomic models and F-E relationships- only the bioeconomic modelling approach is capable of providing scientifically robust advice in 2026, as the F-E relationship approach cannot account for compensatory measures in 2026 or 2027 nor for changes in catchability.

STECF concludes that the F-E relationships could, however, provide a data-driven way of testing the past effects on compensatory measures. This hindcasting would involve comparing the expected linear F-E relationship with the known/estimated values per fleet segment and area, with any discrepancies informing on the potential effect of those measures. If time allows, STECF suggests that such work be included in the modelling *ad hoc* contracts in support of the effort EWG. Such work could also be evaluated during PLEN 26-09/10 mini.

STECF concludes that it cannot comment on the use of the 2025 cap applied to constrain fishing days at MSY to 2024 levels, nor on its scientific justification, as the EWG report does not describe the methodology used to calculate it. However, STECF reiterates that the objective of the WestMed MAP is to ensure that fishing days are set at MSY for the MVS and therefore considers that any effort level exceeding that required to achieve MSY would not be consistent with this objective.

3. Coordination between the assessment and effort EWGs

STECF concludes that the agreed protocol for data delivery between the assessment and effort EWGs should be followed in 2026. This protocol includes agreed delivery dates as well as specific data by assessment type.

4. Future work framework

STECF concludes that the EWG created a list of outstanding issues, and that this list should be discussed and considered by future method EWGs.

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5.3 EWG 26-02 Social Data in EU fisheries 1: further development of the social analysis toolbox (NFPs, indicators)

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 26-02 met in Ispra (Italy) from 15 to 19 June 2026, with the participation of 22 social science experts. STECF considers that the EWG adequately addressed the ToRs and provides the following specific comments on those ToRs covered by the EWG 26-02:

1. ToR 1 - National Fisheries Profiles (NFPs)

National Fisheries Profiles (NFP) provide a comprehensive overview of the fisheries sector by Member State, emphasising the social dimension. They are considered a key tool to understand the wider social context of fisheries (STECF EWG 24-05) and are available online (https://oceans-and-fisheries. (https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/science-observation-and-data/scientific-advice-and-data-collection/national-fisheries-profiles_en).

STECF notes that the EWG reviewed the results of two *ad hoc* contracts commissioned to evaluate the extent to which the two new National Fisheries Profiles (NFPs) are fit for purpose. The two new NFPs for Malta and Finland both show scope for improvement but are in general fit for purpose and allow for cross-comparison with existing NFPs. Both NFPs benefited from harmonised EU data sources while also incorporating national and region-specific information, providing a balance between comparability and country-specific analysis. Publication of the new NFPs will increase the number of available NFPs to 19.

STECF also notes that the NFPs provide unique and valuable information and knowledge to contextualise social data, often dispersed across many sources or not available elsewhere. However, while a template has been incrementally developed and endorsed by STECF (PLEN 23-01 and PLEN 24-02), further standardization is still needed; both in terms of updating existing NFPs to the latest standard, as well as in conciseness of the presented information which varies significantly between the NFPs.

STECF observes that the EWG proposes a further refinement of the existing template by: (i) including a list of standardised tables and figures, (ii) providing guidance on the expected length of NFPs, proportionate to the size of the Member State or complexity of fleets, and (iii) improving the coverage of wellbeing, living conditions and the cultural dimensions of fisheries. STECF also notes that while the NFP template was endorsed by STECF, the NFC are currently neither endorsed nor published as an STECF product.

STECF acknowledges the EWG's suggestion to update the NFPs every three years, in alignment with the social variables data call, and that adequate resources should be allocated to support the update process.

STECF observes that the EWG considers the review process established for NFPs (EWG 25-13) to be effective and should be continued through a recurring ToR to ensure that the profiles remain fit for purpose and aligned with the evolving framework for social data analysis. In this context, STECF notes that the NFPs necessarily cover wider aspects than purely social data, and quality control would benefit from more extended peer-review that includes expertise from multiple scientific disciplines.

STECF takes notes of the proposal made by the EWG 24-05 and the STECF remarks (PLEN 23-01 and 24-02) regarding providing a web-based version of the NFP and considers that a web-based summary of the NFP PDF version would enhance accessibility, usability, and wider dissemination, and allows content to be tailored to different target audiences, thereby maximizing the benefits of the NFPs.

2. ToR 2 - Fisheries Community Profiles (FCPs)

Fisheries Community Profiles (FCPs) are used in concert with NFPs (STECF 22-14 and STECF 24-05) providing a deeper understanding of social dimensions and supplying data, information and knowledge at smaller scales. Community profiles allow to capture the relative societal importance of fisheries and specific structural and functional features that might get diluted in the general NFPs.

STECF notes that FCPs can support social impact assessments at the sub-national level. Unlike the NFPs, to date, there has been no coordinated initiative from the European Commission to systematically produce FCPs, and most work on this element of the social analysis tool has been carried out without dedicated funding. The total number of FCPs has now reached six (three for France, one for Greece and two for Netherlands).

As part of the EWG 26-02' ToRs on FCPs, the development of FCPs in the EU Outermost Regions (ORs) was further explored. STECF acknowledges the joint work with EWG 26-06 on ORs to develop an approach to complement fishing possibilities and capacity balance analysis based on biological, economic and technical variables with social indicators. STECF notes that for the ORs the development of Regional Profiles as well as community of practice (Kraan et al., 2024) profiles for tuna fisheries, the only relevant migratory species for fisheries in these regions, could be an operational approach towards community-level analysis.

STECF observes that, from both conceptual and methodological perspectives, the FCPs could be extended to cover aquaculture and processing sectors where these are relevant to local fisheries communities. It further notes that the FCP template (STECF 20-14 and STECF 24-05) can be used to develop profiles for communities that rely solely on aquaculture or seafood processing.

3. ToR 3 - Social Indicators

STECF observes that EWG 26-02 assessed the full list of potential social indicators from previous EWGs on Social Data (STECF 22-14, 23-17 and 24-05) as well as those available from a systematic literature review by ICES WG Social (ICES, 2024) and FAO (Himes-Cornell et al., 2026) based on data availability, ease of data collection, integration into routine monitoring, and comparability across Member States. Based on this assessment, EWG 26-02 proposed a typology that classifies indicators according to their operational readiness and

identifies pathways for further development, including standardized survey templates and interview guidelines to support data collection.

STECF notes that focused analyses were conducted on (i) generational renewal and (ii) training and education, to support the development of a roadmap for integrating suitable indicators into future EU social data collection exercises. For generational renewal, nine relevant indicators were identified: three can be calculated immediately, four are partially calculable using existing data, and two require pilot studies and harmonised definitions before becoming operational. For training and education, indicators were assessed based on their relevance, testing status, data availability, and implementation challenges. STECF notes progress in the identification of policy-relevant indicators that can be supported by existing data sources. It further notes that future work by the EWG Social Data in Fisheries could contribute to the operationalisation of selected indicators and the development of supporting methodologies, such as survey questionnaires and interview guidelines.

4. ToR 4 - Annual Social Report (ASOR)

STECF observes that EWG 26-02 reviewed the process leading to the production of the first ASOR, and identified 15 points of improvement, with a particular focus on resources (time, expertise), data and process, to inform the preparation of the second ASOR. STECF takes note of the proposal to use the next EWG meeting of the year in which social data are analysed be held as a dedicated in-person meeting, rather than an online one, in order to prepare and review the data. STECF also notes that the inclusion of social variables in the March 2026 update of the DTMT guidance document will contribute to smoother processes and workflows during data collection and analysis. In addition, the process review identified data issues affecting social variables from previous data calls (2017), thereby contributing to improvements in data quality.

STECF notes that EWG 26-02 reported a total of nine initial social fleet data issues that may have impacted the quality and robustness of the analysis in the ASOR, all of which were documented in the Data Transmission Monitoring Tool (DTMT). Among these, STECF observes inconsistencies in employment data between the social and the economic data calls.

STECF notes that, in addition to the basic demographic indicators collected through the social data call, a range of relevant social variables is available from other data sources across the EU. These include information on wages and unpaid labour, particularly in the small-scale fisheries sector; social security coverage for vessel owners and crew on EU fishing vessels; compliance with international standards, including ILO Convention C188 and the IMO STCW 1978 and STCW-F conventions on seafarer training and certification; and accidents at sea. STECF acknowledges EWG 26-02’s suggestion to allocate sufficient time at the EWG and resources to fully exploit these additional data sources and enhance the insights they can provide in the preparation of the second ASOR.

STECF observes that both EWG 26-02 and EWG Outermost Regions 2026-06 consider the contextual analysis of balance capacity indicators to provide a valuable basis to integrate data, information and knowledge from the biological, ecological, technological, economic and social dimensions. STECF acknowledges that the methodological approach jointly developed with EWG 26-06 for the ORs (see also TOR 5.4 of this plenary report) illustrates how these

indicators can be complemented by contextual social information to improve the interpretation of fleet balance outcomes.

STECF notes that EWG 26-02 explored a range of topics and their policy relevance in preparation for the second ASOR (EWG 26-16). These included generational renewal, training and education, technical measures, the further development of social data for the aquaculture and processing sectors, social impact assessments, and the role of fisheries in coastal communities across the EU. STECF acknowledges EWG 26-02's finding that there is currently no immediate advisory need requiring a substantial expansion of social analysis for the aquaculture and processing sectors.

STECF notes that EWG 26-02 identified generational renewal, including training and education, as the most relevant topic for further analysis in the next EWG. The first ASOR has already identified a range of factors affecting generational renewal in the fisheries sector, providing a strong basis for a more structured analysis of their relative importance and interactions. This work is particularly relevant in light of concerns highlighted in the CFP evaluation regarding an ageing workforce, barriers to labour market entry, and declining sector attractiveness (European Commission, 2026). Further analysis would help distinguish between challenges that are specific to fisheries and those shared with other economic sectors, thereby supporting more targeted policy responses. STECF takes note of EWG 26-02's consideration that training and education should form a central component of this work, given their key role in attracting and retaining new entrants and the ongoing policy discussions on fishers' training and certification at EU level. Furthermore, the EWG highlights the need for inclusion of both quantitative and qualitative social science perspectives in developing further work on generational renewal. STECF takes note of the proposals to guide the preparations of this work, including interviews, a stakeholder meeting, an assessment of Member States' initiatives in support of generational renewal as well as benchmarking against other sectors.

STECF Conclusions

STECF endorses the outcomes of EWG 26-02, including the results of the two *ad hoc* contracts, and concludes that all ToRs were appropriately addressed.

STECF concludes that further progress was made in the development of the social analysis toolkit. Two new NFPs were completed, and additional four FCPs were produced. Furthermore, in collaboration with EWG 26-06 an exploratory approach was developed to link social indicators with the existing biological, economic, technical indicators, in order to provide contextual information for the interpretation of the balance status of the fleet segments in the Outermost Regions. This would give Member States an opportunity to provide additional illustrations of the situation of their fleet segments, including small-scale fisheries. STECF emphasises though that these additional social indicators are not considered as alternative indicators to technical, biological and economic ones and do not form part of the fleet balance calculation. In addition, a typology that classifies social indicators according to their operational readiness, as well as specific social indicators for (i) generational renewal and (ii) training and education is now available.

STECF underlines that the NFPs are an important element of the social analysis toolkit and agrees with the EWG 26-02 that the next steps forward are to further refine and standardize the NFPs. STECF also proposes that further formalisation of the update and publication process is desirable, taking into account the following considerations: (i) review of proposed changes to the current template; (ii) alignment of updates with the triennial social variables data call; (iii) review and update of the NFP by a dedicated, multidisciplinary expert working group, assisted by ad hoc contracts; (iv) publication of the NFPs as a STECF product.

STECF highlights that the exploratory approach for linking social indicators in the balance capacity analysis for the ORs marks a pathway forward for future work in the ORs and European sea basins. STECF concludes that community-of -practice profiles could be developed to provide additional elements interpretation of the context faced by the fleet segments assessed being out of balance with their fishing opportunities. For this, information already in the present fleet balance reports can be used.

STECF concludes that the FCP template with some minor adaptations can be used for the development of aquaculture and fish processing pilots.

STECF concludes that EWG 26-02's work on a roadmap for integrating suitable indicators into future EU social data collection exercises, including the use of standardised surveys and interview guides, should be continued.

STECF supports the proposal by EWG 26-02 to focus the next meeting (EWG 26-16) on further analysis of generational renewal, including training and education. STECF further concludes that in EWG 26-16 involvement of both quantitative and qualitative social science expertise is required to assess labour market entry, retention, and workforce renewal in the fisheries sector.

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5.4 EWG 26-06 Outermost Regions

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

STECF EWG 26-06 examined the implementation of the revised fleet-balance guidelines for the EU Outermost Regions (COM(2025) 798 final), assessed biological data limitations affecting Stock-at-Risk (SAR) calculations, reviewed the consistency of economic indicators with the Annual Economic Report, and explored the potential contribution of fisheries community profiles to fleet-balance assessments.

STECF considers that the EWG has satisfactorily addressed the ToRs and provides the following comments on the five ToRs covered by EWG 26-06:

1. ToR 1 - Implementation of the OR fleet balance guidelines in the 2026 fleet reports

STECF notes that this TOR provides an overview of how France, Portugal and Spain implemented the guidelines set out in COM(2025) 798 final in their 2026 national fleet reports.

STECF observes that France made the broadest use of the flexibility offered by COM(2025) 798 final. It applied sub-segmentation to small-scale fleet segments in some regions and presented estimates of the indicators SAR20, VURnn and VUR90. Notably, the estimation of VURnn was based on a theoretical maximum number of days at sea, adjusted according to regional characteristics documented in scientific assessments conducted by French expert groups. France also used national assessments for biological indicators as well as NOS (Number of Overexploited Stocks) and EDI (Economic Dependency Indicator) as complementary indicators.

STECF notes that Portugal did not apply fleet sub-segmentation and did not use SAR20, VUR*nn*, NOS or EDI. However, the Portuguese fleet report included regional and national studies used to estimate SHI for selected fleet segments in Madeira and the Azores. Spain implemented several methodological updates, including the use of SAR20, the incorporation of additional third-country catch data for SAR, complementary biological information where F/F_{MSY} estimates were unavailable, and a VUR*nn* approach based on the average activity of each fleet segment over the preceding five years. Spain did not use NOS or EDI, and no national assessments based on F/F_{MSY} were available for calculating SHI.

STECF notes that the EWG prepared a comparison table, building on the template agreed in PLEN 25-03, to facilitate future comparison between Member State's reports and STECF assessments, including alternative indicators where relevant.

2. ToR 2 - Data availability affecting biological indicators

STECF notes that the EWG identified substantial biological information gaps affecting the calculation and interpretation of SHI and SAR in the ORs. These gaps are reported by the EWG in consolidated tables developed for each region. For each fleet segment, the contribution of each species to total segment value was calculated, and the availability of stock names, assessments, scientific advice and RFMO information was checked using 2026 Annual Fleet Report submissions, total catches by segment and stock from 2017 to 2023, extracted from the online balance reports dashboard (https://sirs.agrocampus-ouest.fr/stecf_balance_2025/index.php?atl_version=0), the STECF 25-12 stock-at-risk list, and online advice or stock-status information from ICES, ICCAT, IOTC, WECAFC and CECAF.

STECF observes that a large proportion of landings originates from data-poor stocks and, consequently, biological information remains unavailable or incomplete for many stocks that account for a significant share of the landing value of the OR fleet segments concerned.

3. ToR 3 - International and shared stocks relevant for OR fleets

STECF observes that the objective of this TOR was to identify the international and/or shared stocks exploited by fleets operating in the outermost regions, for which the calculation of SAR indicators may depend on catch or assessment information from third countries or RFMOs.

STECF observes that the EWG 26-06 made use of Global Fishing Watch AIS-derived maps as qualitative supporting information to obtain a rough indication of the spatial distribution of apparent fishing activity around each OR. STECF acknowledges that these maps should not be interpreted as total fishing effort as vessels below 12 m are likely to be under-represented and Global Fishing Watch identifies fishing-related activity rather than actual fishing effort, potentially resulting in an overestimation of fishing effort.

STECF notes that the EWG provided the list of shared stocks in the ORs where an assessment is available (or part of a working group of a local RFMO) and their respective stock-at-risk status.

STECF notes the EWG's suggestion that the information used for SAR calculation and interpretation should reflect the level of assessment available for each stock. For internationally assessed RFMO stocks, SAR should be interpreted using the relevant RFMO assessment, total removals at the appropriate stock scale and the fleet segment's contribution to those removals. For regionally, locally or proxy-assessed stocks, the applicability and limitations of the assessment should be documented, while stocks for which biological information or total removals remain insufficient should be explicitly identified as data gaps by Member States.

STECF observes that the EWG identified significant biological and fisheries data limitations that constrain SAR estimation such as: limited biological sampling and lack of scientific surveys in most ORs; use of aggregated species groups rather than species-level records; poorly defined or unknown biological stock boundaries; uncertain effects of fishing activities by neighbouring countries and IUU fishing; limited effort information, especially for polyvalent

vessels switching gear and difficulty matching fleet-segment landings to the appropriate biological stock unit.

4. ToR 4 - Alignment with the annual economic report (AER)

STECF notes that the EWG was requested to identify any differences in the economic indicators as defined in the AER and in the balance guidelines. STECF observes that:

- Although the ROFTA formula differs between the AER and the balance guidance frameworks, the two approaches produce equivalent results. In the balance guidance, net profit excludes opportunity costs, whereas in the AER these costs are considered in the calculation of net profit. However, the AER formula also deducts opportunity costs from the numerator of the ROFTA calculation, thereby offsetting the methodological difference and resulting in comparable estimates.
- Regarding ROI, STECF notes that calculations are not aligned in the two frameworks, because the calculation of net profit in the balance guidelines do not include income and costs from fishing rights.
- Regarding the CR/BER indicator, the balance guidelines apply two options: a short-term perspective (that is not present in the AER framework) and a long-term perspective, through the inclusion of opportunity costs. While the long-term BER calculation is conceptually similar across the two frameworks, differences remain in the treatment of opportunity costs. The AER applies a fixed opportunity cost rate of 3.5% (as suggested by STECF -PLEN 23-02-), whereas the fleet balance guidance recommends using a "low-risk long-term interest rate".

STECF considers that the short-term CR/BER currently used in the balance guidelines provides information on the immediate financial viability of fleet segments and therefore it primarily reflects short-term economic conditions. However, as the fleet balance framework is intended to assess longer-term structural adjustment of fleet capacity relative to available fishing opportunities, reliance on a short-term perspective may be less appropriate. Table 5.4.1 provides a comparison between the indicators from the Balance Guidelines (COM (2014) 545 final) and the AER glossary (STECF 25-07, annex 3).

STECF observes that the EWG suggested to adjust and align balance definitions and formulas with AER.

STECF notes that the AER EWGs are currently developing a dashboard exclusively for the EU outermost fishing regions. Although this dashboard is primarily related to economic information, it may also be useful for the Balance EWG (EWG 26-11).

Table 5.4.1. Comparison between the indicators from the Balance Guidelines (COM (2014) 545 final) and the AER glossary (STECF 25-07, annex 3).

Indicator	AER glossary	Balance guidelines
ROFTA	(net profit + opportunity cost of capital) / tangible asset value *Where Net Profit = Income from landings + other income – crew costs – unpaid labour - energy costs – repair costs – other variable costs – non variable costs – depreciation cost – opportunity cost of capital*	Net profit / Capital asset value *Where Net profit = (Income from landings + other income) – (crew costs + unpaid labour + energy costs + repair and maintenance costs + other variable costs + non variable costs+ depreciation)*
ROI	RoI = (net profit + opportunity cost of capital) / capital asset value *Where net profit is calculated as: Net Profit = Income from landings + other income + income from fishing rights – crew costs – unpaid labour - energy costs – repair costs – other variable costs – non variable costs – fishing rights costs – depreciation cost – opportunity cost of capital* *And where:* *Capital asset value = vessel depreciated replacement value + estimated value of fishing rights.*	ROI = Net profit / Capital asset value *Where:* *Net profit = (Income from landings + other income) – (crew costs + unpaid labour + energy costs + repair and maintenance costs + other variable costs + non variable costs* *+ depreciation)* *And where:* *Capital asset value = Vessel replacement value + estimated value of fishing rights*
Current Revenue (CR) / BER *Short term*	Not calculated	BER = (Fixed Costs) / (1-[Variable costs / Current Revenue]) *Where:* *Variable costs =* *Crew costs + Unpaid labour + Energy costs + Repair and Maintenance costs +* *other variable costs* *And where:* *Fixed costs = Non variable costs + depreciation*
Current Revenue (CR) / BER *Long term*	CR/BER = revenue / break-even revenue = Income from landings + other income / BER *Where BER = (Fixed costs + opportunity costs of capital +depreciation) / (1-(crew costs + unpaid labour + energy costs + repair and maintenance costs + other variable costs)/Revenue)* *And where:* *Opportunity cost of capital = fixed tangible asset value * 3.5%*	*Same as short term but:* *Fixed costs = Non variable costs + depreciation+ opportunity cost of capital* *And where:* *Opportunity cost of capital = capital asset value * low risk long term interest rate.*

Source: STECF based on EWG 26-06 report.

5. ToR 5 - Using ORs fisheries communities' profile to interpret the outcomes of balance indicators

STECF notes that that the EWG was requested to identify how fisheries community profiles (FCPs) in the ORs could support the interpretation of fleet balance indicator results. EWG 26-06 explored this in a joint subgroup session with EWG 26-02 on Social Data on EU Fisheries (see ToR 5.3 of this plenary report). The subgroup discussed the appropriate level of analysis and concluded that, given the data currently available under the Data Collection Framework (DCF), together with the fact that Fisheries Community Profiles have not yet been developed for all targeted communities, an initial regional-level approach should be adopted (e.g. Martinique, Madeira, Azores, Canary Islands, Guadeloupe, etc.).

STECF notes that while the proposed Regional Fisheries Profiles (FCPs) provide an appropriate framework, the region also includes tuna fisheries which are characterised by a transboundary nature, diverse stakeholder networks, and specialized practices. This will require the additional development of community of practice profiles across ORs (instead of being geographically defined, communities of practice profiles are based on shared practices—such as target species, fishing gear, or processing methods on land, Kraan et al., 2024).

Regarding the inclusion of the social component in the balance report, STECF considers that the update guidance COM(2025) 798 allows Member States: 1) to produce an alternative version of the Vessel utilisation indicator (VUR*nn*) taking into account natural, technical and social conditions, relevant to the particular situation of the fleet in the outermost regions and 2) to present social indicators that can help illustrate the wider social and economic conditions in which the fleet operates. STECF notes that France and Spain applied the alternative VUR indicator, while no information is given in the EWG 26-06 report if social indicators have been provided in the 2026 fleet reports.

STECF notes that reference to the FCPs may be useful to Member States to justify cases where they consider that certain fleet segments are in balance with fishing opportunities when balance indicator values calculated by the JRC/STECF EWG Balance suggest otherwise.

STECF Conclusions

STECF endorses the outcomes of EWG 26-06 and concludes that all ToRs were appropriately addressed. STECF has these specific conclusions regarding each ToR of the EWG:

Regarding ToR 1, STECF concludes that the comparison table developed by the EWG, including alternative indicators where appropriate, could be used by future EWGs assessing balance reports to facilitate comparisons between Member States' reports and STECF assessments.

Regarding ToR 2, STECF concludes that, given the challenges associated with collecting biological information for all species in the short term, priority could be given to species making the largest contribution to the SHI and/or those considered at risk.

Regarding ToR 3, STECF concludes that differences in the data used for SAR calculations (i.e. international landings versus EU fleet landings) should be documented to maintain comparability across assessments.

Regarding ToR 4, STECF concludes that, if an alignment of the economic indicators used in the AER and balance frameworks is pursued, the balance guidelines (COM(2014) 545 final) should be revised accordingly. In particular, STECF suggests to:

- Align the definitions of ROI and ROFTA with those used in the AER framework;
- include opportunity costs in the calculation of net profit;
- include fishing-rights-related costs and income in the calculation of net profit when deriving ROI; and
- apply only the long-term approach for the CR/BER indicator.

STECF further concludes that the adoption of a fixed-rate approach for calculating opportunity costs within the balance framework would enhance consistency, comparability and the interpretation of results across Member States' balance reports and the AER.

Regarding ToR 5, STECF concludes that, before developing dedicated regional profiles, the information already available through the National Fisheries Profiles, the AER chapter on the ORs, and the OR AER dashboards could be assessed to determine its potential to provide a regional perspective. On this basis, the need for additional stand-alone regional profiles, as well as their scope and content, could be further evaluated.

STECF further concludes that community-of -practice profiles could be developed to provide additional elements interpretation of the context faced by the fleet segments assessed being out of balance with their fishing opportunities (see also ToR 5.3 of this plenary report).

Finally, STECF concludes that, given that the work initiated by the EWG remains ongoing, it would be premature to amend the ToRs of this year's Balance EWG (EWG 26-11).

References

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5.5 EWG 26-07 Evaluation of the Annual Reports 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 26-07 met in Brussels from 22 to 26 June 2026, leaving only one week between the end of the EWG and the start of the STECF PLEN 26-02. Consequently, the following STECF comments and conclusions are based on a presentation of the outcomes from the EWG meeting and a draft version of the EWG report made available to STECF. The EWG was assigned four ToRs:

- Evaluate Member States' Annual Reports (ARs) on the implementation of their Work Plans (WPs) in 2025;
- evaluate the high-severity Data Transmission issues (DTi) reported by end-users for the 2025 data calls by the European Commission (Mediterranean & Black Sea, Social Data, Processing Industry), ICES and IOTC, and medium/low-severity DTi from the 2025 Fleet Economics data call where Member States took corrective actions;
- provide draft evaluation guidelines for the WP/AR quality annexes, based on inputs from ad hoc contracts and Regional Coordination Groups;
- comment on the use of the DCF IT platform for WPs and ARs.

STECF has the following comments related to each of the ToRs assigned to the EWG:

1. ToR 1 - Evaluation of Member States' Annual Reports (ARs)

STECF observes that the evaluation of the 2025 ARs was based on the same procedure as applied in recent years, using a two-step assessment. First, Member States were asked to address the issues identified in the pre-screening of all AR sections prior to the EWG. Then, the EWG used the Member States' replies and the revised AR files to review the issues raised and if/how the Member States had addressed those. STECF acknowledges that using this approach, only few issues were left after the EWG to be addressed by Member States.

