

REPORT

Meeting: **DG MARE Meeting on stakeholder engagement in ICES Advice request formulation**

Parties: **DG MARE, Advisory Councils**

Date: **29 February 2024**

Location: **Brussels, DG MARE premises**

Chair: **Raluca Ivanescu, Head of Unit, Scientific Advice and Data Collection (MARE.C.3)**

Rapporteur: **Tamara Talevska, NSAC Secretariat**

Welcome and introduction

Raluca Ivanescu, Head of Unit for Scientific Advice and Data Collection (MARE.C.3) welcomed participants and noted this was the first meeting of its kind. The purpose of the meeting was to see how to proceed with a more systematic stakeholder engagement in ICES/STECF scientific advice request formulation. It was understood that early engagement was preferable as later the margin for manoeuvre shrinks. She also underscored the importance of keeping science objective and neutral.

Going forward, two presentations were delivered, one on the process of formulation of advice requests to ICES and another one on the process in STECF.

ICES

For ICES, DG MARE signs a 4-year Framework Partnership Agreement with ICES, with the most recent one being the 2023-2025. There are annual grant agreements concluded for recurrent requests (North-east Atlantic, North Sea, Baltic Sea) and ad hoc non-recurrent advice, which are the requests that emerge during the year, also called Special Advice.

The **recurrent advice request** is basic with simple questions for 150 stocks (requests for single-stock advice). This process must be finalized in January every year, though sometimes this deadline is breached (this year is such a case). The idea is for ICES to know early on what to work on.

The draft grant agreement contains an Annex with all the stocks. This undergoes an internal MARE consultation process, with each unit looking at its stocks. After internal consultations, MARE-ICES exchanges follow. This is mostly business as usual, ensuring implementation of the main legislation with a copy-paste exercise.

The **non-recurrent advice requests** are therefore more relevant for ACs. DG MARE Unit sends a request to MARE C3, which then contacts ICES, who passes the request through ACOM (this takes 4-6 weeks). ICES may ask for clarifications to the proposed Terms of Reference (meaning “request”) and DG MARE Unit is then consulted on this. Upon agreement, ICES sends an offer with the outlined process, timelines of deliverables, and involved costs to MARE C3. MARE C3 further consults relevant units and checks the budget. Once ICES delivers the advice, MARE checks whether the advice fits the purpose.

For **multiannual advice** and others (i.e. long-term management strategies), MS are consulted in the Council.

Advice relevant to EU-UK and EU-UK-NO contexts is more complicated as these stocks are co-managed. Such requests may be