STECF notes that the majority of Member States continued to deliver high-quality ARs, but the overall performance across the EU declined slightly compared to the previous year. Last year, six Member States scored 'Mostly' (50-90% achievement of the WP tasks) and one 'Partly' (10-50% achievement), while this year, eight scored 'Mostly' and two 'Partly'. The overall performance decreased from 17 Member States scoring 'Yes' (>90% achievement) last year to 15 Member States this year.

STECF observes that the decrease in the overall performance of the 2025 ARs is to some degree caused by difficulties in WP implementation (such as reduced catches and thus fewer possibilities for sampling, lack of staff availability or breakdown/unavailability of research vessels), as well as formal reporting issues. While some of these issues were unavoidable (e.g. bad weather or short-term technical problems affecting surveys), it is the Member States' responsibility to ensure that avoidable issues (i.e. vessel availability, administrative issues) do not or only minimally affect the data collection.

STECF notes that a special focus of this year's EWG was to evaluate the Member States' efforts to implement the elements of the Regional Work Plans (RWPs) 2025-2027 that they committed to. Overall, STECF acknowledges a good RWP implementation, as Member States reported progress in achieving the RWP tasks. STECF will continue to observe the progress over the coming years, with a view to improve the setup of the RWPs 2028-2030 that will be evaluated by STECF in October/November 2026 (original submissions) and June/July 2027 (possible resubmissions).

STECF further notes that the EWG compiled separate electronic annexes containing the assessment grids by Member State and recommendations for improvement of the AR submission guidance and AR assessment.

2. ToR 2 - Evaluation of Data Transmission issues (DTi)

STECF notes that the EWG assessed the DTi from 2025 classified as "high severity" from the Mediterranean & Black Sea data call (2 issues), Fish Processing (7 issues), Social Data (2 issues), ICES (14 issues) and IOTC (5 issues). In addition, 25 medium/low-severity DTi from the 2025 Fleet Economics data call were assessed.

STECF observes that one of the two Mediterranean & Black Sea issues was assessed as "satisfactory", while the other issue was assessed as "unsatisfactory to be revised" with follow up needed by the Member State and end-user. STECF observes that within the seven Fish Processing issues, four issues were assessed as "satisfactory", as the Member States' comments justified the issue. In three cases, the Member States provided no response, so the assessment was "unsatisfactory".

STECF notes that one of the two issues related to Social Data was assessed as "unsatisfactory", the other one as "unsatisfactory – to be revised".

STECF observes that most of the ICES issues (11) and all the IOTC issues were assessed as "unsatisfactory". The review confirmed that most issues concerned missing data, incomplete submissions or insufficient coverage. Where the information provided by the Member State and the end-user was incomplete or required further clarification, the issue was assessed as "follow-up needed".

STECF acknowledges that the issues from 2025 Fleet Economics data call (medium/low severity) were checked by the end-user (EWG 26-05) on whether data were corrected and uploaded as indicated by the Member States. 13 were assessed as satisfactory, since Member States amended data or Member States' comments justified the issue. In nine cases, the Member States' response was regarded unsatisfactory, with the remark that the

issue has to be revised, usually because the data had not been provided as indicated. The remaining three issues were assessed with the “follow-up” option.

STECF acknowledges that the latest guidance for the Data Transmission Monitoring Tool (DTMT), last revised in STECF PLEN 26-01 (March 2026), was used successfully by the EWG.

3. ToR 3 - Draft evaluation guidelines for the WP/AR quality annexes

STECF notes that the EWG reviewed the *ad hoc* contract outcomes which included draft evaluation guidelines for the WP/AR quality annexes (Annex 1.1 for biological data and Annex 1.2 for socio-economic data) with a set of evaluation criteria. The *ad hoc* experts tested the proposed criteria on a limited number of examples. The EWG discussed how the assessment criteria could be realistically applied in the future evaluation cycle.

STECF acknowledges that during the limited time available at the EWG meeting, it was not possible to test the actual Member States' quality annexes as requested in the Terms of Reference of the EWG. A simplified set of assessment criteria, however, was applied on a small number of examples. STECF notes that the *ad hoc* contract outputs provide a solid and methodologically well-grounded basis for future evaluation. STECF further notes that the criteria could first be applied to a broader set of quality annexes before considering the simplification proposed by the EWG.

STECF observes that the EWG 26-07 formulated questions to be considered when deciding on the final scope of quality annex evaluation.

4. ToR 4 - DCF IT platform for WPs and ARs

STECF observes that the DCF IT platform, fully used for AR evaluation for the second time, remains a useful tool for AR and WP submission and evaluation. STECF notes that the EWG reported on a few outstanding issues that should be addressed to improve the platform.

STECF Conclusions

STECF concludes that EWG 26-07 fully addressed the ToRs (apart from ToR 3 that was addressed to the extent possible within the given time frame). It further concludes that the EWG provided concise summaries on execution and reporting in the Member States ARs.

STECF concludes that, although the majority of Member States continued to submit ARs of good quality, there was a slight decrease in overall performance compared to the previous year that should be monitored in future.

STECF concludes that the EWG suggestions for improvements to WP/AR templates and guidance as well as WP/AR assessment should be kept as reference and for consideration in upcoming revisions of the respective documents.

STECF concludes that the EWG efficiently evaluated Data Transmission issues and successfully used the revised guidance for the DTMT established by STECF.

STECF concludes that a full annual evaluation of all quality annexes for all sampling schemes/segments will not be feasible within the current time and resources of the WP/AR EWGs. STECF, therefore, concludes that the proposed criteria and approaches first be tested on a limited set of cases, considering the feedback from the RCGs and STECF, and that this be taken forward as a dedicated ToR for the EWG 26-15. The possibility of using AI tools for summarising information should also be considered.

STECF concludes that the suggestions and open questions formulated by the EWG 26-07 regarding the usefulness and simplification of the evaluation of the quality annexes should be discussed at the EWG 26-15, with the aim to decide upon an evaluation framework for the quality annexes of the regional and national WPs 2028-2030.

STECF concludes that the RWP 2028-2030 quality annexes should be assessed as part of the RWP evaluation at the EWG 26-15, applying the criteria proposed in the *ad hoc* contract report. This will ensure that the RWPs are finalised before Member States draft their national WPs 2028-2030, in which the relevant RWP parts are referred to.

STECF concludes that the comments collated by the EWG on the use of the DCF IT platform should be taken into consideration by DG MARE for further development of the platform.

6 ADDITIONAL REQUESTS SUBMITTED TO THE STECF PLENARY BY THE COMMISSION

6.1 Ad hoc report in support of the 3rd implementation report on the Implementation of the Technical Measures Regulation

Background provided by the Commission:

Ad hoc report in support of the 3rd Implementation Report on the Implementation of the Technical Measures Regulation.

Background documentation is available on: https://stecf.ec.europa.eu/document/bef03b06-65a2-4c59-a404-6e8c67f6bcf5

Request to the STECF

STECF is requested to evaluate the *ad hoc* report in support of the 3rd Implementation Report on the implementation of the Technical Measures Regulation. The aim of this ad hoc contract is to provide text and visualisations (tables and plots) to describe the impact and insights that the framework developed by the EWG on Technical Measures can provide to the review of the Implementation of the Technical Measures Regulation, the work that has been done so far, its value and where it is going.

Summary of the information provided to STECF

An *ad hoc* contract report nº2632, entitled: 3rd Implementation Report on the Implementation of the Technical Measures Regulation' was supplied to STECF.

STECF Comments

STECF has the following comments related to each ToR of the *ad hoc* contract:

1. ToR 1 - Framing the Challenge

STECF observes that the *ad hoc* report nº2632 provides trends in landings, fishing effort, and economic value derived from Fisheries Dependent Information (FDI) data across the six sea basins (the Baltic Sea (BAL), the Black Sea (BS), the Mediterranean Sea (MED), the Greater North Sea (NS), the North Western Waters (NWW), and the South Western Waters (SWW)), highlighting substantial regional variation in fishing activities. A heat map of EU landings by fishing gear and target assemblage illustrates the highly diverse and interconnected nature of fisheries, with many gears contributing to multiple target assemblages and vice versa, thereby highlighting the complexity of assessing the impacts of technical measures.

STECF observes that for the six sea basins, the ad hoc report summarizes the key technical measures applicable under the Technical Measures Regulation (TMR) and related regional provisions. The proportion of catch by mesh-size range and by the two main gear categories, static and towed gears, is compared before and after the implementation of the TMR in 2019 to identify potential changes in fishing practices and selectivity, although substantial gaps in

the catch reporting by mesh-size range remain, particularly in the SWW, MED, and BS regions. For the NS, NWW, and SWW, trends in catches below the Minimum Conservation Reference Size (MCRS) are explored to identify potential effects on juvenile protection and selectivity. Length distributions from the FDI data are used to estimate the fraction of catches below MCRS, which is expected to decline with increasing selectivity. However, coverage of the available length-frequency data is incomplete, and such analyses are not supported by the available FDI data in the BAL, MED, and BS regions. These patterns are subsequently interpreted in the context of stock status, fishery characteristics, and existing management measures.

STECF notes that, given the detailed nature of the ToRs of the *ad hoc* contract and the request for a concise report, not all requested elements could be covered in full. Limited information is provided on recent improvements to the data collection system and their implications for data quality and resolution, as well as on the key assumptions underpinning the case studies (ToR 2). In addition, fleet-level landings, effort and value indicators requested under ToR 1 are not presented.

2. ToR 2 - Reviewing the work undertaken

STECF notes that the *ad hoc* report clearly describes the progression of the six Expert Working Groups (EWG's) on technical measures. The first three EWGs focused on assessing the biological performance of technical measures at the stock level, primarily through the development and application of selectivity performance indicators. The subsequent three EWGs shifted towards developing and operationalizing a bioeconomic framework for assessing the broader impacts of technical measures. Two hake case studies, in the Bay of Biscay and the Mediterranean, were selected to test and operationalize the framework, based on their potential for gains in yield and juvenile protection, the availability of mixed-fisheries models, and the availability of relevant expertise.

STECF notes that the *ad hoc* report clearly describes the main results and outcomes of the two hake case studies, which demonstrated the potential for improved selectivity (reduction in the capture of juveniles and unwanted species) to generate biological benefits without substantial economic costs. However, the magnitude of these effects is strongly dependent on the fleets involved, stock dynamics, and underlying management conditions.

3. ToR 3 - Outlining Future Developments

STECF observes that the proposed future steps in the *ad hoc* report provide a clear and concrete pathway for future development. During the 2026 EWG on Technical Measures, the number of case studies will be expanded from two to four, with the Celtic Sea and the North Sea now complementing the Bay of Biscay and the Mediterranean. The modelling will be expanded to include longer-term forecasts, fleet dynamics through the inclusion of vessel entry and exit decisions, additional stocks, and finer spatial resolution at the port and community level. Work will also begin on integrating the human dimension into the framework through the development of well-being and social indicators, combined with stakeholder engagement activities involving fishers and Advisory Councils to capture insights into the social impacts of technical measures.

STECF acknowledges that the selectivity indicator (Fjuvenile/Fadult) within the CFP Performance Monitoring Framework provides an opportunity to examine selectivity trends across the stocks corresponding to the species listed in Annex XIV to Regulation (EU) 2019/1241. Linking these trends to stock status, fleet characteristics, fishing practices, mesh sizes, and relevant TMR provisions would support the selection of candidate case studies, the development of associated scenarios and ultimately a more integrated assessment of the biological, economic, and social impacts of technical measures.

STECF Conclusions

STECF concludes that the *ad hoc* report adequately addressed the ToRs and represents a useful contribution to the knowledge base supporting the Commission's triennial reporting under Article 31 of Regulation (EU) 2019/1241 on the implementation of the TMR.

STECF concludes that the *ad hoc* report provides a clear overview of the work undertaken by the EWG on Technical Measures, including the development and application of the bio-economic framework to assess the broader impact of technical measures. Looking forward, the report outlines the expansion of the framework through additional case studies, expanded modelling scope and the incorporation of social dimensions.

STECF concludes that the *ad hoc* report highlights the complexity and challenges of assessing the impacts of technical measures across diverse fisheries and regions, given the multiple interacting drivers affecting fisheries, including changing environmental conditions and declining fish growth rates.

STECF concludes that the highly aggregated level of the FDI-based analyses provided in the *ad hoc* contract limits the attribution of observed trends to specific TMR provisions. As fishing strategies are shaped by complex interactions among gears, target assemblages, stock dynamics, and fisher behaviour, making it difficult to disentangle the effects of individual technical measures.

STECF acknowledges that the inclusion of the selectivity indicator (Fjuvenile/Fadult) in 2026 within the CFP Performance Monitoring Framework, offers a useful basis for identifying case studies where changes in selectivity can be further assessed through the bio-economic framework developed by the EWG on Technical Measures, linking CFP performance monitoring with a broader evaluation of management outcomes.

6.2 original request retracted by Commission

6.3 Joint Recommendation of the Northwestern Waters Group concerning technical measures for the conservation of fisheries resources of Celtic Sea, Irish Sea and the Channel – for early advice by 17 July

Background provided by the Commission

Legal Background

The entry into force of the new Technical Measures Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2019/1241) introduces the possibility to develop joint recommendations that can be used to amend certain regional baseline selectivity standards through a Commission empowerment to implement delegated Acts on the basis of the joint recommendations (Articles 15 and 16 of Regulation (EU) 2019/2141). This permits the tailoring of detailed and technical rules so as to consider regional specificities. The alternative measures should as a minimum lead to such benefits for the conservation of marine biological resources that are at least equivalent to the ones provided by the baseline standards as existing on 14 August 20191 (Article 15.5 Regulation (EU) 2019/1241), in particular in terms of exploitation patterns and the level of protection provided for sensitive species and habitats.

Technical background

The Member States of the Northwestern Waters (NWW) Regional Group have provided a Joint Recommendation on 19 June 2026 for continuation and addition of technical measures in the Celtic Sea, Irish Sea, West of Scotland and the Channel to commence in January 2027. The Joint Recommendation indicates that these measures were agreed in the EU–UK Written Record for the 2026 fisheries consultations and are currently included in Articles 19 and 20 of Council Regulation (EU) 2026/249. The proposed changes to selectivity for various fleets need to be considered and compared to existing legislation. The alternative measures should as a minimum lead to such benefits for the conservation of marine biological resources that are at least equivalent to the ones provided by the baseline standards as existing on 14 August 2019 (Article 15.5 Regulation (EU) 2019/1241), in particular in terms of exploitation patterns and the level of protection provided for sensitive species and habitats. When developing Joint Recommendations in relation to size and species selective characteristics of gear alternative to the baseline mesh sizes, regional groups of Member States should ensure that such measures result in similar, as a minimum, or improved selectivity characteristics as the baseline gear. As such, the Joint Recommendation proposed

1 This means that any evaluation should be based on the specifications set out in the original version of the regulation and not on any subsequent amendments introduced following the date of entry into force: Regulation (EU) 2019/ 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, amending Council Regulations (EC) No 1967/2006, (EC) No 1224/2009 and Regulations (EU) No 1380/2013, (EU) 2016/1139, (EU) 2018/973, (EU) 2019/472 and (EU) 2019/1022 of the European Parliament and of the Council, and repealing Council Regulations (EC) No 894/97, (EC) No 850/98, (EC) No 2549/2000, (EC) No 254/2002, (EC) No 812/2004 and (EC) No 2187/2005.

changes to mesh size specifications and other associated devices such as grids and escape panels shall not lead to a deterioration of selectivity standards, in particular in terms of an increase in the catches of juveniles and also aim at achieving the objectives and targets set out in Articles 3 and 4 of Regulation (EU) 2019/1241.

Background documentation is available on: https://stecf.ec.europa.eu/document/bef03b06-65a2-4c59-a404-6e8c67f6bcf5

Request to the STECF

STECF is requested to assess, based on the findings of the ad hoc report prepared under Contract STECF n. 2666 provided on 29 June 2026, whether the proposed technical measures offer similar or better selectivity characteristics than the baseline gears specified in Part B of Annex VI of Regulation (EC) 2019/1241 existing on 14 August 2019 (Article 15.5 of Regulation (EU) 2019/1241.

Summary of the information provided to STECF

Two documents were provided to STECF

i) Joint Recommendation of the North Western Waters Group concerning technical measures for the conservation of fishery resources of the Celtic Sea, Irish Sea, the Channel, and the West of Scotland REVISED FINAL VERSION 19/06/2026.

ii) STECF Contract 2666. Evaluation of the Joint Recommendation for Technical Measures in the North Western Waters (19 June 2026).

STECF comments

1. Context of the measures proposed

This request in the Joint Recommendation (JR) concerns remedial measures to support the recovery of certain stocks[2] in critical condition in the Celtic Sea, Channel, Irish Sea and the West of Scotland.

The measures proposed list permissible mesh sizes to be used, which are agreed upon in the Written Record for the bilateral EU-UK consultations on fishing opportunities for 2026, and currently included in Articles 19 and 20 of the TAC and quota regulation (EU) 2026/249.

The North Western Waters (NWW) Regional Group requests that the measures will be incorporated into the Technical Measures Regulation (TMR) and are to apply for a period of one year in 2027, taking into consideration the need to avoid ambiguities with existing measures in the TMR.

2 Celtic Sea: Cod (ICES divisions 7e-k), haddock (ICES divisions 7b-k), whiting (ICES divisions 7e-k, b-k). Channel: cod (ICES divisions 7d and 7e), sole (ICES divisions 7d and 7e), plaice (ICES divisions 7d and 7e) (ICES divisions 7d and 7e). Western Channel: cod (ICES division 7e), haddock (ICES division 7e) and whiting (ICES division 7e). Irish Sea: whiting (ICES division 7a), cod (ICES division 7a).

The NWW Regional Group also suggests that, to improve the clarity of the measures applicable for fishers, policy-makers and control units, to the extent possible, measures relating to the minimum mesh size applicable should be referenced in Part B of Annex VI, either explicitly in the table of Part B 1.2 or as a footnote to that table.

2. General comments

STECF notes that according to the European Commission's guidelines for good practice for information to be submitted with joint recommendations (SWD, 2018), point 6 specifies that details on the expected socio-economic impacts of proposed measures on fishing activities should be included. STECF observes that this information was not provided.

STECF notes that, while it is not always possible or necessary within the scope of the present ToR to support each proposed measure with a dedicated selectivity study—particularly where the measure consists of a simple and well-understood modification (e.g. an increase in codend mesh size)—the assessment of its potential conservation benefits at the population level requires information beyond gear selectivity alone. In particular, evaluating the effects of a measure on stock dynamics depends on factors such as the proportion of the fleet effectively using the proposed gear, the behaviour of those fleets, and the evolution of size-at-age and juvenile abundance.

Additionally, STECF notes that any management measure cannot be fully assessed and monitored unless relevant data are collected. Currently there is no complete, standardised and accepted list of selectivity devices adopted within the EU and ICES. Additionally, information about selectivity devices used are not consistently recorded by Member States in logbooks. Therefore, no EU or ICES database contains sufficient information which could be used to assess the impact of exemptions implementation.

STECF, reiterates its previous conclusion (PLEN 20-02) that the use of thresholds based on depleted or protected bycatch species, such as cod in the Celtic Sea, risks weakening the expected benefits of the measures and may not be fully consistent with the objectives of Articles 3 and 4 or with the equivalence requirement in Article 15. Further quantitative assessment based on gear uptake, trip-level catch composition, spatial distribution of catches and robust selectivity trials would be required to demonstrate that all elements of the JR provide conservation benefits and selectivity characteristics at least equivalent to the relevant baseline standards.

3. Specific comments

With reference to the JR from the NWW group and the report of the STECF Contract nº 2666, STECF notes that the contract report provides a detailed and comprehensive review of the measures proposed in the JR taking into account previous comments made in the STECF PLEN 20-02 and earlier[3] reports on proposals for changes to technical measures, together

[3] PLEN 20-01, PLEN 19-02, PLEN 18-02 and EWG 18-06 and EWG 19-08.

with relevant published literature and reports. STECF considers that the approach taken by the contractor is appropriate and agrees with the majority of the findings and opinions expressed therein.

The expected effect of the proposed technical measures on selectivity is generally supported by the available scientific evidence (scientific papers, comprehensive reviews of selectivity studies, *ad hoc* contracts and previous STECF assessments). However, the available studies do not always allow a direct comparison of selectivity parameters, such as L50 retention probabilities or selection range, between the proposed measures and the relevant baseline gears, due to the wide range of measures proposed. In these cases, STECF assessment relied on technical plausibility and expert judgement. Therefore, where direct experimental evidence was not available, the assessment was necessarily qualitative and based on expert judgement of the expected direction of change in gear selectivity rather than on quantified selectivity estimates.

In making comments and drawing conclusions on whether the proposed measures will offer similar or better selectivity characteristics than baseline gears, STECF has taken into consideration the extent and relevance of supporting information relating to the selective properties of proposed and baseline measures.

Furthermore, the terms “similar or better selectivity characteristics” need to be clarified. For the purposes of this response, STECF has interpreted these terms as follows:

i) “Similar” is taken to mean that the relative catch of small/juvenile individuals of certain species and/or the species composition obtained with the proposed gears is likely to be equivalent to the baseline gears i.e. retention patterns and size compositions are likely to be similar;
ii) “Better” it taken to mean that the proposed measures have the potential to catch relatively fewer small/juvenile individuals of certain species than the baseline gears. i.e. retention of unwanted species or smaller size classes are likely to be reduced.

STECF acknowledges that, while increasing mesh size is likely to result in a relative reduction in the catch of small/juvenile individuals of some species by increasing L50, such outcome may not always be achieved in practice as selectivity is also influenced by factors such as gear design, gear deployment techniques and fish behaviour. Therefore, gear configurations incorporating an increase in mesh size compared to the baseline gears are interpreted in this report as having the potential to offer equivalent or better selectivity characteristics than the baseline gears.

With reference to the current request and based on the JR and the contract report and taking into account the definitions for similar and better selectivity given above, Table 6.3.1. summarises the following:

i) an overview of the proposed measures in the JR;
ii) the corresponding baseline measures specified in Part B of Annex VI of Regulation (EC) 2019/1241 existing on 14 August 2019 (Article 15.5 of Regulation (EU) 2019/1241
iii) comments from the *ad hoc report* on likely selectivity effects and any uncertainties, based on existing evidence

iv) STECF comments as to whether the proposed technical measures offer similar or better selectivity characteristics than the baseline gears specified in Part B of Annex VI of Regulation (EC) 2019/1241 existing on 14 August 2019 (Article 15.5 of Regulation (EU) 2019/1241.

For a comprehensive and detailed review and commentary on the measures proposed in the JR and their potential effects on selectivity, the reader is invited to refer to the contract report.

Table 6.3.1. STECF summary and assessment of potential selectivity effects of the measures proposed in the Joint Recommendation[4].

Measure in the Joint Recommendation and area	Area and fisheries	Proposed measures	Corresponding baseline measures in Regulation 2019/1241	Assessment of potential Selectivity effects and uncertainties from Contract 2666 report.	STECF comments
X1.a	The following shall apply to fishing vessels fishing with bottom otter trawls (OTB, OTT, OTP, PTB, PTT, TBN, TBS) and seines (SSC, SDN, SPR, SX, SV) in ICES divisions 7g, the part of 7h north of latitude 49° 30′ North and the part of 7j north of latitude 49° 30′ North and east of longitude 11° West.	Bottom otter trawls and seines to use either 110 mm codend fitted with a 120 mm square-mesh panel (SMP) or a 120 mm codend.	Baseline in ICES 7b–7k is 100 mm. Provisions exist to use mesh sizes less than 100 mm in prescribed directed fisheries.	Expected to improve selectivity for gadoids compared to the 100 mm baseline and additionally prescribed directed fisheries. Previous STECF review indicated that catches of undersized haddock and whiting are likely to be reduced compared to the baseline gears. SMP dimensions and position should be stated clearly to avoid implementation ambiguity.	Both measures (110 mm + 120 SMP or 120 mm) have the potential to offer improved selectivity for gadoids compared to the 100 mm baseline gear in 7b-7k. The extent of any improvements is likely to depend on the specifications of SMPs and other aspects of gear deployment.

4 The term “improvements in selectivity” means that fewer small/juvenile individuals are expected to be caught.

X1.b	The following shall apply to fishing vessels fishing with bottom otter trawls (OTB, OTT, OTP, PTB, PTT, TBN, TBS) and seines (SSC, SDN, SPR, SX, SV) in ICES divisions 7g, the part of 7h north of latitude 49° 30′ North and the part of 7j north of latitude 49° 30′ North and east of longitude 11° West.	Fishing vessels fishing with bottom otter trawls or seines with catches comprising more than 30% of Norway lobster (*Nephrops norvegicus*) shall use 80 mm codend and one of the following gears: i) 300 mm square mesh panel; ii) seltra 300 mm square mesh sorting box; or iii) Nordmøre sorting grid with a maximum bar spacing of 35 mm or a similar Netgrid selectivity device; iv) any means proven to be at least equally selective for avoidance of cod, haddock and whiting approved by the Commission and assessed by STECF.	Directed fishing for Norway lobster (*N. norvegicus*): Minimum codend mesh size of 80 mm plus a SMP of at least 120 mm or sorting grid with a maximum bar spacing of 35 mm or equivalent selectivity device.	STECF 20-02 considered several of these options are likely more selective than, or at least equivalent to the corresponding baseline measures. Strongest evidence concerns reductions in haddock, whiting and cod bycatch for large SMPs, SELTRA and grid-based devices. There is a need for the gears/devices to be prescribed. Impact of the 30% Nephrops threshold cannot be quantified without trip-level catch-composition data.	The proposed measures have the potential to offer equivalent or better selectivity for gadoids than the baseline gears.

X1.c	The following shall apply to fishing vessels fishing with bottom otter trawls (OTB, OTT, OTP, PTB, PTT, TBN, TBS) and seines (SSC, SDN, SPR, SX, SV) in ICES divisions 7g, the part of 7h north of latitude 49° 30′ North and the part of 7j north of latitude 49° 30′ North and east of longitude 11° West.	Fishing vessels fishing with bottom otter trawls or seines with catches comprising more than 55% of anglerfish (*Lophiidae*), hake (*Merluccius merluccius*) or megrim (Lepidorhombus spp.) combined, shall use one of the following gears: i) 100 mm codend with a 100 mm SMP; or ii) 100 mm T90 codend and extension.	Baseline in ICES 7b–7k is 100 mm. Provisions exist to use mesh sizes less than 100 mm in prescribed directed fisheries.	The 100 mm codend equals the area baseline in ICES 7b–7k but is larger than 80 mm directed-fishery derogations. The proposed 100 mm SMP is smaller than the panel specified in the corresponding baseline derogation (80 mm + 120 mm SMP). Concerning 100 mm T90 cod-end and extension, Lamothe et al. (2017) reported reduced discards and reduced catches of young haddock and whiting, while Lavialle et al. (2018) also found reduced catches of undersized haddock and hake. Both sources suggest that the configuration can improve selectivity, although some losses of commercial catches may occur. The available evidence is therefore supportive, particularly for reducing unwanted catches of gadoids in Celtic Sea-type mixed demersal fisheries. STECF noted that some studies were limited with respect to design or statistical treatment. Results obtained with SMP or SMC were less robust, with varying outcomes depending on device position, surface area, trawl geometry and rigging details.	The proposed measures have the potential to offer equivalent or better selectivity for gadoids than the baseline gears. However, there is a risk that the T90 alternative can lead to decreased selectivity for flatfish species.

X2.a	The following shall apply to fishing vessels fishing with bottom otter trawls (OTB, OTT, OTP, PTB, PTT, TBN, TBS) and seines (SSC, SDN, SPR, SX, SV) ICES divisions 6a and 5b, within Union waters, east of 12°W (West of Scotland) in Norway lobster fisheries.	Fishing vessels shall use a SMP (positioning retained) of at least 300 mm for vessels deploying a codend mesh size less than 100 mm; for vessels below 12 m in length overall or with engine power of 200 kW or less, the panel overall length may be 2 m and the panel mesh size may be 200 mm.	Baseline mesh size is 120 mm, with *Nephrops* derogations allowing 80 mm+120 mm SMP or a sorting grid of 35 mm or equivalent selectivity device.	The 300 mm SMP option is expected to maintain or improve selectivity for cod, haddock and whiting. The effect of the provision for ≤200 kW vessels is unclear and results from any relevant trials are not available.	The proposed measures have the potential to offer equivalent or better selectivity than the baseline gears The increased SMP mesh size for vessels deploying codends with mesh size less than 100 mm appears to potentially offer equivalent or improved selectivity characteristics compared to the baseline gears. The effect on selectivity of the provision for 200 kW vessels to use a 200 mm SMP is unclear.
X2.b	The following shall apply to fishing vessels fishing with bottom otter trawls (OTB, OTT, OTP, PTB, PTT, TBN, TBS) and seines (SSC, SDN, SPR, SX, SV) in ICES divisions 6a and 5b, within Union waters, east of 12°W (West of Scotland) in Norway lobster fisheries.	Fishing vessels with catches comprising more than 30% of Norway lobster shall use a square mesh panel (positioning retained) of at least 160 mm for vessels deploying a cod-end mesh size of 100-119 mm.	Baseline mesh size is 120 mm, with *Nephrops* derogations allowing 80 mm + 120 mm SMP or a sorting grid of 35mm or equivalent selectivity device.	The proposed increase in SMP mesh size from 120 to 160 mm is likely to result in improvements in selectivity. Rimaud et al (2020) in the Celtic Sea found that the 100 mm cod-end + 160 mm SMP improved selectivity compared with 100 mm codend, mainly by reducing catches of gadoids.	The proposed measure has the potential to offer equivalent or better selectivity characteristics than the baseline gears.

X3.a	The following shall apply to fishing vessels fishing with bottom otter trawls (OTB, OTT, OTP, PTB, PTT, TBN, TBS) and seines (SSC, SDN, SPR, SX, SV) in ICES division 7a (Irish Sea).	Fishing vessels fishing with otter trawls or seines with a cod-end mesh size equal to or larger than 70 mm and smaller than 100 mm and with catches comprising more than 30% of Norway lobster shall use one of the following gears: i) 300 mm SMP; fishing vessels below 12 metres in length overall may use a 200 mm square mesh panel; ii) seltra 300 mm square mesh sorting box; iii) Nordmøre sorting grid with a maximum bar spacing of 35 mm or a similar Netgrid selectivity device; or iv) any means proven to be at least equally selective for avoidance of cod and whiting approved by the Commission and assessed by STECF.	Baseline gear is 120 mm, with *Nephrops* derogations allowing 80mm + 120mm square mesh panel or a sorting grid of 35 mm or equivalent selectivity device	STECF considered the devices to be used for *Nephrops* fisheries are likely to reduce cod, haddock and whiting The effect of the 30% threshold for *Nephrops* remains uncertain without trip-level catch data.	The proposed measures have the potential to offer equivalent or better selectivity for gadoids compared to the baseline gears.
X3.b	The following shall apply to fishing vessels fishing with bottom otter trawls (OTB, OTT, OTP, PTB, PTT, TBN, TBS) and seines (SSC, SDN, SPR, SX, SV) in ICES division 7a (Irish Sea):	Fishing vessels equal to or greater than 12 m in length overall fishing with bottom otter trawls or seines with catches comprising more than 10% of haddock, cod and skates and rays (*Rajiformes*) combined, shall use 120 mm codend.	There is no specific baseline in Regulation 1241/2019 for fisheries with catches comprising more than 10 % of haddock, cod and skates and rays (*Rajiformes*) combined. 120 mm is the baseline for non-directed fishing.	The 120 mm codend provision is the same as the baseline gear. STECF PLEN 20-01 concluded that, for cod, the 120 mm diamond-mesh codend was among the more selective options assessed, and that for haddock and whiting its selectivity was similar to a 110 mm codend fitted with a 120 mm SMP.	The proposed measures are consistent with the baseline provision for 120 mm mesh sizes for towed gears. Hence selectivity is likely to be equivalent.

X4.	Areas referred to under points X1 to X3 above.	The catch percentages in points X.1 to X.3 shall be calculated as the proportion by live weight of all marine biological resources landed after each fishing trip, in accordance with Article 15 of Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013 and Article 27(2) of this Regulation.	In accordance with Article 15 of Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013 and Article 27(2) of Regulation (EC) 2019/1241, the catch percentages shall be calculated as the proportion by live weight of all marine biological resources landed after each fishing trip.	No change to the baseline	The proposals are equivalent to the baseline.
Xa.1a	The following shall apply in ICES division 7e. The associated conditions set out in the third column of the table under point 1.2, Part B, Annex VI of the TMR shall continue to apply:	a) fishing vessels operating with bottom otter trawls (OTB, OTT, OTP, PTB, PTT, TBN, TBS)) and seines (SSC, SDN, SPR, SX, SV) with catches comprising more than 25 % cod, haddock, whiting or saithe combined, shall use 100 mm codend; and – see Xa.1b below	Baseline in ICES 7b–7k is 100 mm for non-directed fishing. There is no specific baseline in Regulation 1241/2019 for fisheries with catches comprising more than 25% of cod, haddock, whiting and saithe combined. The proposed (100 mm cod-end) is identical to the provisions in Article 20.1|(a) in Regulation (EU) 2026/249.	Selectivity is unlikely to be affected since the proposal corresponds with the baseline measures.	Selectivity is likely to be equivalent to that achieved under the baseline measures in Regulation 2019/1241.

Xa.1b.	The following shall apply in ICES division 7e. The associated conditions set out in the third column of the table under point 1.2, Part B, Annex VI of the TMR shall continue to apply:	Fishing vessels operating with bottom otter trawls (OTB, OTT, OTP, PTB, PTT, TBN, TBS), beam trawls (TBB), and seines (SSC, SDN, SPR, SX, SV) with catches comprising more than 30 % sole or plaice combined and, in the case of otter trawls or seines additionally with catches comprising less than 25% cod, haddock, whiting or saithe combined, shall use 90 mm codend.	Directed fishing for sole and species not covered by catch limits using otter trawls are permitted to use 80 mm codends with an 80 mm SMP fitted. Furthermore, for vessels fishing for sole using beam trawls, a panel with a mesh size of at least 180 fitted in the upper half of the anterior part of the net shall be fitted. and the codend mesh size must be at least 80 mm.	For vessels exploiting sole and plaice using otter trawls, the proposed increase in codend mesh size from 80 to 90 mm fitted with an 80 mm SMP is likely to result in fewer catches of small/juvenile individuals especially sole and gadoids. Reductions in small/juvenile plaice are likely to be minor. The proposed measures for vessels using beam trawls catching more than 30% sole or plaice combined potentially may result in fewer catches of small/juvenile sole and plaice compared to the baseline 80 mm codend + 180 mm SMP when fishing for sole given the STECF understanding that a 180 mm SMP shall also be fitted (i.e. the existing baseline provision for beamtrawls of at least 80 mm codend plus 180 mm SMP). However, the supporting evidence is drawn mainly from beam-trawl and flatfish selectivity studies, much of it from North Sea pulse- and beam-trawl fisheries rather than directly from Channel 7e fleets. Selectivity should therefore be verified for other gear types.	The increase in codend mesh size from 80 mm to 90 mm appears to offer the potential to offer equivalent of better selectivity compared to the baseline gears, especially for small/juvenile sole and gadoids.

Xa.2	ICES division VIId	Fishing vessels fishing in ICES division 7d with bottom otter trawls (OTB, OTT, OTP, PTB, PTT, TBN, TBS)), beam trawls (TBB), and seines (SSC, SDN, SPR, SX, SV) with catches comprising more than 30 % sole or plaice combined, shall use 90 mm codend.	The baseline provision for beam trawls fishing for sole is a codend mesh size of at least 80 mm with no provision to use a SMP. Directed fishing for sole and species not covered by catch limits, using otter trawls. A SMP of at least 80 mm shall be fitted.	The proposal for vessels with catches of more than 30% sole to use a 90 mm codend is likely to result in some reduction in catches of small/juvenile fish especially sole and gadoids.	The increase in codend mesh size from 80 mm to 90 mm has the potential to offer equivalent or improved selectivity compared to the baseline gears, especially for small/juvenile sole and gadoids.

Source: PLEN 26-02 elaboration based on the report of STECF contract nº 2666.

STECF Conclusions

Taking into account the STECF interpretation of the terms “similar” and “better” selectivity characteristics defined above, the extent and relevance of supporting selectivity studies and its expert judgement, STECF concludes the following:

Each of the measures proposed in the current JR from the NWW Group have the potential to offer similar or better selectivity characteristics compared to the baseline gears specified in Part B of Annex VI of Regulation (EC) 2019/1241 existing on 14 August 2019 (Article 15.5 of Regulation (EU) 2019/1241). However, the information reviewed does not allow a detailed assessment of their potential effects on overall exploitation patterns of the stocks concerned.

STECF also reiterates its previous conclusion (PLEN 20-02) that the use of thresholds based on depleted or protected bycatch species, risks weakening the expected benefits of the measures and may not be fully consistent with the objectives of Articles 3 and 4 or with the equivalence requirement in Article 15.

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(EU) 2019/1022 of the European Parliament and of the Council, and repealing Council Regulations (EC) No 894/97, (EC) No 850/98, (EC) No 2549/2000, (EC) No 254/2002, (EC) No 812/2004 and (EC) No 2187/2005. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2019/1241/oj/eng

Rimaud T., Le Barzic F., Mehault S. 2020. Évaluation de l'efficacité des 3 dispositifs sélectifs utilisés en mer Celtique par les pêcheries françaises ciblant les gadidés. Projet financé par: France Filière Pêche, Région Bretagne. 45 pp.

6.4 Evaluation of the Joint Recommendation of the Southwestern Waters High-Level Group aiming to reduce incidental catches of common dolphins in the Bay of Biscay

Background provided by the Commission

Legal background

According to Article 15 of Regulation (EU) 2019/1241 on technical measures (TMR), the Commission is empowered to adopt delegated acts to amend, supplement, repeal or derogate from the technical measures set out in certain annexes, including Annex VII for Southwestern Waters. Such delegated acts shall be adopted based on a joint recommendation submitted by the Member States having a direct management interest.

The technical measures adopted shall: (a) aim at achieving the objectives and targets set in the TMR; (b) be guided by principles of good governance set out in Article 3 of the Common Fisheries Policy; and (c) as a minimum, lead to the level of protection provided for sensitive species that is at least equivalent to existing regional technical measures.

The joint recommendations shall provide scientific evidence to support the adoption of those measures.

Technical background

In its plenary meeting on 12-16 July 2024[5], the STECF assessed the measures proposed in the previous joint recommendation and concluded that while they remain less stringent than the measures advised by ICES as likely to reduce incidental catches of the common dolphin in fisheries in the Bay of Biscay below the PBR level, they represent a step forward in attempting to reduce such catches. The STECF also considered that while there is not yet enough data to evaluate the performance of the closure in relation to Potential Biological Removal (PBR) limit, as a result of the emergency measures adopted by France on 17 January 2024, the total number of strandings of common dolphin has decreased compared to 2023.

The Commission considered that while the measures proposed in the joint recommendation were less stringent than the measures advised by ICES in the six mitigation scenarios that are likely to reduce incidental catches below the PBR limit, they would contribute to reducing incidental catches of common dolphin in the Bay of Biscay. The Commission Delegated

5 STECF(2024). 76th Plenary report (STECF-PLEN-24-02), Publications Office of the European Union, 2025, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/1035959.

Regulation (EU) 2024/3089[6] was adopted on this basis and prolonged for 2026[7]. The adopted measures expire at the end of the year. Unless new measures are adopted, the Technical Measures Regulation will not contain any measures to mitigate accidental by-catches of common dolphins in the Bay of Biscay.

In its plenary on 9-13 March 2026[8], the STECF assessed the likely economic impact of the spatio-temporal closure and concluded that seven segment-gear combinations show lower real value of landings over the year and in all areas in 2024 than in the reference period before the closure (2021-2023). It also concluded that all of them showed lower economic indicators in 2024 compared to the reference period under the four scenarios tested.

On 22 May 2026, the Southwestern Waters Advisory Council (SWWAC) provided an opinion on the draft joint recommendation[9]. In its opinion, the SWWAC recommends that, should the closure be maintained, adaptation strategies could be considered, including the following options: (1) a flexible closure mechanism, whereby fishers shall notify the four-weeks closure within a defined high-bycatch risk period; (2) maintain the current closure, with exemptions granted to vessels participating to experimental activities or to vessels equipped with technological devices; and (3) a modification of the spatial scope of the closure.

On 12 June 2026, the Southwestern Waters High-Level Group submitted a joint recommendation proposing mitigation measures for common dolphins in the Bay of Biscay for 2027. This joint recommendation contains a new proposal which integrates the SWWAC's recommendation on the flexible closure mechanism. Under the new proposed closure, masters of Union fishing vessels shall notify a one-month closure period of their choice, to be taken consecutively between 15/01 and 27/02. In the absence of such notification, the existing closure period will apply by default.

Background documentation is available on: https://stecf.ec.europa.eu/document/bef03b06-65a2-4c59-a404-6e8c67f6bcf5

Request to the STECF

1. The STECF is requested to assess whether the proposed mitigation measures may reduce incidental bycatches, compared with the situation without the measures set out in the joint recommendation and taking into account that the current mitigation measures expire at the end of 2026.

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6 Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2024/3089 of 30 September 2024 amending Regulation (EU) 2019/1241 as regards measures to reduce incidental catches of common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*) and other small cetaceans in the Bay of Biscay, http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg_del/2024/3089/oj.

7 Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2025/2593 of 11 August 2025 amending Regulation (EU) 2019/1241 of the European Parliament and of the Council as regards the prolongation of the measures to reduce incidental catches of common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*) and other small cetaceans in the Bay of Biscay, http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg_del/2025/2593/oj.

8 STECF(2026). 81st Plenary report (STECF-PLEN-26-01), Publications Office of the European Union, 2026, https://stecf.jrc.ec.europa.eu/documents/d/stecf/stecf_plen_26-01.

9 SWW Advisory Council(2026). "*Avis 187 dans le cadre de l'élaboration de la recommandation conjointe relative aux mesures de réduction des captures accidentelles de dauphin commun dans le golfe de Gascogne*". 22 May 2026, https://cc-sud.eu/en/opinions/.

2. The STECF is requested to evaluate and make any appropriate comments on the measures contained in the joint recommendation.

Summary of the information provided to STECF

STECF was provided with the SWW joint recommendation (JR), which includes the main document and 10 annexes. The JR is an update of the previous JR submitted and assessed by STECF (PLEN 24-04) that led to the implementation of the Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2024/3089 (prolonged for 2026). The JR includes measures on monitoring aimed at improving knowledge and reducing incidental catch. The measures remain largely unchanged compared to those submitted in the previous JR, except for the closure period design, which shifts from a fixed four-week closure to a flexible four-consecutive-week closure that the skipper can schedule between 15/1 and 27/02 2027 to be defined by 1 December 2026. The JR summarizes the context, describing:

- The dolphin population in the Northeast Atlantic.
- The diversity of fisheries operating in the Bay of Biscay and along the Western Iberian Peninsula coast.
- The issues of incidental catches of dolphins with a drastic increase in observed strandings in the late 2010s / early 2020s likely exceeding the Potential Biological Removal (PBR) estimated by ICES (4927 individuals in Northeast Atlantic, ICES 2023a).
- The monitoring programmes in place (onboard observation, electronic monitoring (EM) and stranding observation), the recent efforts to develop technical mitigation measures (acoustic deterrent devices, cetacean excluder devices – CED).
- The economic impacts of the four-week closures, based on analyses which were reviewed by STECF in PLEN 26-01. The analysis presented in the JR suggests negative impacts for some segments of the fishing fleet (including decreases in the weight and value of landings) compared to previous years. However, these effects were partially compensated by an increase in prices after the closure. Observations also suggest negative impacts on the value chain, including downstream activities (auction market, traders, sellers) and fishing-related economic activities.

The JR also summarizes the history of the legal process that led to the implementation of the Commission Delegated Regulation and to the drafting of this new proposal (see sections “Background provided by the Commission” and “summary of past advice” for details).

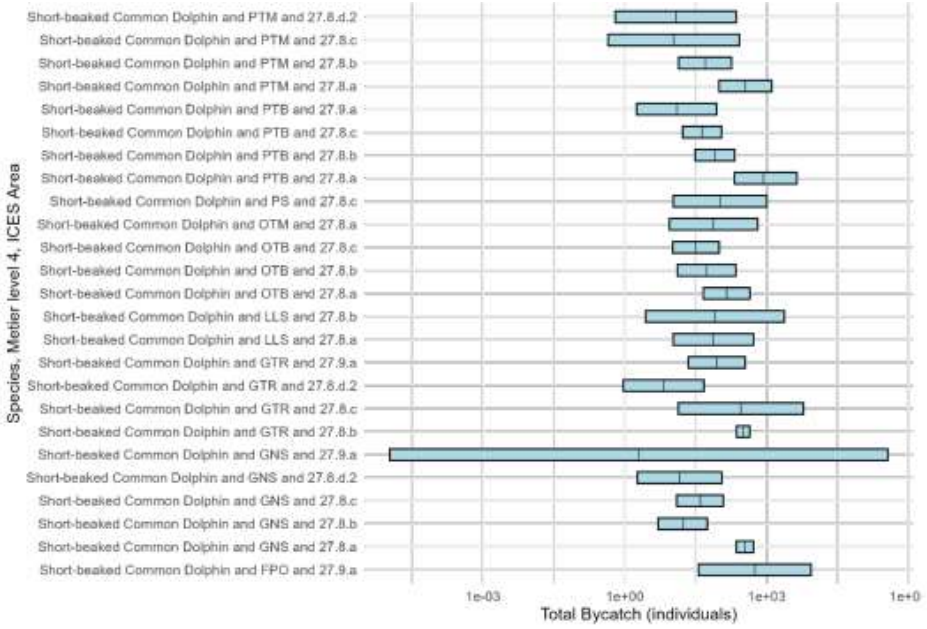
The JR includes 10 annexes:

- Annex I: a set of tables that detail for each country the coverage of the onboard and EM programs (France: from 2020/2021 to 2025/2026 for both programs, Spain: 2020/2021 to 2025/2026 for onboard monitoring and 2021/2023 for EM, Portugal data summed from 2016-2023) and the number of observed incidental catch events per fleet.
- Annex II: this report presents the strategy of Spain to address the bycatch issue and includes two pillars: the knowledge improvement and the implementation of reduction measures. The strategy is largely based on the previous JR and the resulting Commission

Delegated Regulation (onboard monitoring, development of EM through the implementation of a pilot project, obligation of bycatch declaration, stranding network, use of pingers, spatio-temporal closure). In addition to these measures, Spain set-up a move-on rule (Ministerial Order APA/1200/2020) that imposes that when more than three cetaceans are caught during a fishing operation with bottom trawl gear, the vessels should move away (at least 5 miles). Spain was also involved in different initiatives, including the project CetAMBICion (2021-2023, with France, Spain and Portugal) to improve the monitoring and mitigation or other initiatives to test deterrent devices and improve monitoring.

- Annex III includes several reports:
    - The report of the 2025 ICES workshop on the bycatch of protected species (ICES 2025). Based on a data call (including logbook, onboard or EM data) issued in 2024, the report estimates bycatch of sensitive species across the Northeast Atlantic and adjacent sea areas (Baltic, Mediterranean, and Black Seas) using a Bycatch Evaluation and Assessment Matrix (BEAM –Figure 6.4.1–). These last estimates show that gears like PTM or PTB are among the main gears and that most of the bycatch occurs in ICES divisions 8.a-b. However, it also shows that many other gears contribute to the bycatch, especially gillnets but also other gears such as OTB, and that bycatch also occurs in other ICES divisions (8.c and 9.a).

Figure 6.4.1. Total bycatch estimates (number of individuals) and confidence intervals for common dolphin per ICES area in the Bay of Biscay and the Iberian coast ecoregion, across métiers level 4. Note the log-scale on the x-axis. ICES estimates for 2024, based on Bycatch Evaluation and Assessment Matrix.



Source: ICES (2025) -Figure 3.14-.

- A scientific article from Lehnoff et al. (2022) that presents a bio-inspired acoustic repellent developed during the DOLPHINFREE project, that emits signals that facilitate the detection and avoidance of gillnets by dolphins. The first observations showed that the behaviour of dolphins may have been effectively modified by the devices and that individuals were kept away from the fishing gears. The use of such bio-inspired devices is expected to limit habituation compared to traditional pingers.
- A report and a presentation outlining the development of the OBSCAMe and OBSCAMe+ monitoring program that aims to monitor fishing operations (type of gear used, catches and bycatch) through EM system. The report dates back to 2023 (Vignard and Tachoires, 2023) and covers the early part of the voluntary trial in France. Over the period December 2021 to July 2022 the EM system was progressively installed tested on 20 gillnetters (out of a total of 527 vessels in the French gillnetters fleet according to the report), allowing a coverage of almost 5% of the total number of fishing days over that period. The report is based on data collected till February 2023: 260 bycatch events were detected (247 cetaceans including 163 common dolphins, and 13 grey seals). The effectiveness was validated by the comparison of simultaneous onboard and electronic observations. According to the report, the test also confirmed the cost-effectiveness of the system compared to onboard monitoring program, allowing a broader coverage at a lower cost. The JR reports that the monitoring effort has significantly increased since then (116 vessels: 103 gillnetters and 14 trawlers, 47% of the fishing effort of gillnetters) in 2025, and all gillnetters covered by the compulsory monitoring plan were expected to be equipped by winter 2026 (see annex 1). The presentation was delivered in 2024 and summarizes the next stage of the program. In June 2023, 44 gilnetters were equipped with the EM system. The slideshow presents data collected from January 2021 to April 2024: 24966 fishing operation were monitored (55% GTR) and 416 marine mammals' bycatch were detected (77% with GTR). The slideshow also details some technical improvements of the system (e.g. camera optimisation) as well as the development of AI-based algorithms to automatically blur fisher's faces and detect bycatch, with both approaches yielding promising results.
- A leaflet promoting the adoption of onboard observers within the Obsmer program in France.

- Annex IV is a technical report from IEO that reviews the knowledge on interactions between Spanish pelagic purse seiners and cetaceans in Iberian Atlantic Waters (IEO 2024a). The fleet is composed of vessels targeting small pelagics (anchovy, sardine, horse mackerel and mackerel) in ICES subareas 8, 9 and 10 and CECAF areas (34.1.1, 34.1.2 and 34.2.0). The observation of purse seiners in ICES subarea 8 and division 9.aN started in 2021, following DG MARE request for emergency measures to prevent bycatch

of common dolphin. The report presents data from 2021 to 2023, showing a coverage ranging from 0.04 to 0.49% depending on the years and zones, except a peak of 1.1% in division 8.b in 2022. Among the 78 sampled trips, two bycatch events of common dolphins were observed, both in 2022 in the ICES division 8.c. The report states that “bycatch captures are very rare, since dolphins can break the nets”. Pingers were also tested during the MERMACIFRA project. Experiments were conducted in June or July (i.e., outside the main interaction season) with 25 hauls in which pingers were deployed when dolphins were visually observed. No bycatch was recorded, and the dolphins appeared to be effectively deterred from the net once the pinger was activated.

- Annex V is similar to annex IV but focuses on nets (IEO 2024b). The Spanish fishery arises from 25 fishing ports with circa 3500 licenses. The fleet uses both gillnets and trammel nets. The onboard monitoring program started in 2020, in the first phase of an onboard sampling program for monitoring the bycatch of marine mammals, following the DG MARE request for emergency measures to prevent bycatch of common dolphin, and targeting metiers GNS_DEF_90-99_0_0 and GNS_DEF_>=220_0_0 in divisions 8.c and 9.aN, and metier GNS_DEF_100-119_0_0 in 8a.b.d. Then, the program was extended to metiers GNS_DEF_60-69_0_0 and GTR_DEF_60-69_0_0 in divisions 8c and 9aN in 2021. Coverage (on fishing days) ranged from 0.12 to 6.67%, depending on years and métiers. From 2020 to 2023, the bycatch of 4 common dolphins and 3 harbour porpoises were observed, leading to estimates of bycatch rates ranging from 0.00035 to 0.015. Experimentation of pingers were also made during the MERMACIFRA project but neither interaction with dolphins nor bycatch were observed (see annexes VIII and IX).
- Annex VI reviews the bycatch of cetaceans by the Basque purse seine fleets (Basterretxea et al. 2024). The analysis is based on the onboard monitoring program from 2009 to 2024 (no monitoring from 2011 to 2015). The fleet is composed of 47 vessels and target small pelagic. Fishing effort is concentrated in the southern Bay of Biscay, mostly in ICES division 8.c, with a peak of fishing effort from March to May. In recent years, more than 1% of fishing trips were monitored and 1.1% across the entire period, with a total of 291 fishing trips over the whole period. No incidental catch was observed. Onboard monitoring is distributed almost all year long, but no onboard observations were conducted in January and February, and few data were collected in March (no data at all in recent years), because of more limited fishing effort at that time. Still, this period represents the peak of interactions with cetaceans.
- Annex VII summarizes the outcome of a pilot project aiming to install EM system in the small-scale gillnet fleets (AZTI, 2024). The report presents results of four vessels in 2023 and six (two additional) in 2024, all operating in ICES division 8.c, over a fleet of 60 vessels. During those tests, 193 days were recorded, 192 fishing trips and 552 hauls. The report estimates a coverage of 7.5%. Two birds and one common dolphin bycatch were detected, all in 2023, leading to a bycatch rate estimate of 0.52%. Data for 2024 were still incomplete when the report was drafted.

- Annex VIII is a scientific poster presented at the ICES annual Science Conference 2023 about the use of pingers in trammel nets and purse seine vessels during the MERMACIFRA project (Izquierdo et al. 2023). No bycatch of dolphins was observed either in the control (with no pinger) or on equipped vessels. However, sightings of common dolphin and bottlenose dolphin have been carried out during (fishing sets/fishing route) with purse seine, suggesting a potential deterrent effect of pingers on this gear.
- Annex IX is a poster presented at the 9th World fishery congress, showing the same experiment as Annex VIII, but focusing on purse seine (Izquierdo et al. 2024).
- Annex X presents a catalogue of pingers employed by the three countries, accompanied by references that substantiate their efficacy. The JR explicitly recommends the use of pingers drawn from this catalogue.

In addition to the JR and related annexes, STECF was provided with the ICES advice answering a request from the Commission on appropriate bycatch monitoring systems at Member State level and on regional coordination (ICES 2024). ICES drew up several recommendations when setting up a monitoring network. The first point is to use spatio-temporal information on the species and fleets, or expert knowledge, to estimate the risk of bycatch and prioritize monitoring. ICES then recommended designing a sampling-scheme with maximum coverage when possible, and/or statistically appropriate sampling design, with sufficient effort to reach the target.

Summary of past STECF advice

An initial JR was submitted to STECF in 2021 following an ICES advice (ICES 2020), proposing (i) the use of pingers for trawlers (OTM, PTM, PTB) in ICES subarea 8, and demersal trawls (OTB) in division 8.c, (ii) the obligation of declaration of bycatch, (iii) increased onboard and electronic monitoring (2% of total fishing effort), (iv) improvement of knowledge on the population and on stranding, (v) development of new mitigation measures. PLEN 21-01 concluded that those measures were “unlikely to minimise and will not eliminate incidental catches of common dolphin in fisheries in the Bay of Biscay”, based on the outcome of the scenario simulated by ICES (2020).

A new JR was proposed in 2023 that, in addition to the previous measures, included a closure of the French EEZ in ICES subarea 8 from 22nd January to 20th February for all vessels using gears with a high risk of bycatch and that are not equipped with deterrent devices or another experimental device. STECF (PLEN 23-03) concluded that the measures were “unlikely to minimize and will not eliminate incidental catches of common dolphin in fisheries in the Bay of Biscay”, and noted that the proposed measures were “less stringent than any of the scenarios tested by ICES (2023a)”, and that, among those scenarios, the one that included a total implementation of the proposed four-week closure (scenario I), was insufficient to reduce the mortality below the PBR limit.

Following a decision from the French High Court, France set-up emergency measures for winter 2023-2024, that included a spatio-temporal closure for 30 days (22/01/2024 to 20/02/2024) in the French EEZ in ICES subarea 8 for vessels using gears-at-risk (OTM, PTM, PTB, GTR, GNS, GTN, PS). This closure was extended to non-French vessels fishing

with the same gears in the same area following the Article 13 of the CFP. A new JR was then drafted in 2024, which included the measures from the previous JR and the closure set-up by the French emergency measures (i.e. a fixed 30-day closure from 22/01 to 20/02 for all vessels above 8 metres using PTM, OTM, PTB, PS, GNS and GTR in the French EEZ within ICES subarea 8). PLEN 24-02 acknowledged that this proposal was a step forward compared to previous versions, although they “remain less stringent than the measures advised by ICES to reduce bycatches to the level that the Potential Biomass Removal threshold (PBR) is unlikely to be exceeded.” and noted that a two-months closure would minimize risk of missing the peak of bycatch. STECF also noted that OTB were exempted from the closure, while their inclusion “may further reduce the risk of dolphin bycatch”. PLEN 24-02 also made various suggestions on the use and development of acoustic deterrent devices, encouraging further research to confirm their effectiveness.

STECF Comments

STECF acknowledges the level of detail and the amount of information provided in the JR, including numerous annexes. STECF notes that, given the drafting timeframe of a JR, most data submitted in 2026 extend to 2024 only, as 2025 information was not available. STECF notes that this hampers a detailed assessment of the impact of the recent closures on a multiannual perspective. STECF notes that the upcoming ICES working group on bycatch of protected species (ICES WGBYC), scheduled for later in 2026, should be in a position to analyse incidental catch data up to 2025 which will provide new insights into the effects of measures implemented since 2024 on different metiers.

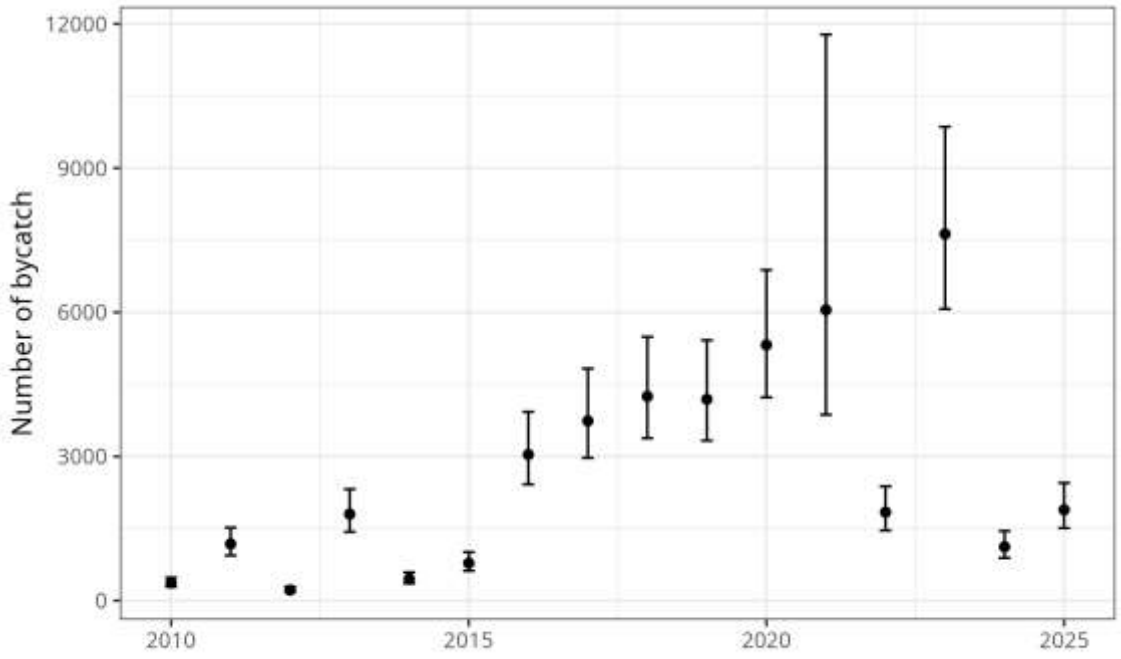
STECF has the following comments related to the different elements of the submitted JR:

1. Comparison of the measures to the situation with no measures as of 1 January 2027.

STECF notes that the request from the Commission is to assess whether the measures proposed in the submitted JR would lead to a reduction in incidental catches compared to a situation without the measures proposed in the JR. STECF interprets the request as a comparison to a baseline situation, that considers the absence of the measures implemented by the French emergency measures and the Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2024/3089.

STECF observes that significantly lower strandings were observed in 2024 and 2025 compared with the levels observed in 2016-2021 and 2023 (Figure 6.4.2), suggesting a possible positive effect of the mitigation measures. However, it remains difficult to fully disentangle the effects of the closure itself from other possibly confounding factors (e.g. environmental conditions such as wind or currents, or fishing activity). STECF acknowleges Peltier et al. (2025b) assessment that definitive conclusions about the closure’s effect cannot be drawn.

Figure 6.4.2. Estimates of incidental catch of common dolphins (y-axis) based on reconstruction from stranding data along the French Atlantic coast. Each year represents the estimates of the bycaught animals summed up from 01/12 of year n-1 to 31/03 of year n.



Source: Redrawn from the data given in Peltier et al. (2025b).

STECF notes that the measures proposed in the JR are largely similar to the measures proposed in the previous JR and implemented in the Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2024/3089. STECF notes that these were reviewed and compared to the baseline situation by STECF PLEN 24-02. Therefore, most of the comments, observations and conclusions made at that time regarding the effectiveness of the measures remain valid. However, STECF notes two main differences compare to the previous JR:

1. The design of the spatio-temporal closure with further flexibility in the dates.
2. Clarification of the required incidental catch monitoring effort.

1.1. Spatio-temporal closure

The French emergency measures and the Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2024/3089 implemented a 30-consecutive-day closure from 22/01 to 20/02 while the submitted JR proposes a flexible closure mechanism. The flexible closure mechanism permits vessels to choose the timing of their consecutive 30 days of closure during the period from 15th of January to 27th of February. The fishing grounds (French EEZ within ICES subarea 8) and targeted gears remain unchanged in the submitted JR.

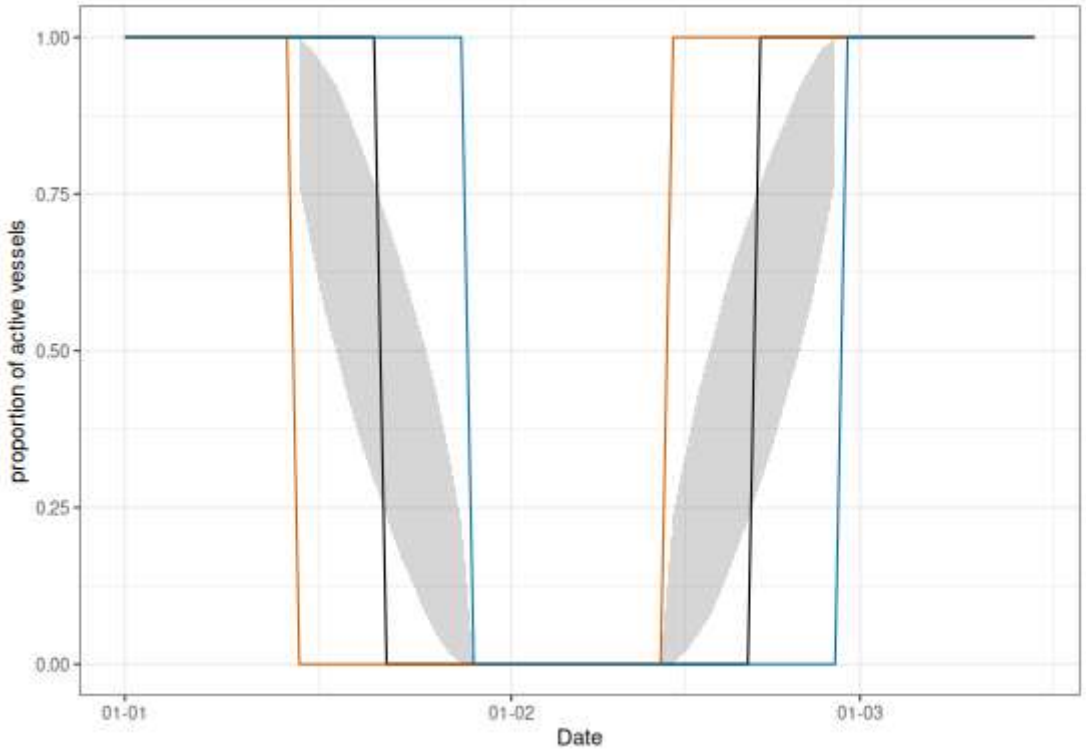
The submitted JR requires vessels to declare their preferred closure period by 1 December 2026; otherwise, the default closure period of 22 January–20 February will apply (the same

period as in 2024- 2026). STECF notes that the proposed flexibility may create control challenges, as some vessels may be fishing while others are under closure. Early declaration of the preferred closure period should facilitate control planning by Member States.

STECF notes that partial closure is not unprecedented given that in the 2024-2026 closures only a fraction of all fishing vessels operating in the Bay of Biscay were subjected to temporary stop (Guyader et al., 2024). Therefore, a targeted control at vessel-level was required. However, STECF notes that the proposal of the submitted JR increases enforcement complexity, as control authorities will need to verify, on a vessel-by-vessel basis, both the applicable closure period and the authorised gears, potentially resulting in vessels operating under different restrictions at the same time. STECF considers that detailing the specific control enforcement would have been a useful information in the JR. For vessels that keep fishing during the closure (in other grounds or using other gears), STECF considers that VMS or AIS can be used to monitor and to track the displacement of vessels. However, STECF further notes that this suggestion is not free of limitations as small-scale vessels are generally not equipped with these systems.

STECF notes that the flexibility ensures a complete closure of two weeks only between 29 January and 13 February. Depending on the shipowners' decisions, an early closure could run from 15 January to 13 February if all shipowners opt to close early, a late closure could extend from 29 January to 27 February if all shipowners delay, or any intermediate schedule is possible (Figure 6.4.3).

Figure 6.4.3. Possible outcomes of the proposed closures in terms of proportion of vessels (y-axis) fishing each day depending on scenario. The black line stands for the closure as enforced in 2024 and 2025 (and still possible with the new JR). The blue line indicates the proportion of active vessels if all vessels opt to close late and the orange line if all vessels choose to close early. The grey ribbon indicates for the proportion of active vessels (between quantiles 2.5% and 97.5%) based on a repeated simulations where vessels choose the closure purely at random, and aim to illustrate the flexibility proposed by the JR. With the proposed system, a complete closure is ensured only 2 weeks between 29 January and 13 February.



Source: Own elaboration.

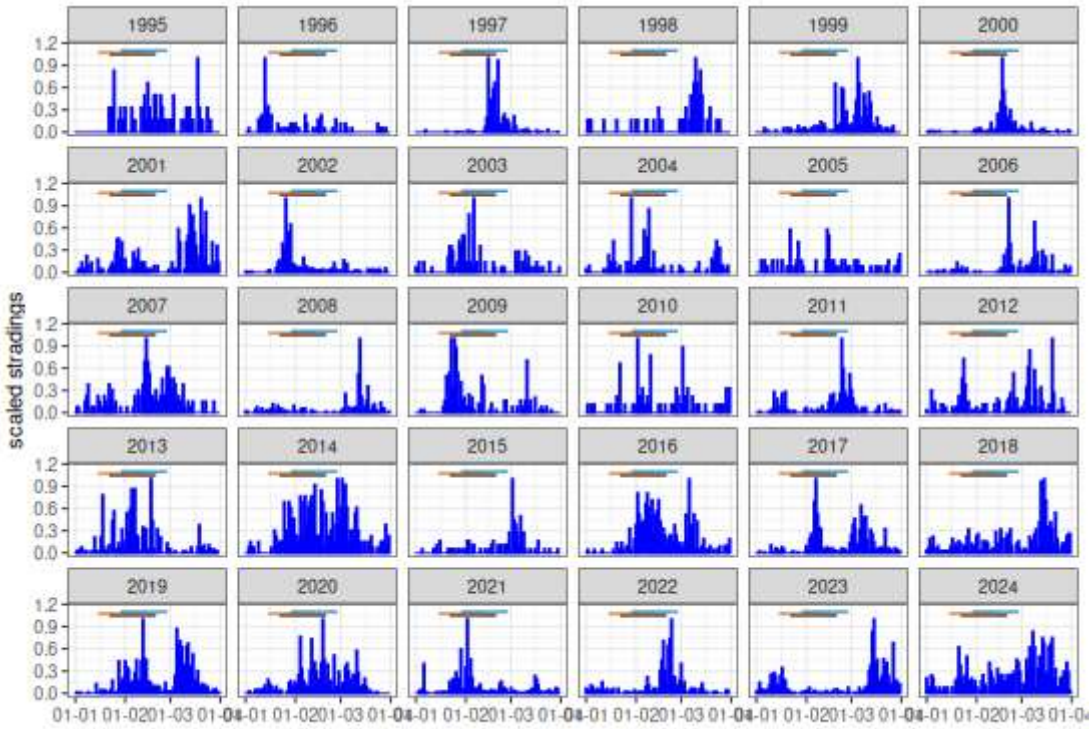
STECF notes that the economic indicators presented by Guyader et al. 2024 and examined in PLEN 26-01 show that, in 2022-2023, before any closures were implemented, fishing effort and landings of the French fleet (both weight and value) were slightly higher in late February/early March than in early January, especially for smaller vessels (Figure 31 in Guyader et al. 2024). This pattern could suggest that the later period might be more favorable in not affecting economic patterns, potentially leading vessel owners to prefer an early closure. However, STECF points out that these findings are based on only two years, and that effort and landings during that time may have been influenced by various external factors such as weather and market conditions. Consequently, STECF considers it difficult to predict how shipowners will set their closure dates.

From an ecological point of view, STECF notes that ICES (2023b) concluded that a 4-week closure is not enough to minimize the risk of covering the peak of dolphin interactions. The proposed extended 6-week window of partial closure is likely to increase the probability of covering at least partially the peak of interactions as it corresponds to one of the windows defined by ICES to decrease common dolphin incidental catch (scenario G in ICES 2023a),

but STECF observes that it is still not enough since interactions extend till March, and that this decreases the probability of covering the peak of interactions when all the fishery has stopped (since the total closure is likely to occur only during two weeks).

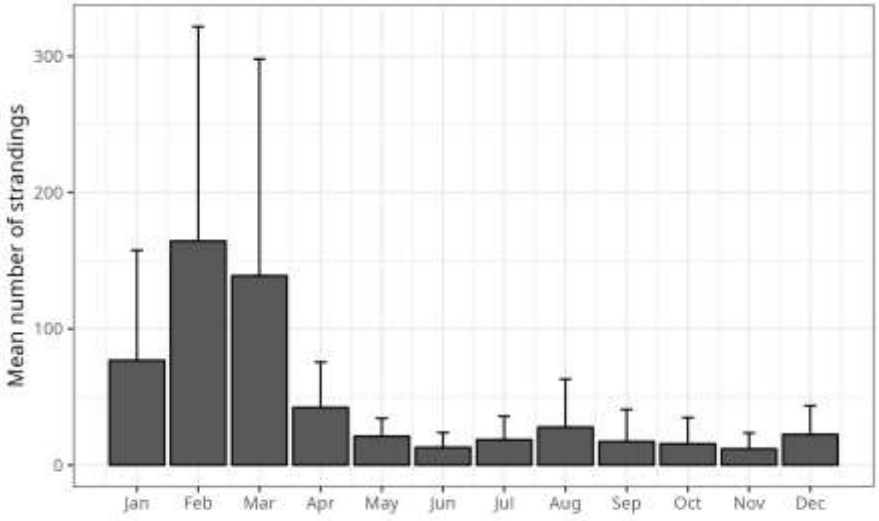
STECF notes that the timing of stranding varies greatly from year to year (Figure 6.4.4), making it difficult to predict when the risk of interactions will peak. On average, more strandings are recorded along the French coast in March than in January (Figure 6.4.5), suggesting that incidental catch is likely higher in late February to early March than in early January, even when accounting for dead animal drift duration of 5 to 25 days (drift duration typically ranges between 5 to 25 days depending on wind and current conditions according to Peltier et al. 2025a).

Figure 6.4.4. Scaled number of cetaceans stranding observed per year along the French of Atlantic coast south of 48°N from January to March (blue bars). To better visualize the temporal pattern, numbers per year are scaled by the maximum stranding in a day so that they range from 0 to 1. The black segments indicate the timing of the closure as implemented in 2024 and 2025, the orange (respectively blue) segment indicates the timing of the closure as proposed in the JR is all vessels opt for an early (respectively late) closure.



Source: Own elaboration using stranding data from the French national stranding monitoring network (http://pelagis.in2p3.fr/public/histo-carto/index.php).

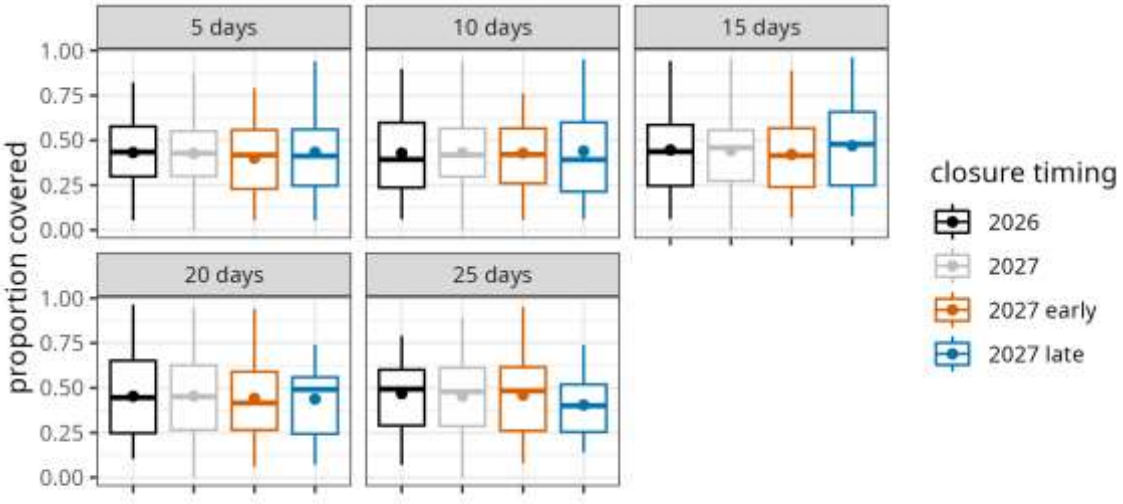
Figure 6.4.5. Monthly average (1995-2023) of strandings of small cetaceans on French Atlantic coast (south 48°N). The bar indicates the mean while the error bar stands for the standard deviation.



Source: Own elaboration based on stranding data from the French national stranding monitoring network (http://pelagis.in2p3.fr/public/histo-carto/index.php).

Based on onboard monitoring data, Authier et al. (travaux 2a1 in Cloâtre et al. 2025) estimated the risk of analysis of incidental catch for French pelagic trawlers per week. Results indicate higher risk of incidental catch in January. However, STECF notes that the analysis is based on a limited dataset (incidental catch observed during onboard monitoring). Using the French stranding data per year, STECF simulated the proportion that would have been covered by different timing of closures, shifting strandings by 5 to 25 days to account for different values of carcass drift (Figure 6.4.6). For simplicity, STECF assumes constant values of drift duration, but STECF reminds that those drift duration is highly variable and depend on environmental conditions such as wind direction and intensity (Peltier et al. 2025a). Results confirm that inter-annual variability in the peak of risk of interaction impairs the prediction of the change. As such, STECF considers that it is not possible to predict the effects of the change in the closure design proposed in the JR compared to the situation in 2024-2026.

Figure 6.4.6. Proportions of stranding data that would have occurred under different closure timings (black 2024-2026 closure timing, orange JR proposal if all vessels choose an early closure, blue JR proposal if all vessels choose a late closure, grey shows results obtained by randomly simulating skipper choices within the JR window). A proportion close to 1 would mean that the closure period would have covered all incidental catches. The boxplots display the yearly distribution, while the points indicate the average over the 1995-2023 period. Each panel represents a shift (in days) of the stranding events to account for plausible drift durations based on observations of Peltier et al. (2025a).



Source: Own elaboration based on stranding data from the French national stranding monitoring network (http://pelagis.in2p3.fr/public/histo-carto/index.php).

STECF notes that the main argument in the submitted JR for justifying the change in the closure design is to “alleviate the economic difficulties encountered while remaining within the period of the peak risk of bycatch”. STECF (PLEN 26-01) underlined that while it was not possible to conclude whether this was only due to the closure, some fleet segments have displayed lower performance indicators in 2024 than in previous years. The JR also reports significant impacts of the closure on the value chain (e.g. fishmongers, auction) and fishing related trades (e.g. port services, gear manufacturers). STECF acknowledges that granting greater flexibility to vessels might help mitigate their economic losses and reminds that further flexibility often favours compliance to rules (Boonstra et al. 2017; Raakjær Nielsen 2003; Raakjær Nielsen and Mathiesen 2003). On the other hand, STECF notes the deteriorated performance of the fleets was already partially compensated by higher prices (Guyader et al. 2024) after the closure in 2024, but that the effect of this more flexible closure on downstream trades and fishing related trades depends on the final choices made by vessels owners. If the vessel owners do not all choose the same closure period, it might smooth the activity and the provision of fish product to traders; conversely, if all fishers choose the same closure period, the the situation will be unchanged compared to previous years. Interviews with fishmongers, included as background material in the PLEN 26-01 report, indicated that the post-closure rise in fish prices further exacerbated the impact of the closure in 2024 for them as they had to buy the fish at a higher price but were unable to transfer this cost increase to consumers. STECF notes that data for 2025 and 2026 are not

available but would be helpful to assess whether the value chain has been able to adapt over the years to the consequences of the closures.

STECF notes that, despite the measures taken, about half of the dolphins stranded along the French coast south of 48°N during the 2025 closure still exhibit signs of capture (Peltier et al. 2025b). This raises questions about the source of these captures, which may result from gear types exempted from the closure or from captures occurring in open fishing areas.

STECF notes that ICES estimated that a significant part of the incidental catch occurs in divisions 9.a and 8.c, which are not included in the closure (division 8.c is only included for boats operating in the French EEZ, which covers a very small part of that division). ICES also noted that “mitigation measures applied for subarea 8 only are much less efficient than if implemented in a larger area that includes subarea 8 and division 9.a” and that ideally, a “more complete monitoring should be implemented throughout the range of the species in the Northeast Atlantic” (ICES 2023b). Moreover, STECF (PLEN 24-02), underlined that including OTB in the closure would contribute further to the reduction of incidental catch. STECF observes that ICES (2025) estimated that OTB métiers were not responsible for a high share of incidental catch based on 2024 data, but that their catches were still in the same range of magnitude as gear subject to the closure (e.g. OTM).

1.2. Clarification of the incidental catch monitoring effort.

STECF observes that, following the proposal of the previous JR, the Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2024/3089 states that “during the high-risk period of incidental catches: Member States may increase monitoring coverage on trammel nets (GTR) and set anchored gillnets (GNS) to between 2% and 5% of the total fishing effort measured in days at sea; vessels may be equipped with electronic monitoring systems incorporating cameras.”, but that the “high-risk period” was not clearly defined and the “may” was unclear.

The present JR proposes to reformulate this measure as “Member States will increase observations on trammel nets (GTR) and set (anchored) gillnets (GNS) during the at-risk period, between January and March, at a level of 7% of the total fishing effort measured in number of days at sea.”. This corresponds to the rules defined in Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2025/2593. STECF observes that this reformulation is clearer.

2. Other comments on the measures proposed in the JR

STECF observes that the strategy set up by Member States to address the issue of small cetacean bycatch is based on three main pillars (i) improving the knowledge on incidental catch through better monitoring and research and analysis of the dolphin biology and fleet behaviour, (ii) development of new technical mitigation measures (e.g. acoustic deterrent devices, cetacean excluder devices), (iii) management measures to reduce current levels of incidental catch.

As already noticed by PLEN 24-02, STECF acknowledges the amount of work and resources invested by Member States, which has significantly increased since 2023, notably through various research projects (e.g. MITICET, CETAMBICION, MERMACIFRA, DELMOGES, LICADO and DOLPHINFREE). Among the most recent ones, the DELMOGES project aimed

at improving the understanding of the mechanism behind the cetaceans and fleets interactions, developing mitigation measures and fostering the dialogue among stakeholders to enhance the governance. It provided new knowledge on the factors driving the spatial distribution and the displacement of dolphins, suggesting that a cascade effect triggered by climate change has pushed dolphins to move closer to the coast, thereby increasing the risk of interaction with the fishing industry (Authier et al. 2026). MERMACIFRA has also worked on the spatial mapping of risks and has addressed several other issues including the enhancement of stranding monitoring, development of EM, improvement of mitigation measures, enhancing the assessment of bycatch. STECF observes that the Horizon Europe project Marine Beacon that aims to develop and test innovative tools and tecnologies for better monitoring of protected species and mitigating risks of bycatch, has a specific case study on the Bay of Biscay and dolphin bycatch.

STECF notes that the development of EM (AZTI 2024; Vignard and Tachoires 2023) appears to be a valuable, reliable, and cost-effective method to extend the monitoring coverage. STECF further notes that coverage, both in terms of the proportion per fleet segment and the number of fleet segments, has increased over time (see travaux 2c1 in Cloâtre et al. 2025). In France, following the OBSCAMe and OBSCAMe+ programs, the equipment of 116 vessels (103 gillnetters and 14 trawlers) was even made compulsory in 2025 (47% of fishing effort of gillnetters) with a strict statistical sampling scheme, as recommended by ICES (2024), to pick up the vessels to equip (Boussarie and Cloatre, 2024). Spain has also developed an EM program on netters and trawlers (Annexes 1 and 7 of the JR), although data supplied in the JR ended in 2023 and is partly inconsistent among annexes (Annex 1 stipulates that no netters were equipped in 2023 while Annex 7 shows that 7.4% of the Basque netter fleets was covered that year), which does not allow to reliably estimate the coverage and outcome of that program. STECF notes that the JR reports an EM program in Portugal, but no data are reported in the JR, and no data are described in the report of the ICES bycatch working group (ICES 2025). STECF reiterates its observation from PLEN 23-03 that a wider application of EM systems allowing sufficient post-hoc control, is a prerequisite for considering the possibility of moving towards real-time closures rather than a fixed closure.

STECF notes that Spain enforced a move-on-rule (Annex II of the JR), that imposes vessels to move away from at least 5 miles from a fishing site when more than three cetaceans are caught in fishing operations with bottom trawl gears (or one cetacean in two consecutive hauls). STECF considers that the effectiveness of such real-time measure can’t be guaranteed without appropriate monitoring and control. Moreover, STECF (PLEN 24-02) highlighted that “delay in detecting an increase in bycatch would, however, impair the effectiveness of such real-time management”. STECF considers that the development of fast automatic image-processing algorithms could contribute to achieve such a rapid warning system. STECF also considers that, once sufficient post-hoc control is guaranteed, the thresholds that trigger real-time closures or move-on rules (such as the simultaneous catch of three cetaceans by the Spanish bottom-trawl fleet) can be defined and estimated based on quantitative risk analysis that ensure their effectiveness.

STECF reminds that pingers are unlikely to be 100% effective, especially since, the pingers prescribed by Reg (EU) 812/2004 were mainly designed to mitigate the bycatch of harbour porpoise and results were generally less conclusive for dolphins (STECF EWG 19-07). In this context, STECF notes that many projects have been carried out to estimate their

effectiveness on common dolphins (annex 10 of the JR for a detailed list), to determine how relevant and practical they are across various fishing gear, to reduce the risk of dolphin habituation (Izquierdo et al. 2024, 2023; Lehnhoff et al. 2022). STECF reiterates its comment from PLEN 24-02 about the difficulty in obtaining statistically significant results, due to the variability in the occurrence of bycatch events. Recently, Faillettaz et al. (2025) provided a review of technical mitigation measures, including acoustic deterrent (with different types depending on vessels and gears), bio-inspired deterrent, light deterrent and devices to increase the acoustic reflectivity of gears, discuss pros and cons of each type of device, and concluded that while they offer promising solutions, work is still needed to optimise their functioning, enhance their ease of use and draw definitive conclusions on their effectiveness. STECF also reminds that it is critical to assess not only the efficiency of pingers to reduce bycatch, but also their possible detrimental side-effects due to background noise and displacement effects (in the case of pingers).

STECF (PLEN 24-02) highlighted the need to ensure the proper use of pingers by fishers (i.e., appropriate device, correct quantity, proper functioning and maintenance). STECF observes for example an incidental catch that occurred during experiment trials of the DOLPHINFREE devices while the device was out of battery (Lehnhoff et al. 2022). STECF notes that this issue is addressed in the JR, which states that “Member-States must control the good efficiency of the pingers on these fleets as some bycatches are related to pinger malfunction. On this regard, a reinforcement of the inspections at port and at sea should be implemented, on a risk analysis assessment, and communicated to the European Commission by the end of this year.”. Because the current level of control is unknown, STECF cannot determine whether the proposed (but unspecified) reinforced controls will be sufficient, but it acknowledges the relevance of the report to the Commission.

STECF notes that the JR promotes the tagging of dead by-caught animals. STECF underlines the relevance of this proposal since it allows a better analysis of the drift of dead animals and estimation of key parameters (e.g. buoyancy rate, drift duration) to quantify bycatch volumes based on stranding data (Peltier et al. 2025a). As acknowledged by Peltier et al. (2025a), the quality of such data greatly depends on fishers’ cooperation. The JR reminds recently tagging of dead dolphins were organised during MERMACIFRA and the VaradaC projects. The JR also notes that the analysis of tagging data collected in France has contributed to the revision of the winter mortality from 6 100 to 4 700 dolphins for the period 2017–2023 (from 1 December to 31 March). STECF suggests that a quantitative target for the proportion of dead dolphins that should be tagged may be useful, and that the tagging campaign ought to be linked to a control system (e.g., via EM) to prevent bias in the data collected.

Although bycatch monitoring has improved and the JR is committed to promoting data transfer to ICES and data sharing, STECF identifies that there might be further areas for improvement. For example, STECF observes that the Portuguese bycatch data from onboard monitoring provided in annex 1 of the JR is aggregated over the 2016-2023 period. The development and use of a standard format of exchange might solve this kind of issue in the future (ICES, 2026). The JR reports that “only data from French stranding network are used by ICES to estimate incidental catch according to stranding data, because those Spanish and Portuguese are fragmented”. ICES (2025) also noted that Spain also deployed efforts through EM programmes, however, data were not included in the WGBYC data calls. STECF

also notes in some annexes of the JR that onboard monitoring effort was not always distributed adequately to cover the period of high peak of interactions. STECF suggests checking whether this still occurs in the most recent years and if needed, considers better compliance with ICES recommendations (ICES 2024).

STECF Conclusions

STECF concludes that the assessment of the previous JR made during PLEN 24-02 still applies, i.e that the proposed measures in the JR should contribute to reducing incidental catches compared to a situation with no measures as of 1 January 2027. However, the proposed measures are less stringent than those recommended by ICES.

STECF concludes that the duration of the proposed closure is too short to fully cover the peak of interactions between the fleet and cetaceans. A two-month closure would allow a better coverage and was recommended by ICES but is likely to have significant social and economic impacts.

STECF concludes that, from an ecological point of view, it is not possible to predict the effect of the proposed change in the design of the spatio-temporal closure as the timing of the peak of interaction between fishing fleet and dolphins is too variable across years. Furthermore, STECF is not in a position to conclude whether two weeks of complete closure is equivalent to four weeks of partial closure.

STECF concludes that introducing flexibility of the timing of the closure might smooth the economic impacts on the fishing fleet and promote compliance by allowing the vessel owner to select the options that have the smallest impact on their operations. However, STECF concludes that it is not possible to conclude on the economic impact on the rest of the value chain and that it will likely depend on the distribution of closure dates choice across vessel owners.

STECF concludes that, although a flexible closure, shares some of the enforcement challenges associated with a fixed closure, it also raises additional issues, as some fishing vessels may be authorized to use a given gear while others are prohibited from doing so, on the same fishing day. STECF concludes that early notification of the chosen fishing periods to the authorities of the Member States is crucial to leave enough time to implement the necessary control measures based on which fishing vessel is allowed to fish with which gear during each day of the six weeks period.

STECF concludes that several additions compared with the previous JR are relevant, notably the tagging of dead individuals and reinforced controls on pinger use. However, STECF concludes that the lack of quantitative data (e.g. proportion of tagged dolphins) in the JR and the voluntary nature of the tagging impairs the assessment of the benefit compared with the current situation. Regarding control, STECF concludes that further details on current practices and planned control measures would be useful, while the commitment to report control outcomes to the Commission may provide a better basis for assessing their effectiveness.

STECF concludes that the proposed revision of the drafting of the rules on the minimum level of monitoring gillnetters compared to the previous JR and to the Commission Delegated

Regulation (EU) 2024/3089, is similar to the rules set up in the Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2025/2593 and clarifies the rules, confirming the 7% monitoring coverage.

STECF concludes that the extensive research in the last few years has significantly contributed to a better knowledge of the ecology of the species and its interaction with fisheries. The better spatial delineation of the risk areas might help to refine spatio-temporal measures in the future that would guarantee effective bycatch reduction while reducing the impacts on the fleets.

STECF concludes that extensive work has been undertaken and is still ongoing to develop and test technological mitigation measures (e.g. pingers and cetacean excluder devices). Although results appear promising, STECF considers that further work is needed to confirm and quantify their effects, both in terms of their effectiveness in reducing bycatch and their possible adverse side-effects due to background noise and displacement effects (in the case of pingers).

STECF concludes that the development and testing of EM systems appear to offer a cost-effective solution to collect reliable data with a significantly enhanced coverage.

STECF concludes that additional measures for areas and gears not subject to the closure should contribute to a further reduction in incidental catches.

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6.5 original request retracted by Commission

6.6 West Med MAP Compensation Measures

Request to the STECF

The 2026 Fishing Opportunities Regulation (Council Regulation (EU) 2026/266) introduced several modifications, compared to 2025, to the measures included in its Article 8, the compensation mechanism. Criteria establishing closure periods[1] were modified by amending the timeframe for setting the closure periods in the following manner:

- Criteria 8.1. c) from May-September to February-September.
- Criteria 8.1. d) from May-October to March-October.
- Criteria 8.1. e) from May-October to March-October.

Additionally, the regulation introduces a new criteria 8.1.n/8.2.n granting additional days to the Member States implementing permanent cessation as follows:

"a Member State may increase the allocation of fishing days by 15 % [if the permanent cessation concerns between 5 and 10% of the fleet concerned], unless a permanent cessation applies to more than 10 % of the fleet concerned, in which case the Member State may increase the allocation of fishing days by 30 %"

Finally, the first years of implementation of the compensation mechanism also highlighted divergences in implementing the compensation mechanism. In particular, some fishing vessels are being granted additional days for using 45mm and 50mm while fishing only with one net at the same time and additional % from Article 8 are being cumulated irrespective of where the fishing vessel operates.

Terms of reference (ToR)

1. Compensation Mechanism 2026

    1.3 Modified closures

STECF is requested to evaluate, in line with the approach proposed in STECF PLEN 26-01, the impact of the temporal changes made to the closure periods included in Article 8.1. and examine and confirm that the closure below 800m cannot be evaluated in a quantitative (Q1) level (Art 8.1.j).

    2.3 Permanent Cessation IT

STECF is requested to evaluate, in line with the approach proposed in STECF PLEN 26-01, the possible conservation impact of the new criteria related to permanent cessation (Article 8.1.n) on fishing mortality.

    3.3 Clarification on how 2 mesh sizes can be used simultaneously by a vessel, to justify cumulative accumulation of additional days

1. STECF is requested to examine and comment on whether it is practically possible to use 2 mesh sizes simultaneously on an otter trawl fishing vessel; and if so, to evaluate the impact on fishing mortality where compensation days stemming from criteria 8.1.a) and 8.1.b) are cumulated.

2. STECF is requested, in the context of compensation measures stemming from criteria 8.1.a) or b) to assess the effect of granting compensation to a twin otter trawl fishing net and the difference from the same measure to single otter trawlers considering the different catching power of these gears (documented in STECF-21-01)

STECF Comments

STECF has the following comments related to the general request and the specific ToRs requested:

1. General comments

STECF notes that the Compensation Mechanism (CM) established under Article 8 of the annual Fishing Opportunities Regulations constitutes one of the implementation tools of the Western Mediterranean Multiannual Plan (West Med MAP; Regulation (EU) 2019/1022). Its underlying rationale is that conservation measures capable of reducing fishing mortality (F) may justify a limited increase in fishing opportunities through the allocation of additional fishing days, provided that the overall conservation objectives of the MAP are maintained.

STECF notes that since its introduction, the CM has progressively evolved from a limited set of technical and spatial measures into a more structured framework incorporating selectivity improvements, temporal and spatial closures, technical innovations and, most recently, permanent cessation. At the same time, the scientific assessment has evolved from simple comparisons of nominal fishing effort towards integrated evaluations of F that explicitly consider fleet behaviour, effort redistribution and mixed-fisheries dynamics through spatially explicit bio-economic models.

STECF observes that the 2026 Fishing Opportunities Regulation introduces two main developments compared with 2025: (i) wider implementation windows for selected temporal closures; (ii) a new compensation criterion linked to permanent cessation. In addition, there is the need to clarify specific implementation issues identified during the first years of application, including the cumulative allocation of additional fishing days and the treatment of fishing gears with different selectivity.

STECF notes that the allocation of additional fishing days under Article 8 implicitly assumes biological equivalence between two opposing management effects: the reduction in F generated by a conservation measure and the increase in fishing mortality potentially associated with additional fishing days. Biological equivalence should therefore, according to STECF (PLEN 26-01) and the *ad hoc* report nº2615, be evaluated in terms of expected changes in fishing mortality rather than nominal fishing effort, considering fleet behaviour, effort redistribution and stock-specific vulnerability.

STECF notes that CM do not affect all stocks equally. Technical measures primarily modify gear selectivity, while spatial and temporal closures reduce fishing mortality only for the fraction of the stock occurring within the protected area and period. In mixed demersal fisheries, these measures therefore influence partial fishing mortality, i.e. the component of

total fishing mortality attributable to a particular fleet segment, gear, area or season, rather than total fishing mortality directly. Assessing their effects on partial F is therefore a necessary step before evaluating consequences at stock level.

STECF highlights that the realised effects of CM also depend on the behavioural responses of fishing fleets. Fishers may redistribute fishing effort spatially, temporally or across métiers following the introduction of closures or technical measures, causing realised fishing mortality to differ from that expected under the nominal design of the measure. Ignoring these adaptive responses may therefore lead to biased estimates of conservation benefits.

STECF notes that the scientific framework adopted in the present assessment builds upon the concept of evaluability introduced in STECF report nº2615 (PLEN 26-01). Rather than assuming that every conservation measure can be assessed quantitatively, evaluability recognises that the level of scientific confidence depends on the availability of appropriate data, suitable modelling approaches, the possibility of establishing causal relationships with fishing mortality, and the uncertainty associated with implementation and fleet behaviour.

Building upon this framework, compensation measures can be evaluated through a sequence of scientific questions:

- Is the expected biological mechanism clearly identified?
- Can this mechanism be parameterised using available data in order to quantify its effect in terms of fishing mortality?
- Can it be represented within an appropriate modelling framework?
- Can the resulting changes in fishing mortality be estimated with acceptable uncertainty?
- Can biological equivalence with the additional fishing days be demonstrated?

Only when these conditions are satisfied can a CM be considered fully evaluable (Q1) and suitable for quantitative assessment. Since compensation measures may affect different stocks differently, the assessment should consider all stocks covered by the West Med MAP, with particular attention to the most vulnerable ones.

2. Comments to the specific ToRs

2.1. ToR 1.1 - Modified temporal closures.

STECF notes that extending the temporal window during which Member State should set the temporal closures to four consecutive weeks does not increase the duration of the closure itself but rather makes it more flexible.

The biological rationale underlying seasonal closures is that F is reduced during periods when vulnerable components of the stock are disproportionately exposed to fishing activities. Such vulnerability may arise from spawning aggregations, recruitment processes or seasonal concentration of juveniles. Unlike permanent closures, temporal closures may generate conservation benefits only when their timing overlaps with biologically relevant life-cycle phases. Consequently, the expected effect depends not only on the duration and spatial extent of the closure but also on its temporal coincidence with spawning, recruitment and seasonal fishing patterns. Moreover, the biological effectiveness of seasonal closures

depends upon the extent to which fishing effort is redistributed before, during and after the closure period. In fact, considering that spatial aggregation can also persist after the end of the temporal closures, the subsequent temporal re-distribution of the fishing effort can lead to effects in terms of fishing mortality that need to be considered.

Consequently, STECF notes that evaluating changes in closure timing cannot be performed by simply accounting for nominal reductions in fishing effort but requires dynamic spatially explicit models capable of representing fleet behaviour. This principle has progressively emerged throughout successive STECF evaluations (STECF EWG 23-10 and PLEN 24-01) and underpins the current modelling framework based on SMART, ISIS-Fish and other spatial bio-economic models.

STECF performed a review of the scientific evidence underpinning seasonal closures within the West Med MAP, considering the principal STECF assessments developed since the implementation of the CM (Table 6.6.1). The review revealed marked heterogeneity in the quantity and quality of available biological information across stocks.

STECF notes that previous discussions and analyses have evidenced a general lack of useful information, which is often local and specific to research projects. For HKE and MUT, relatively detailed information is available on spawning phenology, recruitment dynamics, and the seasonal distribution of juveniles and adults. Conversely, for the four crustacean stocks (DPS, ARA, ARS), the available information focuses primarily on the identification of persistent nursery areas, mature female distributions and spatial hotspots derived from MEDISEH analyses and stock assessments. Explicit descriptions of monthly spawning or recruitment calendars are generally lacking.

STECF concluded that, given the scarcity of available data and the fact that spawning periods are also influenced by EMU and local conditions, it is difficult to identify unique periods for the different stocks.

Table 6.6.1. Summary of information about critical phases of the life-cycle collected and analysed, during the previous STECF EWGs.

Stock	Biologically important period(s)	Main vulnerable life stage(s)	Implication for seasonal closures	Primary supporting source
HKE	Spawning occurs throughout the year, with regional peaks during winter (Italian waters) and autumn–winter (Spanish/French waters).	Spawners and juveniles. Persistent nursery hotspots are better documented than adult spawning aggregations.	No single closure window is optimal throughout the West Mediterranean. The wider implementation period introduced in Article 8 allows to better match regional spawning phenology and nursery protection (ecological perspective) or less productive periods (fishers perspective).	STECF-23-01 (species biology and spawning phenology); STECF-22-01 (persistent nursery and spawning hotspots); MEDISEH hotspot analyses.
MUT	Main spawning period: May–June; larval phase: June–July; recruitment: summer–early autumn.	Spawners in late spring; recruits during summer and early autumn.	Spring closures mainly protect spawning adults, whereas late summer closures better protect recruits.	STECF stock assessment reports; STECF-23-01 biological review.
NEP	Reproductive behaviour influences catchability (ovigerous females remain inside burrows). Monthly spawning calendar not explicitly synthesised in reviewed STECF reports.	Mature females and recruits.	Spatial protection of persistent burrow habitats is likely more effective than applying a uniform seasonal closure.	STECF-22-01; MEDISEH habitat analyses; stock assessment documentation.
DPS	Juvenile and mature female hotspots identified; no harmonised monthly spawning calendar reported in reviewed STECF documents.	Juveniles and mature females.	Closure timing should be based on spatial overlap with recruits and spawning grounds rather than fixed calendar periods.	STECF-22-01; STECF-23-01; MEDISEH hotspot analyses.
ARS	Mature females and juvenile distributions characterised through hotspot analyses; monthly reproductive cycle not explicitly summarised.	Mature females.	Seasonal measures should be combined with spatial hotspot protection.	STECF-22-01; MEDISEH; stock assessment reports.
ARA	Maturity and spawning biology incorporated into assessment models; no common West Med monthly reproductive calendar identified.	Mature females.	Biological effectiveness depends primarily on spatial distribution and fleet overlap.	STECF-22-01; STECF stock assessments; MEDISEH analyses.

Source: Own elaboration from STECF PLEN 26-01.

STECF notes that, from a theoretical perspective, if closure timing were selected at random, widening the implementation window would reduce the probability that a fixed-duration closure overlaps a biologically sensitive period. Therefore, extending the implementation window from May–September to February–September, or from May–October to March–October, should not be interpreted as providing greater conservation benefits. Instead, the wider temporal window potentially enables Member States to better align closures with regional differences in spawning phenology, juvenile distribution and fleet activity. This increased flexibility may therefore improve the likelihood that closures are implemented during biologically relevant periods, but the realised conservation benefit remains entirely dependent upon the specific timing adopted by each Member State.

2.2 - Assessment of the closure below 800 m (Article 8.1.j).

Article 8.1(j) considers the implementation of a permanent closure below 800 metres (m) depth as one of the conservation measures eligible for compensation.

STECF notes that, unlike shallow-water closures aimed at nursery or spawning grounds, closures below 800 m are primarily intended to reduce fishing mortality on deep-water resources and limit fishing activity in habitats that support vulnerable benthic communities and deep-water commercial species. However, the scientific basis for estimating the expected reduction in fishing mortality from this measure is substantially weaker than for other compensation measures. STECF has examined deep-water closures on several occasions (STECF 23-01, STECF 24-01, PLEN 23-02 and STECF 24-09), as well as through dedicated *ad hoc* contracts. These analyses showed that some deep-water closure scenarios produced little additional reduction in fishing mortality relative to the status quo, mainly because fishing effort was redistributed towards shallower grounds. As a result, the expected conservation benefits depend critically on fleet behavioural responses, rather than on the closure itself.

STECF notes that the review conducted under *ad hoc* contract nº25105 reviewed in PLEN 26-01 similarly concluded that the available literature provides heterogeneous, and sometimes contradictory, results depending on the modelling framework, management unit, target species, and assumptions regarding fleet adaptation. The recent comparative analysis by Sbrana et al. (2025) further illustrates this complexity, indicating that simulated bathymetric closures produced markedly different ecological and socio-economic outcomes among Mediterranean regions.

STECF notes that the inability to perform a quantitative (Q1) evaluation of closures below 800 m reflects the current inability to estimate its expected effect on fishing mortality with sufficient robustness and generality across the West Mediterranean.

Three independent sources of uncertainty justify this conclusion:

1. **Data limitations:** Available fisheries-dependent and fisheries-independent datasets provide only limited information on fishing activity occurring below 800 m. Several commercial species targeted at these depths are characterised by relatively sparse observations, while survey coverage at deep bathymetric strata remains limited. Consequently, empirical estimates of fishing mortality before and after implementation of the closure are associated with considerable uncertainty.

2. **Model limitations**: Although some models can represent effort redistribution, no modelling framework has yet been comprehensively calibrated and validated to quantify the effects of a permanent closure below 800 m across both West Mediterranean Management Units. Existing simulations remain highly scenario-dependent and rely on assumptions that cannot currently be generalised.
3. Perhaps more importantly, a bathymetric closure is an **indirect management measure**. Its conservation effect is mediated through behavioural adaptation by fishing vessels. Consequently, Closure below 800 m -> changes fishing grounds -> changes spatial effort distribution -> changes partial fishing mortality -> changes total fishing mortality

Each step introduces additional uncertainty. Unlike selectivity measures, where the biological mechanism is direct and measurable, the effect of deep-water closures emerges only through a cascade of behavioural and ecological processes that remain difficult to parameterise consistently.

Although the unavailability of survey data remains the main limit, future improvements may arise from:

- higher-resolution VMS/AIS data (VMS Data Call is ongoing);
- improved spatial information on deep-water fishing effort;
- enhanced representation of fisher behavioural adaptation;
- integrated spatial bio-economic modelling;
- additional validation using long-term monitoring following implementation;
- on going studies at local or regional scales.

STECF acknowledges that deep-water closures below 800 m are supported by a plausible conservation rationale. However, the Committee considers that the currently available empirical evidence and modelling frameworks do not allow a robust quantitative estimation of their expected effect on fishing mortality across the West Mediterranean. Existing simulations remain highly dependent on assumptions regarding fleet behaviour, effort redistribution and spatial fishing dynamics, and cannot yet be generalised across management units.

2.3. ToR 2 - Assessment of the new permanent cessation criterion (Article 8.1.n).

The 2026 Fishing Opportunities Regulation introduces a new compensation criterion linking additional fishing days to permanent fleet cessation schemes. Under Article 8.1(n), Member States implementing permanent cessation may increase their fishing day allocation by 15% where between 5% and 10% of the fleet concerned is permanently withdrawn, and by 30% where permanent cessation exceeds 10% of the fleet.

STECF notes that, unlike the other CMs included in Article 8, which reduce fishing mortality through changes in fishing practices or spatial and temporal fishing patterns, permanent cessation acts by directly reducing fleet capacity. Consequently, the scientific question is whether this structural reduction in capacity offsets the increase in fishing opportunities granted to the remaining vessels. Under fisheries theory, the permanent withdrawal of vessels reduces the fleet's maximum fishing capacity by decreasing the number of active

vessels. However, the conservation benefit is not necessarily proportional to the reduction in vessel numbers, as the remaining fleet may adapt by increasing fishing activity, concentrating effort in more profitable fishing grounds, improving fishing efficiency, or absorbing part of the effort released by withdrawn vessels. Therefore, the effectiveness of permanent cessation depends on the balance between the reduction in fleet capacity and the behavioural responses of the remaining vessels, making its evaluation fundamentally different from that of the other compensation measures under Article 8.

STECF notes that, as with spatial closures, behavioural responses may reduce the conservation benefits. Remaining vessels may increase trip duration, optimise fishing strategies or shift towards more profitable fishing grounds. Such adaptive responses can only be represented through dynamic bio-economic modelling. In this way, the allocation of additional fishing days may partly offset the expected reduction in fishing mortality.

Previous STECF work has consistently recognised permanent cessation as a scientifically plausible conservation measure, while emphasising that its effectiveness cannot be inferred solely from the reduction in vessel numbers because fleet adaptation and effort redistribution may substantially modify the resulting fishing mortality (STECF PLEN 26-01, PLEN 24-01, EWG 25-12, EWG 24-13 and EWG-23-13), Similarly, successive West Med effort reports have incorporated decommissioning schemes into scenario simulations, accounting for reductions in fishing capacity alongside changes in effort allocation and compensation mechanisms. These analyses recognise that decommissioning contributes to reductions in fishing mortality but also highlight that its biological effectiveness depends upon the assumptions adopted regarding fleet dynamics and effort redistribution.

The *ad hoc* contract report nº2615 classified permanent cessation as a distinct category of compensation measure characterised by relatively high evaluability (Q2), because both the reduction in fleet capacity and the associated changes in fishing effort can, in principle, be quantified using existing fleet registers, effort databases and bio-economic models.

Finally, STECF notes that, even assuming that the structures of the dismissed part of the fleet and that of the remaining part of the fleet (that will benefit from the additional days) are the same, the percentages reported in the 2026 Fishing Opportunities Regulation could determine an increase in the final effort with respect to the value before the adoption of the CM. STECF notes also that the regulation does not contain a specific rule to guarantee that the removed effort is assigned to a portion of the remaining fleet that corresponds to the similar fishing capacity of the dismissed vessels.

2.4. ToR 3.1 - Assessment of the cumulative compensation associated with 45 mm and 50 mm codends.

STECF notes that the practical feasibility of using two mesh sizes simultaneously on an otter trawl vessel does not demonstrates that their conservation effects are additive. Even where both mesh sizes may be present within the same gear configuration, fish are subjected to a single overall size-selection process, and the resulting selectivity is determined by the performance of the gear as a whole. Therefore, the simultaneous presence of two mesh sizes does not automatically imply an additional reduction in fishing mortality beyond that achieved by the most selective configuration alone. As a result, the conservation effects

associated with Article 8.1(a) and Article 8.1(b) cannot be considered additive for vessels operating two mesh sizes simultaneously in an otter trawl net.

2.5. ToR 3.2 - Granting compensation to a twin otter trawl fishing net and the difference from the same measure to single otter trawlers.

STECF notes that previous assessments have already demonstrated that twin otter trawls exhibit higher fishing efficiency than conventional single otter trawls and that differences in fishing power should be estimated using trip-level LPUE derived from VMS and logbook information rather than aggregated effort statistics (see TOR 6.9 of this plenary report). When evaluating CMs, it is therefore pertinent to examine whether identical percentages of additional fishing days translate into comparable biological consequences across gears exhibiting different levels of fishing power.

At present, although available evidence demonstrates that OTT gears exhibit greater fishing efficiency than OTB gears, no analyses have been identified that quantify the effect of applying the same compensation percentages to OTB and OTT under the Article 8 CM. Consequently, no scientific evidence currently demonstrates that identical percentages of additional fishing days generate equivalent increases in fishing mortality for OTB and OTT gears.

STECF Conclusions

STECF concludes that extending the closure implementation period increases management flexibility rather than directly increasing conservation benefits. The actual effectiveness of temporal closures will continue to depend upon whether Member States select periods that overlap with biologically sensitive phases of the exploited stocks. Additional analyses, including simulations, are needed to assess the impact of the closure periods defined by the Member States within the new temporal changes.

STECF reiterates the conclusion made in PLEN 26-01 that closure below 800 m cannot presently be considered quantitatively evaluable (Q1 level). STECF also concludes that, although the limitation of survey coverage at deep bathymetric strata remains a major constraint, future improvements in spatial fisheries data and modelling approaches may allow improved assessment (still Q2 level) of this measure.

STECF concludes that the possible conservation impact of the new permanent cessation criterion introduced under Article 8.1(n) cannot be inferred directly from the percentage of vessels permanently withdrawn or from the additional fishing days allocated specified in the Regulation. The biological outcome depends on the characteristics of the vessels removed from the fleet, the redistribution of fishing opportunities among the remaining vessels and their behavioural responses. STECF concludes that to raise the evaluability to a Q1 level information should be available regarding:

- Characteristics of withdrawn vessels;
- historical fishing effort;
- fleet dynamics;

- effort reallocation among remaining vessels;

and that these data are used to inform dynamic fleet-specific bio-economic modelling capable of estimating changes in effective fishing mortality rather than nominal fleet size alone. STECF notes that, under the percentages currently set out in the Regulation, the final level of fishing effort could increase.

STECF concludes that the cumulative allocation of additional fishing days under Articles 8.1(a) and 8.1(b) is not scientifically justified. The use of different codend mesh sizes, whether within the same gear configuration or across fishing operations, does not provide evidence of additive conservation benefits and therefore does not support the cumulative granting of compensation days.

STECF concludes that, given the higher fishing efficiency of OTT compared with OTB, applying the same percentage increase in fishing days to both gears is unlikely to result in equivalent effective fishing pressure. The same compensation percentage may therefore have different effects on fishing mortality.

6.7 Testing of F_{MSY} upper range for West Med MAP most vulnerable stock

Request to the STECF

On the basis of Articles 4 (1-3) of the Regulation (EU) 2019/1022, the West Mediterranean MAP requires for setting targets of fishing mortality in line with ranges of the F_{MSY} in order to manage the stocks "the Council fixes maximum allowable fishing effort, it shall establish that fishing effort for each fishing effort group, within the range of F_{MSY} available at that time for the most vulnerable stock". If certain conditions are met (Article 5 of Regulation (EU) 2019/1022) fishing effort days can be set above the F_{MSY} range levels.

The definition of range of F_{MSY} in the MAP means that all levels of fishing mortality within that range result in maximum sustainable yield (MSY) in the long term with a given fishing pattern and under current average environmental conditions, without significantly affecting the reproduction process for the stocks in question. It is derived to deliver no more than a 5% reduction in long-term yield compared to the MSY. It is capped so that the probability of the stock falling below the limit reference point (B_{lim}) is no more than 5%.

Since 2023 STECF has been requested to provide F_{MSY} ranges for the stocks with analytical assessments as part of the stock assessment advice. STECF 23-09 concluded that until further evaluations can be completed, F_{MSY} should be considered as Fupper. In 2024 STECF concluded that the EWG 24-10 should estimate the reference points needed for the MAP implementation: F_{max} for type 1 stocks and F0.1 for all the others. Furthermore, STECF concluded that if the 2024 hake stocks assessments performed by the EWG 24-10 show any of these stocks to be above B_{PA}, in which case F ranges may be needed, the F ranges estimated by the EWG 24-02 could be used preliminarily. STECF further concluded that if the use of F ranges is required, as per previous paragraph, the revision will have to be brought forward, however there was no Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) framework available for conducting the necessary testing.

STECF 25-09, in the summary sheets of the assessed stocks, for F_{MSY} upper estimates has a foot note remarking that this value "is not tested and is assumed not to be precautionary, hence STECF does not advise fishing at F> F_{MSY}". This has prevented DG MARE from using the Fupper range of the most vulnerable stock.

Since EWG 24-10 and 25-09, there have been multiple developments. In 2025 there was a shift in most vulnerable stock moving from Hake to Norway lobster both in EMU 1 and 2. On this basis, it is clear that in absence of a revision/validation of the F_{MSY} upper ranges estimated in EWG 24-02, one of the key flexibilities of the West Mediterranean MAPs to deal explicitly with the mixed nature of the fisheries, cannot be used. Thanks to the advancements with the new FLR MSE package and with MSE work carried out in GFCM and in the EWG 26-03, there is now an MSE framework for the West Med MAP stocks that is conductive to reference points testing, including potentially the Fupper ranges. On this basis and to try to overcome the current limitation, STECF is asked to complete the testing of Fupper ranges so that they can be used.

TORs

1 Testing Fupper for current most vulnerable stock

STECF is requested to further advance in the review of F_{MSY} upper range to ensure that stocks with an analytical assessment are compatible with the F_{MSY} definition in the West Med MAP.

I. Considering the Management Strategy Evaluation testing done in EWG 26-03 (EWG Methods) to test the stability of B_{PA} and B_{lim}, STECF should advise if also the values of the Fupper ranges (proposed in the 2024 EWG Methods) can be tested in this MSE framework to ensure that they are precautionary and in line with the current MAP F_{MSY} range definition.

II. On the basis of the conclusions the point above, advise if STECF EWG Stock assessment (EWG 26-09) or EWG Effort (EWG 26-10) could be requested to validate via the MSE script the Fupper for the emerging most vulnerable stocks in the two EMUs or if this work is best suited for an ad hoc contract ahead of EWG 26-09 or 26-10.

Summary of the information provided to STECF

STECF used the draft report of the EWG 26-03 on methods for stock assessments in the Western Mediterranean Sea (ToR 5.2 of this plenary report), together with other relevant STECF EWG and plenary reports. Particular reference was made to EWG 24-02, which proposed the framework for calculating F_{MSY} and F_{MSY} ranges.

STECF Comments

STECF has the following comments regarding each part of the single ToR of this request.

1. ToR 1.1. Use of the MSE framework to test F_{MSY} ranges

1.1. STECF framework for F_{MSY} and F_{MSY} ranges

STECF recalls that in Article 2 of the Western Mediterranean Sea EU Multiannual Plan (West Med MAP, Regulation (EU) 2019/1022), F_{MSY} is defined as the fishing mortality that “gives the long-term maximum yield”, while F_{MSY} range is defined as the range of fishing mortality values that “deliver no more than a 5% reduction in long-term yield compared to the MSY” and is capped “so that the probability of the stock falling below the limit reference point (B_{lim}) is no more than 5%”.

STECF notes that, until 2023, F_{MSY} was set at $F_{0.1}$ (the fishing mortality at which the slope of the yield-per-recruit curve is 10% of that at the origin) for all stocks. In addition, F_{MSY} ranges were derived from the empirical relationships established by EWG 15-09, which were based on a meta-analysis of the F_{MSY} ranges for demersal stocks in the Baltic Sea and the North Sea. At that time, STECF considered that the precautionary nature of these ranges could not be assessed (EWG 23-09).

In 2024, EWG 24-02 proposed a methodology for calculating F_{MSY} (or F_{MSY} proxy) targets and respective F_{MSY} ranges for the key stocks in the West Med MAP. It consisted of first calculating several F_{MSY} proxy targets and the respective ranges leading to 95% of the yield at F_{MSY} proxy. Then, a forward simulation framework was used to assess the risks of falling

below B_{lim} for these ranges. In line with the definition of F_{MSY} ranges (article 2 in Regulation (EU) 2019/1022), the fishing mortality value inducing risks of going below B_{lim} equal or higher than 5% ($F_{p.05}$) was used to set the maximum limits to exploitation and cap the estimated F_{MSY} ranges.

STECF notes that EWG 24-02 identified three groups of stocks depending on the shape of the equilibrium production curves. The first group (Type 1) showed a well-defined maximum in the production curve (F_{max}) for which F_{MSY} (fishing mortality giving the maximum yield) and the corresponding ranges (fishing mortalities leading to yields above 95% of the yield at F_{MSY}) could be calculated from the production curve. The second group (Type 2) had a well-defined maximum, with a slowly decreasing yield that impeded the calculation of the range upper limit. The third group (Type 3) had a continuously increasing production curve and did not have a well-defined maximum. For the second and third groups the EWG proposed several options gradually reverting to $F_{0.1}$ and empirical F ranges. STECF further notes that the three stocks classified as Type 1 were the two most vulnerable stocks at that time (hake in GSAs 1-5-6-7 and hake in GSAs 8-9-10-11) and Norway lobster in GSA 6.

Based on the work of EWG 24-02, PLEN 24-02 concluded that the stock assessment EWG (EWG 24-10) should "estimate the reference points needed for the MAP implementation: F_{max} for Type 1 stocks and $F_{0.1}$ for all the others". Furthermore, STECF concluded that "if the 2024 hake stocks assessments performed by the EWG 24-10 show any of these stocks to be above B_{PA}, in which case F ranges may be needed, the F ranges estimated by the EWG 24-02 could be used preliminary."

Subsequently, in EWG 24-10, F_{MSY} was estimated as F_{max} for the three stocks classified as Type1, whereas $F_{0.1}$ was used for the other stocks. Given that the most vulnerable stocks were estimated to be below B_{PA}, STECF EWG 24-10 interpreted that the F_{MSY} ranges were not usable for management purposes and did not recalculate them (STECF PLEN 24-09-mini). STECF notes that the F ranges provided in the EWG 24-10 report were based on the empirical equations for all stocks.

A similar approach was followed during EWG 25-09, in which the values of F_{MSY} were updated based on the type of the production curve and the provided F_{MSY} ranges were based on the empirical equations for all stocks, except for hake in EMU 1.

1.2. Current F_{MSY} and F_{MSY} ranges for most vulnerable stocks

According to the latest stock assessment (EWG 25-09, PLEN 25-09-mini), the current most vulnerable stocks (MVS) are Norway lobster in GSA 6 (EMU1) and Norway lobster in GSA 11 (EMU2).

STECF notes that the first stock, Norway lobster in GSA 6 (EMU1), was analysed during EWG 24-02. The production curve showed a well-defined maximum and was therefore classified as Type 1. Consequently, F_{MSY} (fishing mortality giving the maximum yield) and the corresponding F_{MSY} ranges (fishing mortalities leading to yields above 95% of the yield at F_{MSY}) could be calculated from the production curve. However, F_{upper} implied probabilities of SSB being below B_{lim} larger than 0.05 and it had to be capped at $F_{p.05}$. Since EWG 24-02 the stock assessment has been updated twice. As a result, STECF cannot assess whether the F_{upper} calculated by EWG 24-02 should still be capped by Fp.05, and therefore, whether it can

still be considered precautionary. Furthermore, STECF observes that during EWG 26-09 there will be three additional years of data compared with EWG 24-02. This would be aligned with the three-year revision interval suggested by PLEN 22-03 for reference points, supporting the full revision of F_{MSY} and F_{MSY} ranges to be conducted this year.

Regarding the second stock, Norway lobster in GSA 11 (EMU2), STECF notes that it was first assessed with an age-structured model during EWG 25-09. This means that F_{MSY} and respective F_{MSY} ranges for this could not be calculated during EWG 24-02. Alternatively, EWG 25-09 explored the possibility to use F_{max} to estimate F_{MSY}, but the production curve was continuously increasing, and ultimately $F_{0.1}$ was used as a proxy for F_{MSY} and F_{MSY} ranges were calculated using the empirical formulas. STECF notes that these values need to be further evaluated in line with the framework proposed by EWG 24-02.

For the remaining stocks for which EWG 24-02 provided F_{MSY} and respective F_{MSY} ranges, STECF notes that there are a variety of situations that may trigger an update of the values, e.g. changes in the stock assessment model settings, changes in the stock-recruitment models that were used for the calculation of production curves and/or changes in the biological or selectivity parameters. As stated for Norway lobster in GSA 6, STECF considers that due to the elapsed time since EWG 24-02, in case F_{MSY} ranges are needed for any of the other stocks, the estimates should be updated incorporating the most up-to-date information for the stock.

Finally, regarding the use of the empirical equations provided by STECF EWG 15-06 for the calculation of F_{MSY} ranges for any of the stocks, STECF recalls that according to the long-term projections carried out during EWG 24-02, the F_{MSY} ranges derived from the empirical equations do not necessarily fulfill the definition of the F_{MSY} ranges given in Article 2 of the West Med MAP. While the F_{MSY} ranges obtained from the empirical equations were precautionary in the long-term, they did not always result in 95% of the catches at F_{MSY} (the values ranged between 85% and 105%).

1.3. Applicability of the MSE framework

STECF notes that the Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) framework used during EWG 26-03 (see ToR 5.2 of this plenary report) to test the stability of B_{lim}, could have broader applications, such as the evaluation of alternative reference points and management strategies under different sources of uncertainty. The use of MSE for such purposes would be consistent with internationally accepted best practice, including in ICES and GFCM. Consequently, STECF considers that this framework could also be used to evaluate if F_{MSY} ranges are precautionary and in line with the definition in the West Med MAP.

However, STECF remarks that, despite being a powerful tool, the application of the MSE framework is not straightforward. Within the broad MSE framework, numerous settings must be specified, including the conditioning of population and fleet dynamics, the formulation of candidate management strategies, and the selection of the most relevant sources of uncertainty in the fishery system. The reliability of the outcomes will critically depend on the extent to which the key processes and uncertainties of the fishery system have been properly captured.

STECF notes that the forward simulation framework used by EWG 24-02 to test F_{MSY} ranges can be considered a simplified version of the MSE framework used by EWG 26-03. While the forward simulation framework included a broad range of uncertainties regarding the population dynamics (initial population dynamics, parameters of the stock-recruitment model and variability around the stock-recruitment model), the uncertainty in the management procedure was represented in a single term as variability around the actual fishing mortality. In contrast, the MSE framework would allow to explicitly include the different sources of uncertainty in the management procedure (e.g. observation uncertainty, stock assessment estimation uncertainty, reference point estimation uncertainty, application of advice rule and/or implementation uncertainty). Therefore, if the provided MSE framework is adequately set up, replacing the forward simulation framework by the MSE framework could provide a more reliable evaluation of the F_{MSY} ranges. STECF notes this is in line with the future work suggested by EWG 24-02 of conducting MSE for the most vulnerable stocks.

STECF notes that the steps followed by EWG 24-02 for evaluating F_{MSY} ranges would still be valid when using the MSE framework. These steps are: collation of latest stock assessment results, revision of stock-recruitment models, calculation of F_{MSY} and respective F_{MSY} ranges, calculation of $F_{p.05}$ and evaluation of long-term performance of F_{MSY} ranges.

STECF notes that currently the MSE framework establishes the advised fishing mortality at F_{MSY} and does not include any reduction of fishing mortality when the MVS is below B_{PA} or B_{lim}. As previously noted by PLEN 24-03, the West Med MAP regulation (EU Reg 2019/1022) does not specify how the fishing mortality reduction is to be made. STECF reiterates that there are multiple plausible approaches to modulate this reduction, each of which may lead to different management outcomes. In the absence of clear guidance, it is not possible to evaluate the effectiveness of this measure in a generic manner, nor to incorporate it into the MSE framework. STECF notes that this may have an impact when assessing the risks associated with the implementation of F_{MSY} ranges.

1.4. Fishing at F_{upper}

Article 4 (3) of the West Med MAP (EU Reg 2019/1022) establishes that the maximum allowable fishing effort shall be set “within the range of F_{MSY} available at that time for the most vulnerable stock”. However, STECF notes that fishing at F_{upper} of the MVS is not always permitted. 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 B_{PA}, “maximum allowable fishing effort shall be set at levels consistent with a fishing mortality that is reduced within the range of F_{MSY}”. In addition, according to article 6(2) if a stock is below B_{lim} further remedial measures should be taken, including adequate reduction of the maximum allowable fishing effort.

As stated previously by STECF (PLEN 24-03), the principle of reducing fishing mortality when biomass falls below a given threshold is of high relevance. Furthermore, STECF considers that keeping the reduction of fishing mortality within the lower range of F_{MSY} (between F_{lower} and F_{MSY}), instead of within the whole range of F_{MSY}, would reduce biological risks and would contribute to a faster recovery of the stock. This would be in line with the approach followed in other European MAPs (e.g. Regulation (EU) 2019/472) that avoid the use of F_{upper} by restricting the fishing mortality below F_{MSY} when the biomass is below some threshold.

1.5. Additional considerations

STECF recalls that F_{MSY} ranges were developed to support management decisions in mixed fisheries. Therefore, beyond the simulations based on single-stock dynamics to calculate reference points, their performance should be evaluated within a mixed-fisheries context.

2. ToR 1.2. Workplan to validate F_{MSY} ranges of the most vulnerable stocks via the MSE script

STECF observes that ideally, the validation of F_{MSY} ranges for the emerging MVSs through MSE simulations should be conducted once the stock assessment and reference point estimates from the stock assessment EWG are available and the MVSs per EMU have been identified, but before the effort regime EWG, to give the modelers sufficient time to use the new F_{MSY} ranges in the elaboration of effort scenarios.

STECF notes that both the stock assessment and the effort regime EWGs (EWG 26-09 and EWG 26-10) already face a heavy workload under strong time constraints (PLEN 24-09–mini, PLEN 24-03, PLEN 25-03). In recent years substantial efforts have been made to address these issues, e.g. through *ad hoc* contracts prior to the EWG (PLEN 25-09-mini). In an attempt to improve the process for 2026, PLEN 25-03 discussed and planned the work programme in 2026 to support the West Med MAP. Furthermore, EWG 26-03 has developed a coordination protocol between the stock assessment and the effort regime EWGs (see ToR 5.2 in this plenary report). STECF considers that completing this process and fully establishing the coordination protocol should remain a priority for these EWGs, before any additional tasks are taken.

STECF notes that if the number of stocks assessed by EWG 26-09 is reduced, some experts could be allocated during the EWG to update the F_{MSY} ranges for the MVS. The revision and adjustment of the MSE scripts could start during the EWG, while the actual evaluation of the F_{MSY} ranges would only be possible once the final stock assessment results are ready. As the stock assessment results may only be delivered towards the end of the meeting and MSE work usually requires time and computational resources, an *ad hoc* contract could be issued to ensure the work can be finalized and reported.

STECF Conclusions

STECF concludes that from the two MVSs identified in the 2025 Stock Assessment EWG, only Norway lobster in GSA 6 was analysed during EWG 24-02. Given that F_{upper} was capped by $F_{p.05}$ to ensure the probability of SSB being below B_{lim} was below 0.05, STECF concludes that the F_{MSY} ranges for this stock should be updated based on the most up-to-date information (including three additional years of data). Additionally, F_{MSY} ranges for Norway lobster in GSA 11 should be subject for a complete full analysis.

STECF concludes that the MSE framework used by EWG 26-03 to assess stability of B_{lim} could also be used to evaluate if F_{MSY} ranges are precautionary and in line with the definition in the West Med MAP. However, STECF stresses that this framework requires a large number of settings and assumptions that may need to be checked and adapted for this new purpose.

STECF concludes that the approach followed by EWG 24-02 for updating reference points and deriving and evaluating F_{MSY} ranges followed by EWG 24-02, remains valid, in case the MSE framework would replace the forward simulations used previously.

STECF concludes that if the number of stocks assessed by EWG 26-09 is reduced, the update of the F_{MSY} ranges via the MSE script for the MVS in EMU 1 and 2 could be initiated during the stock assessment EWG and finalized via an *ad hoc* contract.

6.8 original request retracted by Commission

6.9 Evaluation of the Otter trawl to Otter Twin Trawl conversion factor under the GFCM Adriatic MAP and on best practices for a future inclusion of OTT gear in the effort regime beyond 2026

Background provided by the Commisssion

The Adriatic demersal MAP was adopted by GFCM in 2019, and it regulates the fishing mortality of the 5 keys stocks with a fishing effort regime covering bottom towed gears[10]. CPCs at the beginning of the MAP could declare different types of towed gears and their levels of fishing effort starting from given baseline periods. While otter (OTB) and beam (TBB) trawlers were declared by Member States, no country declared the use of otter twin trawlers (OTT), de facto, not including OTT gear in the plan. Before the MAP adoption there was some OTT activity in the Adriatic, but since the MAP adoption this gear does not have an allocation of fishing days. Over time, different annual decisions[11] established fishing opportunities in the period 2020-2026, including the possibility of developing conversion factors.

On this basis, Italy developed draft conversion factor for OTB- OTT on the basis of 2015-2018 logbook data and OTB-OTB on recent data and these were presented and discussed in the GFCM Subregional Committee for the Adriatic and then in the Scientific Advisory Committee, where the following was concluded:

The SRC took note of the proposal to establish conversion factors to transfer effort between effort groups (OTB-OTB) and gear fleet segments (OTB-OTT) based on LPUE, as applied by the STECF in the western Mediterranean. The SRC-AS encouraged a comparison of results obtained using a combined LPUE for all species versus an LPUE calculated only on MAP species, while also underlining the importance of employing more recent data for the conversion from OTB to OTT owing to the risk of an unaccounted increase of fishing power. The SRC noted a discrepancy in the level of OTB LPUE reported in the two analyses, noting that that from 2015-2018 is almost half of the most recent one, which raises questions on the reliability of the estimated of the OTB-OTT conversion factors. It also called for better understanding of the impact of the application of the conversion factors between different vessel size segments, given the heterogeneity in the spatial distribution of operations and catch composition as well as the difference in exploitation patterns between smaller vessels that operated coastally and larger ones that operated further offshore. Finally, the SRC-AS noted that OTT appeared to be more efficient than OTB and underlined the need to better

10 https://gfcm.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/CoC/EWrLEh2_wpdDibe57A4ZfssBDeGRu-ZnSM7tP3eBs3Xguw

11 https://gfcm.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/CoC/Ef9RxVoefwNApHhFQoA5MAoBmTIDTmryQVgfnJqHQdgfFA

https://gfcm.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/CoC/Een5_uD93vFLtYNNOZWZcVUBWHOyVbDCPSBX2soa5ca8zg

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https://gfcm.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/CoC/Efo14_nn0HNNhQbPr3aKNEsBSZBcGmExWco4XhlTHFb5vg

https://gfcm.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/CoC/IQBRqcigjsAXQbxnQO2ZuWVXAbRFd8UETjijZHm-jRjaCo8

understand net benefits in terms of decarbonization as well as the potential for a wider use across the Adriatic Sea.

As the current GFCM MAP is coming to an end in 2026, ongoing discussions for the future MAP, have identified the intention of Italy to include OTT gear in the effort regime from 2027. While OTT vessels catch the same target stocks of the OTBs, in the current GFCM advice there is no explicit accounting for their past or future impact on the key stocks. Owing to much higher LPUEs, as demonstrated by the OTB-OTT French conversion factors (see TOR above), it is key that the new MAP will be equipped with the correct mechanism to manage OTB and OTT gears while correctly accounting their relative impacts on the stocks and managing the different fishing efficiencies. Advise from STECF is sought to facilitate the adoption of such mechanism and for a way to quantify a sustainable initial level of OTT days.

Background documentation is available on: https://stecf.ec.europa.eu/document/bef03b06-65a2-4c59-a404-6e8c67f6bcf5

Request to the STECF

TOR 1

1) STECF is requested to to evaluate the study on the OTB-OTT conversion factor and to, and to:
    a. Assess if the logbook data used (from 2015-2018) is reliable and consistent in terms of LPUE level with the data used to derive contemporary OTB-OTB conversion factors (e.g. the all species OTB LPUE in 2017-2018 is between 400-600 kg/day, while in 2024 OTB LPUE is above 700 kg/day).
    b. Advice on the need of updating this information with recent LPUEs to ensure a correct accounting of fishing power increase over time.
    c. Advise, based on point a-b), if the study provides for a valid estimation of this conversion factor for its future use

TOR 2

- STECF is requested to advise on the best practices for the addition, on top of OTB gear, of OTT gear in the demersal Adriatic GFCM MAP and for correctly accounting for the higher catching power of OTT gear. STECF should consider that the impact of OTTs is not quantified in the stocks assessments provided by SAC in recent years and that the.
- Advise on how to best establish an initial number of OTT fishing days that will be in line with MSY, e.g. either started converting several OTB days in OTT days or based on a historical baseline of OTT days
- Advise on how to best manage the allocation of fishing days by gear (OTB/OTT)

Summary of the information provided to STECF

The following documents were supplied to STECF:

1. “Technical document on the Adriatic demersal management plan – Conversion factors between OTB and OTT fishing gears”, Mannini A. et al., 2026a. This technical report provides the analysis of the logbook data from 2016 to 2018 to produce conversion factors between OTB and OTT in the Adriatic Sea considering the period before the implementation of the GFCM Adriatic Demersal MAP.
2. “Technical document on the Adriatic demersal management plan – Conversion factors”, Mannini A. et al., 2026b. This technical document provides the analysis of the FDI data from 2022 to 2024 to produce conversion factors between fleet segments both for OTB and TBB different fleet segments in the Adriatic Sea.

Together with the two technical reports, two presentations, summarising the contents of the reports, were made available to STECF.

STECF Comments

STECF has the following comments regarding the TORs of the request:

1. ToR 1 - evaluate the study on the OTB – OTT conversion factor

STECF observes that according to Mannini et al. (2026a), OTT gears were more efficient than OTB gears in terms of catchability over the period 2016-2018. The same authors estimated that in GSAs 17-18 one fishing day of OTT gears would on average produce the same yield as 1.3 fishing days of OTB gears for large vessels (VL2440), and 1.12 for mid-size vessels (VL1224).

STECF reviewed the available information on conversion factors (CFs) between OTT and OTB from various sources. Table 6.9.1 presents the CFs estimated for GSAs 17-18 and other areas, including GSA 7 and the Bay of Biscay. STECF notes that vessel length ranges and the years covered vary across sources, and that confidence intervals are not consistently available. This limits the possibility of making quantitative comparisons or assessing whether observed differences are statistically significant.

STECF notes that to produce the CFs between OTB and OTT in Mannini et al. (2026a) a ratio of LPUE_OTT over LPUE_OTB was used as in STECF PLEN 21-01 and in STECF EWG 21-01 (when calculating CFs between different vessel length categories), while a CATCH_OTT over CATCH_OTB ratio was used in STECF EWG 21-01 (when calculating CFs between OTB and OTT), and in Certain et al. (2024).

STECF observes that the CFs provided in the technical report from Mannini et al. (2026a) are produced using logbook data from 2016 to 2018. In the same report, LPUE values for OTB are presented. These values are consistently lower, in particular for vessels with lengths above 24 m (VL2440), compared to the LPUE values reported for OTB using FDI data from 2022 to 2024 in the technical report from Mannini et al. (2026b). This implies a potential

increase in catch efficiency over time for OTB. However, no information is available for OTT during the same period.

Table 6.9.1. Conversion factors (CF) from OTT to OTB present in the literature. CI refers to confidence intervals, VL refers to vessel length.

CF	95% CI	Area	Year	VL	Source
1.08	-	GSAs 17-18	2016	12-24	Mannini et al. 2026a
1.14	-	GSAs 17-18	2017	12-24	Mannini et al. 2026a
1.13	-	GSAs 17-18	2018	12-24	Mannini et al. 2026a
1.12	-	GSAs 17-18	2016-2018	12-24	Mannini et al. 2026a
1.20	-	GSAs 17-18	2016	24-40	Mannini et al. 2026a
1.30	-	GSAs 17-18	2017	24-40	Mannini et al. 2026a
1.40	-	GSAs 17-18	2018	24-40	Mannini et al. 2026a
1.30	-	GSAs 17-18	2016-2018	24-40	Mannini et al. 2026a
1.66	1.55-1.79	GSA 7	2019	18-24	EWG 21-01
1.41	1.34-1.15	GSA 7	2019	24-40	EWG 21-01
1.28	~1.12-1.45	GSA 7	2017-2023	18-24	Certain et al. 2024*
1.20	~1.05-1.41	GSA 7	2017-2023	24-40	Certain et al. 2024*
1.39	-	Bay of Biscay	2003	12-24	Drouineau et al. 2004

*CI reported are extracted from Figure 14 within the report.
Source: Own elaboration.

STECF notes that a change in LPUE through time does not necessarily correspond to a change in CFs as it depends if the change in LPUE has happened proportionally across the compared gears. However, more up to date data would give confirmation if the CF from OTT to OTB has remained stable or changed in recent years, making a revision of the data and an update of the estimation fundamental. Therefore, STECF cannot evaluate if the conversion factors provided in Mannini et al. (2026a) are valid and robust also for the period after 2018.

2. ToR 2 - Advise on the best practices for the addition, on top of OTB gear, of OTT gear in the demersal Adriatic and how to best establish an initial number of OTT fishing days that will be in line with MSY.

STECF notes that, to answer the three points of this second ToR, data reporting total effort (e.g. in fishing days) and total landings by gear (for OTB and OTT) would be required.

STECF notes that the publicly available FDI dataset from 2025 was searched to obtain data on effort and total landings from OTT gear in GSAs 17 and 18. Additionally, the JRC checked if landings within GSAs 17 and 18 were available for OTT gear in the Med&BS dataset. No data for OTT gear in GSAs 17 and 18 were available neither from the FDI nor from the Med&BS dataset.

STECF notes that without the aforementioned data ToR 2 cannot be fully answered. Therefore, STECF suggests that before reviewing stock assessments under the Adriatic

demersal MAP (recommended by GFCM in 2019), data referring to trawling gears (OTB, OTT, TBB, PTB) in GSAs 17 and 18 within the FDI and Med&BS data should be revised and adding the OTT in the NWP of countries fishing in GSAs 17 and 18 so that it is correctly recorded from now on. STECF cannot evaluate if OTT total catches were misreported as OTB or were excluded, but it should be noted that in the first case there would be no effect on stock assessments as the two gears can be assumed as having the same selectivity (Certain et al., 2024) if no commercial CPUE are used as tuning indices. STECF underlines that regardless of their actual use in stock assessment, effort data should be duly recorded and revised as those are fundamental for the correct allocation of fishing days per gear under the GFCM Adriatic demersal MAP.

STECF notes that, as data on effort and landings of OTT in GSAs 17 and 18 is available from logbook data for the period 2016-2018 (Mannini et al., 2026a) a first step could be to check if this information is available along the whole time series of data coming from logbooks and if that could help revise the FDI and Med&BS data. STECF notes that this issue has been flagged in the Data Transmission Monitoring Tool (DTMT) for assessment by the responsible Member State.

STECF suggests that, as the Adriatic demersal MAP is under the remit of GFCM (https://www.fao.org/gfcm/managementplan-demersal-adriatic/en/), after the evaluation of the data discrepancy between logbooks, FDI, and Med&BS data, GFCM will be able to evaluate the impact of the potential data revision on the stock assessments used as the basis for the MAP.

STECF suggests that, in the absence of a more up to date analysis on the CFs between OTB and OTT in the GSAs 17-18, a precautionary approach should be used when allocating fishing days from OTB to OTT in the future GFCM Adriatic demersal MAP. To that purpose, an interim conversion factor of 1.6 is proposed to translate OTT fishing days in OTB fishing days. This interim CF is based on the adoption of the highest CF observed in the GSAs 17-18 (1.40 for VL2440 in 2018; Table 6.9.1; Mannini et al., 2026a) increased by 0.2 to take uncertainty into consideration based on the highest confidence intervals ranges observed in the literature. Assuming that OTB and OTT have the same selectivity, as reported in Certain et al. (2024), the total amount of fishing days allocated to the OTT fleet should be equal to the reduction of fishing days in the OTB multiplied by 1/CF (i.e., OTTdays = OTBredux * (1/CF)).

STECF Conclusions

STECF concludes that the available evidence consistently indicates that OTT gears have higher catch efficiency than OTB gears, although the magnitude of this difference varies across geographical areas and across time within the same area. Therefore, attention is to be paid to the scale at which these CF are estimated and revised over time.

STECF concludes that the methodology used by Mannini et al. (2026a) is consistent with previous STECF work, but it is not possible to evaluate if the conversion factors provided in Mannini et al. (2026a) are valid and robust also for the period after 2018 given the increases recorded in the recent years of OTB LPUEs and the absence of more recent data to estimate variation of relative efficiencies of OTT over OTB.

STECF concludes that a review of data available from logbooks for the period between 2016 and 2018 and after 2018 is needed in GSAs 17 and 18 following the data revision requested through the DTMT.

STECF concludes that resolving inconsistencies between logbook, FDI, and MED&BS data will allow the evaluation of the potential impact of the data amendments on the stock assessments under the GFCM Adriatic demersal MAP.

STECF suggests that, pending a more up-to-date analysis of OTB–OTT conversion factors in GSAs 17–18, a precautionary approach could be applied in the future GFCM Adriatic demersal MAP through the provisional use of a conversion factor of 1.6 OTT to OTB (for the allocation of fishing days from OTB to OTT a value of 0.625 should be used), taking into account the uncertainty and variability observed in the available estimates.

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6.10 T90

Request to the STECF

The Commission requested the STECF, at its Plenary 25-01, to review the Scheveningen Joint Recommendation and provide comments and recommendations, in particular on the proposed technical measure to allow the use, in the Skagerrak, the Kattegat and in ICES Subarea 4 north of the 55th parallel, of a T90 codend in trawls with the mesh sizes required under Annex V, Part B of Regulation (EU) No 2019/1241.

The request applies to the following bottom trawls and seines: OTB, OTM, OTT, PTB, PTM, SDN, SPR, SSC, TB, TBN and TBS.

In its Plenary 25-01, STECF concluded that the introduction of a T90 codend as an amendment to the baseline gear specifications (Annex V, Part B of Regulation (EU) No 2019/1241) could improve selectivity for roundfish (and, in some cases, small flatfish), provided that the mandatory use of the currently prescribed escape panels in trawls and seines with mesh sizes below the North Sea baseline (120 mm) is maintained.

The same provision has since been resubmitted to the Commission. However, uncertainty remains regarding its scope, in particular as concerns the range of mesh sizes covered. It is unclear whether the suggested provision can be applied to any codend mesh size, as far as it is line with Annex V (including obligatory use of selectivity devices), because scientific evidence has only been submitted for mesh sizes above 105mm. The trial evidence submitted by the regional group supports this, however, it is questioned whether the available scientific evidence would ensure a level of selectivity equivalent to that of the current North Sea baseline gear.

The Commission therefore requests STECF to further elaborate on its advice provided in early 2025, in particular to:

- specify the mesh sizes for which the use of a T90 codend ensures selectivity equivalent to or better than the current baseline requirements, based on the supporting study and the best available scientific evidence;
- clarify the conditions under which such equivalence is achieved.

Background documentation is available on:
https://stecf.ec.europa.eu/document/bef03b06-65a2-4c59-a404-6e8c67f6bcf5

Summary of the information provided to STECF

Two documents were provided to STECF:

1. Joint Recommendation (JR) of the Scheveningen Group concerning technical measures for the conservation of fishery resources of the North Sea

The submitted document presents an amendment to the current technical measures in the North Sea as provided for in Article 15 (5) b, ii of the basic regulation and Article 15(2) of Regulation (EU) No 2019/1241.

The proposal consists of introducing the voluntary use of T90 cod-end in bottom trawls and seines in Skagerrak, Kattegat, and ICES area 4 north of the 55th parallel. The objective is to improve selectivity, reducing catches of juvenile roundfish (e.g. cod and haddock) while maintaining catches of marketable flatfish.

The JR includes results from scientific trials (carried out by DTU Aqua), which showed that T90 gear allowed more roundfish and flatfish below MCRS to escape, while retention of marketable flatfish remains largely unchanged (or can potentially increase).

The JR was sent for stakeholder consultation (notably NSAC), which highlighted that:

- The measure should remain geographically limited to Skagerrak and Kattegat and ICES area 4 north of the 55th parallel.
- Further research is needed before extending its use.
- The definition of allowable gear should not be overly restrictive.

2. Note from DTU Aqua_Effect of T90 meshes May 2026

The advice note submitted by Denmark (DTU Aqua) is based on a literature review of published research papers and on the study referred to in the request, “Development of selective gears and technologies for commercial gears SELEKT”, DTU Aqua report nº441-2023 (reviewed in PLEN 25-01), and was prepared in the context of the proposed introduction of T90 gear as a legal option in parts of the North Sea.

The note concludes that T90 is a well-studied gear modification that consistently improves size selectivity for roundfish species, increasing L50 and reducing the selection range (SR) compared with similar diamond-mesh (T0) codends, resulting in reduced retention of undersized fish.

The review states that the same effect is not observed for flatfish species. Available evidence indicates that T90 often results in reduced selectivity, i.e. lower L50 values and increased retention of smaller flatfish compared with equivalent T0 codends.

Overall, DTU Aqua report concludes that T90 is generally beneficial for roundfish selectivity but may have adverse effects on flatfish selectivity. These effects are considered broadly independent of mesh size, although their magnitude may be influenced by factors such as twine thickness and the number of twines used.

STECF Comments

STECF has the following comments related to each ToR of the request:

1. ToR 1 - Specify the mesh sizes for which the use of a T90 codend ensures selectivity equivalent to or better than the current baseline requirements, based on the supporting study and the best available scientific evidence.

STECF understands this ToR as a request to assess whether a T90 codend, equipped with the same nominal mesh size and same selectivity devices (e.g., square mesh panel) as the

baseline codend specified in the Technical Measures Regulation, provides selectivity equivalent to or better than that of the baseline configuration.

STECF notes that the supporting document reports a consistent pattern, observed across different fisheries and geographical areas, where T90 codends generally show improved size selectivity compared to T0 meshes of similar size for roundfish species. This effect is typically reflected in increased L50 values and a narrower SR, resulting from the more stable and open mesh geometry of T90 netting. STECF notes that these findings are consistent with a broader scientific literature, which have repeatedly demonstrated improved escapement of undersized roundfish in T90 configurations (e.g. Cheng et al., 2020; Madsen et al. 2012; Petteta et al. 2020; Tokaç et al. 2014).

STECF notes that the supporting document further indicates that the positive selectivity effects of T90 codends observed for roundfish are not consistently observed for flatfish. Available studies suggest that T90 codends may result in lower L50 values implying increased retention of smaller flatfish (e.g. Bayse et al. 2016; Lomeli et al. 2017; Madsen et al. 2012), while occasionally producing a narrower SR, indicating a sharper size selection process.

STECF notes that the supporting document does not identify specific mesh sizes for which the use of a T90 codend ensures selectivity equivalent to or better than the current baseline requirements. STECF notes that the supporting document explicitly concludes that the “described effects of T90 are not mesh-size-specific” but rather show a consistent pattern across different codend mesh sizes.

STECF notes that evidence reviewed by STECF in PLEN 25-01 indicated that a 120 mm T90 codend reduces retention of roundfish species such as cod and haddock compared with a 120 mm T0 codend, while increased catches of smaller commercial sizes of flatfish were observed.

STECF notes that, based on the generally observed pattern of improved selectivity for roundfish but reduced selectivity for flatfish, the voluntary implementation of T90 codends may entail risks for fisheries targeting, or catching substantial quantities of flatfish species. Examples include the Kattegat sole fishery using 90 mm mesh codend and the North Sea flatfish fishery operating with 100 mm codends south of 57°30′ N (and other examples may exist).

2. ToR 2 - Clarify the conditions under which such equivalence is achieved.

STECF notes that the consistent improvement in size selectivity observed for roundfish suggests that equivalence in selectivity is more likely to be achieved in fisheries where these species dominate the catch. STECF notes that the risk of reduced selectivity for flatfish, imply that equivalence in selectivity is not expected to be achieved in fisheries where flatfish are targeted or constitute a significant proportion of the catch (see previous examples provided).

STECF notes that, given these opposite effects and the absence of comprehensive evidence across all permitted mesh sizes, equivalence in selectivity should be understood as context dependent, requiring a balance between the demonstrated benefits for roundfish selectivity and the potential negative consequences for flatfish retention. This implies that T90 option

may positively impact mixed or roundfish oriented fisheries, rather than fisheries primarily targeting flatfish, where the current baseline requirements may remain more appropriate.

3. General comments

STECF acknowledges that the proposed T90 option is intended to be voluntary, allowing fishers to choose the gear configuration that best fits their quota portfolio and operational needs. STECF also acknowledges that the JR excludes beam trawl (TBB) from the request to eliminate the majority of fisheries targeting flatfish.

STECF further notes that the JR argues that the potential increased retention of plaice (indicated as the main flatfish caught in the North Sea area) may be mitigated by the good status of the stock and high quota availability. However, STECF recalls that the available scientific evidence shows increased retention of smaller flatfish individuals and that the effects of applying T90 codend broadly across fisheries and mesh sizes remain uncertain, especially in relation to flatfish selectivity. Such increased retention of undersized individuals may rise additional concerns where those fish are undersized (below MCRS).

Furthermore, STECF notes that current plaice stock status and quota availability may partially mitigate concerns in the short term, but such conditions may not persist in the future. STECF also notes that not just North Sea plaice but also other flatfish stocks that are more vulnerable can potentially be negatively affected by the introduction of a T90 option. A current example is the sole stock in subdivisions 20–24 (Skagerrak and Kattegat, western Baltic Sea), which is below B_{lim} and with a zero TAC advice for 2027.

Therefore, while the voluntary nature of the measure may allow fishers to avoid its use in situations where it is considered inappropriate, STECF considers that fisheries targeting flatfish are less suitable candidates for the application of the proposed T90 option under current evidence.

STECF acknowledges that the JR submitted specifies that "*The inclusion of T90 as a voluntary option does not aim to replace other gears in the present legislation*", indicating the use of T90 codend is intended to be introduced as an option alongside the currently prescribed escape panels and grids in trawls and seines. However, STECF considers that the proposed wording of the amendment is ambiguous and could be interpreted as allowing their use as a full alternative to existing technical measures (as stated in PLEN 25-01). STECF suggests that the wording should be revised to avoid any ambiguity in the interpretation.

STECF finally notes that, according to the European Commission's guidelines for good practice for information to be submitted with joint recommendations (SWD, 2018), point 6 specifies that details on the expected socio and economic impacts of proposed measures on fishing activities should be included. This information was not provided.

STECF Conclusions

STECF concludes that the available evidence does not support identifying specific mesh sizes at which T90 codends can be considered to provide selectivity equivalent to, or better than, current regulatory baselines. The evidence reviewed shows that T90 codend selectivity is strongly influenced by species morphology. Compared with conventional diamond-mesh

codends, T90 codends have positive or neutral effects on selectivity for roundfish species, while they may reduce size selectivity for flatfish species, leading to lower L50 values and higher retention of smaller fish.

STECF concludes that the conditions under which improved or equivalent selectivity is achieved are restricted to roundfish species. STECF therefore suggests excluding fisheries targeting flatfish species from the JR implementation.

STECF concludes that the proposed amendment wording is ambiguous and, as noted in PLEN 25-01, could be interpreted as allowing T90 codends to fully replace existing technical measures. STECF therefore suggests revising the wording to remove this ambiguity.

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6.11 Exemptions under the landing obligation

Background provided by the Commission

Under the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), discard plans adopted through Delegated Acts provide for specific derogations from the landing obligation, including exemptions based on high survivability and de minimis provisions.

Current Delegated Acts (discard plans) covering the North Sea (NS), Northwestern Waters (NWW), and Southwestern Waters (SWW) were adopted based on scientific advice and evaluations provided by the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries.

The current legal framework will expire by 2027, and therefore the framework underpinning the implementation of the landing obligation beyond that date will need to be addressed.

The Commission considers that the work carried out in 2021 and 2022, which led to the present legal framework, represented a substantial scientific effort. In some cases, further work may still be required to strengthen the underlying evidence base. At the same time, scientific knowledge, technical developments, and stock assessments may have evolved since then, which merits being identified and analysed as a basis for a future exercise of a similar nature.

While the regional groups of Member States start laying the ground for the adaptation of their future Joint Recommendations, including through a dedicated meeting with STECF expert, the Commission needs to take stock of the latest scientific and technical developments, to support this process and ensure a robust and up-to-date evidence base.

This request is supported by an *ad hoc* contract. The final report will be available on 5 June and will include the following deliverables: (i) a compilation of all exemptions requests assessed in 2023, including STECF assessment and advice by that time; (ii) a template for regional groups; and (iii) a summary of scientific and technical developments since the adoption of the current management plans.

Background documentation is available on: https://stecf.ec.europa.eu/document/bef03b06-65a2-4c59-a404-6e8c67f6bcf5

Request to the STECF

STECF is requested to review the findings of the final report of the ad hoc contract and make any appropriate comments and recommendations. The STECF should also consider and where relevant, integrate any additional feedback provided by the Member States' Regional Groups. Finally, STECF should discuss and propose possible modalities to present the key outcomes to the Member States' Regional Groups.

Summary of the information provided to STECF

The *ad hoc* contract report (no. 2659) and responses from Regional Groups to the proposed new templates drafted under this contract were provided to STECF.

1. Summary of *ad hoc* report (nº2659).

The ad hoc report nº2659 reviewed the scientific and technical basis for exemptions from the landing obligation (LO) in the North Sea (NS), North Western Waters (NWW) and South Western Waters (SWW). It focused on the exemption requests assessed by STECF EWG 23-04 and 23-06, the suitability of the current STECF reporting templates, and recent developments that will be relevant for future Joint Recommendations (JRs) on LO exemptions.

A summary of the three ToRs addressed by the *ad hoc* report is presented below:

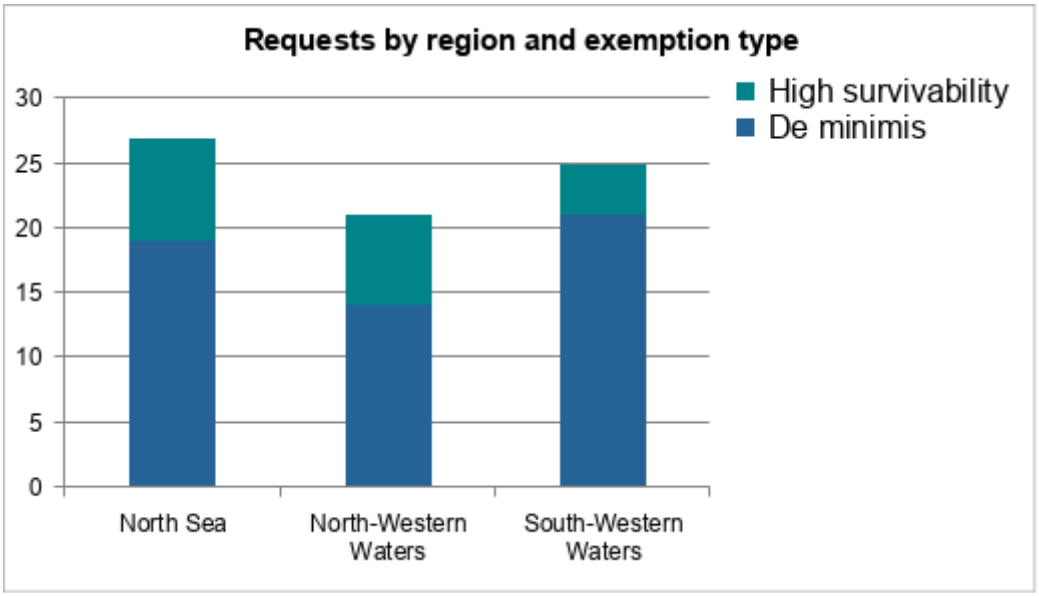
1.1. ToR 1 - Compilation and assessment of exemption requests.

EWG 23-04 reviewed 73 exemption requests across the three sea basins (NS, NWW, SWW), including 54 *de minimis* exemptions (table 2 in the *ad hoc* report nº2659) and 19 high-survivability exemptions (table 3 in the *ad hoc* report nº2659). Most requests reviewed were for the renewal of existing exemptions rather than new derogations, showing that Member States mainly aimed to maintain the current legal provisions. Only two new exemptions were submitted for assessment.

The *ad hoc* report developed a notation key to qualify the quality of the evidence-base (Figure 6.11.2) where it classified submitted data as “Robust”, “Moderate”, “Limited” and “No data”. It shows that the overall evidence base remains uneven among the submitted exemption requests. Of the 73 requests assessed in this report (tables 2 and 3 of the *ad hoc report* nº2659), only four were supported by robust evidence, i.e. only 5% of the cases. 33 were supported by moderate evidence, while 35 were supported by limited evidence. One exemption could not be evaluated because no supporting data were available (Figure 6.11.2). A common weakness identified in the past submitted exemption requests by the *ad hoc* report is the absence of absolute estimates of unwanted catches, inconsistent catch and discard data, limited fleet-specific information, and reliance on generic or previously submitted studies that had not been updated. According to the report, these limitations reduced STECF's ability to assess the effects on stock status, fishing mortality, discard mortality and TAC deductions.

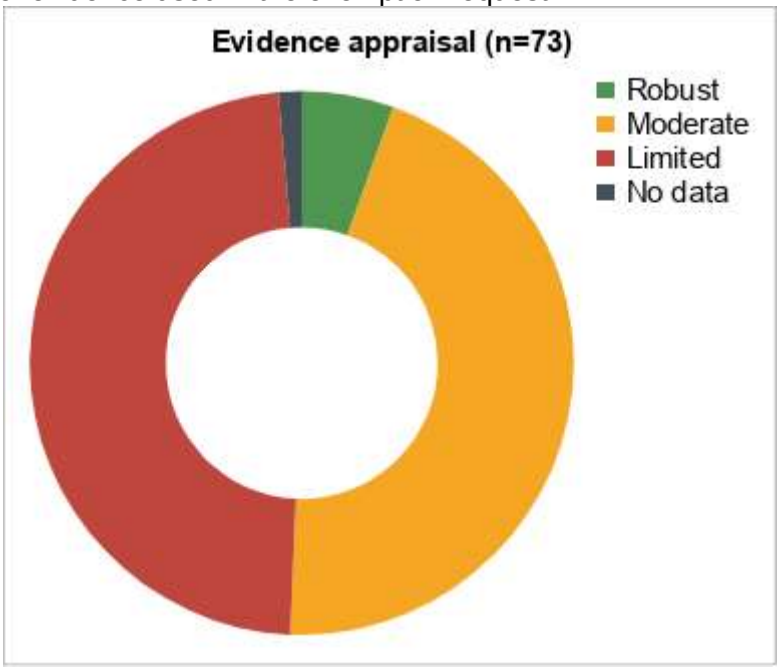
For the *de minimis* exemptions, the *ad hoc* report concluded that, it was generally unclear from the request whether the exemptions were intended only for residual unwanted catches or also covered more substantial unresolved levels of discarding. In several cases, the rationale for the requested exemption volume was not sufficiently supported by the available information on the actual level of unwanted catches. For high-survivability exemptions, the evidence has improved for some species and fisheries. However, discarded species survival rate estimates remain highly variable and should be considered together with discard quantities, fleet uptake, stock status and handling practices.

Figure 6.11.1. Exemption request by region and exemption type.



Source: Presentation of the ad hoc contract no. 2659 to STECF.

Figure 6.11.2. Type of evidence used in the exemption request.



Source: Presentation of the ad hoc contract no. 2659 to STECF.

1.2 ToR 2 - Review of STECF templates.

The *ad hoc* report concluded that the current STECF templates provided to the regional groups for evaluating past JRs may not have been fully appropriately designed to ensure the consistent provision of the information needed for robust, transparent and comparable assessments. In addition, in many JRs, the templates were incompletely filled, contained

inconsistencies, or were insufficiently detailed to estimate the likely impact of exemptions on fleets, fisheries and stocks.

Revised templates were thus proposed by the *ad hoc* contractor for both *de minimis* and high-survivability exemptions (tables 8 and 9 in the *ad hoc report* nº2659*)*. They are organised around three components: a fishing activity definition, a total fleet summary, and a derogation subset summary. The suggested templates are intended to clarify the link between the requested exemption, the fishing activity concerned, and the specific catches or discards to which the derogation would apply.

Furthermore, the proposed new variables in the template were aligned with existing DCF, FDI and AER data structures, where possible. The aim was to improve consistency across Member States and regions, streamline the completion of the template, facilitate comparisons with broader fisheries datasets, and strengthen STECF's ability to assess the scale, use and potential impact of exemptions.

1.3. ToR 3 - Scientific and technical developments.

The *ad hoc* report concludes that recent ICES advice indicates variable stock status for the species and areas covered by the current exemptions (table 11 in the *ad hoc report* nº2659*)*. Some stocks, including NS sole, NS plaice, NS turbot, NS herring, several *Nephrops* functional units, and some anglerfish and horse mackerel stocks, remain in relatively good condition. However, other stocks relevant to the current exemptions are below biological reference points, subject to zero-catch advice, or show declining advice or biomass trends. These include saithe, mackerel, blue whiting, northern prawn, Norway pout, several sandeel stocks, whiting and haddock in parts of the NWW, sole in 7.d, red seabream, and several *Nephrops* functional units. This variation in stock status has direct implications for future exemption assessments. Exemptions affecting stocks below B_{lim}, below MSY $B_{trigger}$, subject to zero-catch advice, or showing declining trends should receive particular attention, especially where discard quantities or survival rates remain uncertain.

Furthermore, the *ad hoc* report concludes that recent scientific and technical studies provide useful examples of progress, including new survivability studies for sole, plaice and spurdog, and gear selectivity trials in *Nephrops*, Irish Sea and Celtic Sea demersal fisheries. However, important evidence gaps remain, particularly for Rajiformes, pelagic slipping exemptions, broad species-group exemptions, and cases where survival estimates are not clearly representative of commercial fishing conditions.

2. Summary of RCG responses

STECF received comments on the proposed templates from the SWW group, the NWW group, and the Scheveningen Group. The comments broadly address whether the proposed templates for *de minimis* and high survivability exemptions duplicate existing FDI reporting, whether the variables are sufficiently defined and aligned with EU data standards, and whether the template provide an adequate basis for robust evaluation of derogations from LO without creating a disproportionate administrative burden.

The comments highlighted the need for a clearer scope, better alignment with existing FDI and AER data structures where possible, and greater clarity on what additional derogation-specific information is genuinely required.

STECF Comments

1. Comments on *ad hoc* report

STECF considers that the *ad hoc* report addressed all the TORs and provides a useful basis for the preparation of future JRs. STECF provides the following comments on the three ToRs addressed in the *ad hoc* report and on the additional feedback submitted by Member States' Regional Groups.

1.1. ToR 1 - Compilation and assessment of exemption requests

STECF notes that the compilation presented in the ad hoc report provides a useful overview of exemption requests assessed by EWG 23-04 and EWG 23-06, including the type of exemption, sea basin, STECF assessment and post-2023 legal status.

STECF observes that although the existing exemption framework has been a valuable element of the implementation of the LO, the evidence submitted to EWG 23-04 and 23-06 by Member States was mostly insufficient to enable a robust assessment or reliable quantification by STECF of the likely impacts of many exemptions on stock status, fishing mortality and discard mortality.

STECF observes that the main impediments to robust assessment of the exemptions are a lack of absolute estimates of unwanted catches, inconsistent catch and discard data, limited fleet or fishery specific information, and reliance on generic or previously submitted studies. These limitations constrained STECF's ability to assess the likely effects of exemptions on stock status, fishing mortality, discard mortality and TAC deductions. For the *de minimis* exemptions, STECF notes that the justification should make it clear whether the exemption concerns residual unwanted catches or a larger unresolved discarding issue. Moreover, the *de minimis* exemptions were often not adequately justified, with disproportionate costs frequently cited as justification despite the difficulties in quantifying. STECF recalls that there is no strict threshold to define when costs become disproportionate and a qualitative judgement can only be made on a case-by-case basis (STECF-22-05; STECF 24-04, STECF 25-02). For high-survivability exemptions, STECF notes that survival estimates should be interpreted together with discard volumes, fleet uptake, stock status and handling practices. STECF has repeatedly provided generic considerations on LO exemptions (cf e.g. PLEN 17-02, PLEN 18-02). In particular, estimates of survivability should be considered in the context of the discard rate for the fishery seeking an exemption, highlighting that medium survival rates in high discarding fisheries still lead to high discard mortality rates.

STECF notes that overall, there is extensive documented evidence that no or only limited changes have globally occurred in the selectivity and discarding behaviour in the fisheries following the implementation of the exemptions (cf among others Davie and al., 2025, and references therein).

1.2. ToR 2 - Review of STECF templates

STECF notes that the review of exemption requests assessed by EWG 23-04 and EWG 23-06 showed that the information submitted using the current templates was often incomplete, inconsistent or insufficiently detailed to support robust, transparent and comparable assessments.

STECF notes that the proposed revised template for the *de minimis* exemption (table 8 in the *ad hoc report* nº2659) and survivability exemption (table 9 in the *ad hoc report* nº2659) are intended to: i) simplify the completion for the stakeholders, ii) provide a clearer description of the fishing activity affected by the derogation and iii) place the requested exemption in the context of the wider fleet activity.

STECF considers that the templates should be accompanied by clear guidance on the required variables, definitions, units, data sources and treatment of missing values to improve consistency, comparability and transparency (table 10 in the *ad hoc report* nº2659). In particular, the templates should provide more detailed catch and fleet data for the relevant stock and fishery, include estimates of the magnitude of unwanted catches expressed in both relative (discard rates) and absolute terms (volumes of unwanted catches), indicate the level of exemption uptake by Member States, and allow the magnitude of the exemption to be assessed by comparing exempted landings and discards with the overall level of fleet activity. In addition, the proposed variables should be aligned, where possible, with existing DCF, FDI and AER data structures, allowing JRs to be assessed alongside broader fisheries datasets.

1.3. ToR 3 - Scientific and technical developments

STECF notes that the *ad hoc* report presented the recent ICES advice that shows the status of stocks covered by current LO exemptions in the NS, NWW and SWW is highly variable. While several stocks, including NS sole, plaice, turbot, herring, some *Nephrops* functional units, and some anglerfish and horse mackerel stocks, remain in relatively favourable condition, others are below biological reference points, subject to zero-catch advice, or show declining biomass or catch advice.

STECF notes that the report highlights the need for stock-specific assessments rather than broad assumptions based on species or sea basin. Moreover, it refers that the biological risk associated with exemptions depends not only on stock status but also on the quantities discarded, discard survival and the level of exemption uptake.

2. Comments of the responses from the Regional Groups

STECF reviewed the comments submitted by the SWW, NWW and Scheveningen Regional Groups. These comments mainly concerned the risk of duplication with existing FDI reporting, the need for clearer variable definitions and code-list alignment, the legal and procedural status of the templates, the treatment of gear, métier and fishing technique, the use of vessel numbers, and the potential administrative burden for Member States.

STECF notes that the Regional Groups' feedback does not call into question the objective of improving the evidence base for LO exemptions. However, it indicates that the templates should be clearly scoped, proportionate, and focused on information that is necessary for STECF to assess the scale, uptake and potential impact of exemptions. Where information

can be derived reliably from existing FDI, DCF or AER data, duplication should be avoided. Where derogation-specific information is not available from existing data calls, the template should clearly explain why the additional information is required and how it will be used in the assessment. The specific feedback points submitted by the regional groups and STECF comments on them are summarized in Table 6.11.1.

STECF notes that in response of the feedback received, the templates were revised (Tables 6.11.2 and 6.11.3). These updates included redefining the “estimates of discards” to “estimates of scientific discards” to make clear that such estimates can only be provided by national experts who have knowledge of the exemption being evaluated and its potential impact on the fishery. Additionally, the variable description table was updated to improve clarity around definition and typology (Table 6.11.4).

STECF considers that a short technical presentation or workshop with the Regional Groups, involving DCF/FDI data experts and, where relevant, experts on discard survival, would be useful. The presentation could provide a summary of the outcomes of the last STECF evaluation, the proposed revised templates and guidance, examples of well-documented exemption requests, recurring weaknesses in previous submissions, and the distinction between scientific discard estimates and quantities reported against exemptions.

STECF considers that this technical presentation should be accompanied by a guidance document on how to populate the template, which includes a pre-filled example template, and a summary of how STECF would use it. This information could be shared with the Regional Groups in advance, allowing questions to be submitted ahead of the presentation.

3. Other changes to the templates provided by the ad hoc contract suggested by STECF

STECF notes that an LO exemption for a given stock may increase the fishing effort of the fleet(s) concerned and, consequently, the catches of other stocks. As a result, information on the status of stocks with known technical interactions with the stock and gears covered by the exemption could be a valuable addition to the assessment templates. Accordingly, the templates -already revised in light of Regional Groups’ feedback- were further amended to include a column listing “Other Species in the Catch Composition” (Tables 6.11.2 and 6.11.3). Furthermore, the variable description table was revised to improve the clarity of variable definitions and classifications (Table 6.11.4).

Table 6.11.1. Feedback received from the RG and STECF comments on them.

Feedback	Comments from RGs	STECF Comments
Simplification and avoidance of duplicate reporting:	Any new template or data requests should minimise additional reporting burden on Member States. Several comments argued that fishing activity information already available through, or derivable from the FDI data call, should not be requested again, and, that EU-level efforts should focus on simplifying rather than increasing data requests.	FDI does not contain all of the variables and level of data disaggregation required to provide a complete estimate of Member State levels of discards associated with proposed exemptions.
Need to clarify the legal and procedural status of the template	Whether the completed templates should be treated as annexes to JRs or as a new data call, given the practical implications for data confidentiality and the type of information that Member States can provide	Decisions regarding confidentiality can only be made by the relevant Member State, owing to differences in national requirements and definitions of confidentiality, as well as the primacy of sovereign national law in this area. Consequently, STECF cannot address these issues, despite their relevance to all data requests.
FDI usefulness, but limitations for derogation-specific assessment:	Member States recognised the relevance of FDI, but the comments also indicate limitations when using FDI outputs for derogation-specific questions. The document's reviewer notes that FDI is designed to provide scientific estimates of discards and fleet activity, not to assess specific landing obligation derogations or record all derogation-specific features such as selectivity devices or actual usage of exemptions	Although FDI is designed to provide scientific estimates of discards and fleet activity, it is not designed to assess specific landing obligation derogations or record all derogation-specific features such as selectivity devices or actual usage of exemptions. The main challenge to this is that there is no standardised list of selectivity devices by which to submit data in the DCF, and they are not consistently reported in EU logbooks. Therefore, STECF has no way to estimate impact of measure without national expertise.
Gear, métier and fishing technique require careful treatment	Use gear, as defined in JRs, rather than métier where possible, because the correspondence between gear and –métier is not always exact. It was also highlighted while also noting that multiple métiers may be associated with a single gear and that derogations do not necessarily correspond are not equivalent to fixed "landing obligation segments".	Scientific estimates of discards are made at métier level to best capture the impact of targeting and fisher behaviour. Therefore, for a robust evaluation of the impact of an exemption would require estimates at the métier level. Sampling designs are centred around the metier and trip level data, therefore expert national experience is required to allocate this sampling design to the proposed exemptions to ensure a meaningful estimation of discards. STECF is not aware of any landing obligation segment.
Variable definitions and code-list alignment need improvement	The proposed template required clearer definitions. These include the meaning of total landings, whether totals should cover all species or only the species concerned, whether mesh-size ranges should match the derogation, the definition of unwanted catches reported against exemption, and whether variables such as derogation specification, geo-indicator and fishing technique are reported using standardised codes and definitions (FLUX/MDR standards)	Definition have been incorporated into the updated template. Except for the reference to FLUX/MDR standards as this is an outdated standard in terms of DCF. This proposal follows AER[1], FDI[2] and RCG[3] standards in terms of typology.
Number of vessels is contested but important	Considering the removal of vessel numbers from the template on the basis that they are reported in FDI and that vessel counts may not be available at the required activity-area level and calculating them separately would create workload.	Vessel numbers are necessary to understand the scale and likely impact of an exemption, including how many vessels are currently using a derogation, and can be very informative for evaluation.
Use of "free text	this field for specifying the exemption is a free-text entry. While this approach has the advantage of allowing applicants to provide detailed and context-specific information, there is a concern that it may result in submissions that are inconsistent, incomplete, or difficult to compare across cases.	STECF agrees that providing clearer guidance on the information expected in this field could help reduce this risk and improve the quality and consistency of the data collected. A more structured approach would facilitate both data analysis and the assessment of derogation requests while still allowing sufficient flexibility to capture fishery-specific circumstances.

[1] https://dcf.ec.europa.eu/data-calls/aer_en
[2] https://datacollection.jrc.ec.europa.eu/documents/d/dcf/fdi_datacall_annex_2026
[3] https://github.com/ices-eg/RCGs/tree/master/Metiers/Reference_lists

Source: STECF PLEN 26-02.

Table 6.11.2. STECF updated the *de minimis* template.

Fishing activity definition			Total fleet summary							Derogation subset summary									Comment
Species	Area (ICES division /FU/GSA)	Derogation specification	Year	Country	Geo-indicator	Fishing technique	Total landings (tonnes)	Total annual effort (days at sea)	No. of vessels	Metier (DCF level 6)	Total species landings (tonnes)	Total species landings value (€)	Estimated landings in tonnes; missing values not allowed	Total species catch (tonnes)	Annual species discard rate (rate, 0 – 1)	Unwanted catches reported against exemption (tonnes)	Associated species cathches (List FAO codes)	No. of vessels	Comment / additional information

Source: Ad hoc contract no. 2659 (Table 6.11.1) report modified by STECF based on feedback from Regional Coordination Groups and STECF discussions.

Table 6.11.3. STECF high survivability template.

Fishing activity definition			Total fleet summary							Derogation subset summary									Comment
Species	Area (ICES division /FU/GSA)	Derogation specification	Year	Country	Geo-indicator	Fishing technique	Total landings (tonnes)	Total annual effort (days at sea)	No. of vessels	Metier (DCF level 6)	Total species landings (tonnes)	Total species landings value (€)	Total species scientific estimate of discards (tonnes)	Total species catch (tonnes)	Annual species discard Rate (rate, 0 – 1)	Estimated discard survival rate (rate, 0 – 1)	Associated species cathches (List FAO codes)	No. of vessels	Comment / additional information/ reference of study

Source: Ad hoc contract no. 2659 (Table 6.11.2) report modified by STECF based on feedback from Regional Coordination Groups and STECF discussions.

Table 6.11.4. STECF updated variable summary, format definition and explanation.

Section	Variable	Format	Explanation
Fishing activity definition	Species	FAO - 3 letter code	Species coding according to the FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Statistics and Information Branch 3-alpha code (https://www.fao.org/fishery/en/collection/asfis).
	Sub region	Codification per table	According to the code list provided in Appendix 9[1][1] of FDI Annex; missing values not allowed.
	Derogation specification	Free text	Include all details pertaining to requested derogation specification, including but not limited to gear, mesh size range, selectivity device etc. Additional details provided in guidelines.
Total fleet summary	Year	Four digits	Four digits (e.g. 2019); missing values not allowed
	Country	3 letter code	According to the code list provided in Appendix 1[1]; missing values not allowed.
	Geo indicator	3 letter code	According to the code list provided in Appendix 10[1]; missing values not allowed.
	Fishing technique	3 letter code	According to the code list provided in Appendix 3; missing values not allowed.
	Total landings (tonnes)	Numeric [precision to 3 digits after the decimal]	Estimated landings in tonnes; missing values not allowed
	Total annual effort (days at sea)	Days at sea	For recommended calculation method of days at sea and fishing days, please refer to the following report: Castro Ribeiro, C. et al. Report of the 2nd Workshop on Transversal Variables[2]
	No. of vessels	Integer	Number of vessels conducting activity as defined in columns 4 to 9; missing values not allowed.
Current catch information	Métier	Codification per guide	Métier definitions, consistent with level 6 of the Commission Decision 2010/93, follow the recommendation of RCGs [3]
	Total species landings (tonnes)	Numeric [precision to 3 digits after the decimal]	Estimated landings in tonnes (live weight), including landings below minimum conservation reference size (MCRS); missing values not allowed.
	Total species landings value (€)	Numeric [precision to 2 digits after the decimal]	Total value of the landings in euro
	Total species scientific discards (tonnes)	Numeric [precision to 3 digits after the decimal]	Scientific estimates of discards in tonnes.
	Total species Catch (tonnes)	Numeric [precision to 3 digits after the decimal]	Estimated landings in tonnes plus total scientific estimate of discards; missing values not allowed
	Estimated Discard Rate	numeric value between 0 and 1	The discard ratio should be supplied as a numeric value between 0 and 1, representing the proportion of discards relative to total catch (landings + discards).
	Discards reported against exemption (tonnes)	Numeric [precision to 3 digits after the decimal]	This column should only be populated if exemption has been previously implemented.
	Associated species cathches	List of FAO codes (3 letter codes)	List of species caught as part of a mixed fishery with listed derogation species. Species coding according to the FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Statistics and Information Branch 3- alpha code (https://www.fao.org/fishery/en/collection/asfis).
	No. of vessels	Integer	Number of vessels, the subset of total fleet described in column 10, conducting activity as defined in columns 11 to 17; missing values not allowed.
	Estimated survival rate	numeric value between 0 and 1	Estimated discard survival rate from provided studies/representative studies (included reference)
General	Comment / additional information	Free text	Space to provide any additional details considered relevant to data sources and estimates provided

[1] https://datacollection.jrc.ec.europa.eu/documents/d/dcf/fdi_datacall_annex_2026
[2] https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC101362?mode=full
[3] https://github.com/ices-eg/RCGs/blob/master/Metiers/Reference_lists/RDB_ISSG_Metier_list.csv

Source: Ad hoc contract nº2659 (Table 6.11.3) report, revised by STECF based on feedback from Regional Coordination Groups and STECF discussions. .

STECF Conclusions

STECF concludes that the *ad hoc* report provides a useful and comprehensive basis to support the preparation of future Joint Recommendations for exemptions from the landing obligation in the NS, NWW and SWW.

STECF concludes that the evidence base underpinning current landing obligation exemptions remains uneven. This limits STECF's ability to assess the likely effects of exemptions on unwanted catches, discard mortality, fishing mortality and stock status.

STECF concludes that the proposed revised templates (Tables 6.11.2 and 6.11.3), updated in light of both Regional Groups' feedback and STECF deliberations, have the potential to improve the clarity, consistency, transparency and comparability of future assessments, provided that they are accompanied by clear guidance on variable definitions, units, formats, data sources and confidentiality constraints.

STECF concludes that future exemption requests should, as a minimum, provide the stock-specific information requested in the templates, including information on catches, unwanted catches, discard rates and survivability (where applicable).

STECF concludes that successful implementation of the revised templates could be supported by an accompanying concise guidance document on how to populate the table containing a pre-filled example template, and an example paragraph on how the STECF will use the data.

STECF concludes that revised templates should be presented to Member States' Regional Groups and to national DCF and data experts, in a structured workshop. The presentation should also include a summary of the outcomes from the last evaluation (STECF EWG 25-04 & 06) process to provide context to the challenges met and the requirement for the new template, i.e a prefilled example template and a concise guidance document on how it should be populated.

STECF concludes that a similar presentation should be given to the FDI EWG and ICES Working Group on species survival (WKSURVIVE), as the experts participating in these two groups are often the same experts that will be asked to provide the information in the templates

STECF concludes that exemptions based on disproportionate costs are particularly difficult to assess as it is not possible to assess at which level costs are disproportionate. For this reason, in assessing the *de minimis* exemptions, the relationship between the *de minimis* volume, the actual level of unwanted catches and the overall status of the stocks involved has been the focus of the assessments" (STECF 24-04 & 24-06). Therefore, requests for exemptions based on disproportionate costs requires also the necessary data for these assessments.

STECF concludes that stock status should form an integral part of future exemptions assessments, as it provides key information on the potential impacts of the use of the derogation. Broad exemptions covering multiple stocks, species groups or fishing areas should receive particular scrutiny, especially where evidence is limited or stocks are under biological pressure.

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

7.1 West MED: Scenarios and drafting ToRs for the modellers

Request to the STECF

STECF is requested to provide comments on the draft terms of reference.

STECF Comments

STECF received the draft ToRs for the EWG 26-10, discussed them, and submitted feedback to DG MARE.

STECF further discussed and agreed with DG MARE on the draft TORs for the *ad hoc* contracts for modellers to prepare the model runs for the EWG 26-10.

7.2 EWG 26-12/13 Economic Report on the aquaculture I and II

Request to the STECF

STECF is requested to review and advise on the feasibility of the terms of reference.

STECF Comments

STECF received the draft ToRs for this EWG, discussed them, and submitted feedback to DG MARE.

7.3 Integrating climate change considerations in the scientific advice of RFMOs

Request to the STECF

Discussion on current state of play and potential next steps.

STECF Comments

STECF discussed the current state of play and agreed with DG MARE that currently Phase 2 as defined in PLEN 25-01 and PLEN 26-01 cannot be started as currently the scientific advice topics and potential research questions have not been discussed.

STECF observes that in PLEN 26-01, DG MARE enquired about the opportunity to expand Phase 1 to include also NEAFC and GFCM. STECF notes that currently JRC is working on expanding the Phase 1 report (*"Review of climate change integration in Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs) – Phase 1"*) to include also these two RFMOs.

8. CONTACT DETAILS OF STECF MEMBERS AND OTHER PARTICIPANTS

[1] - Information on STECF members and invited experts' 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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STECF

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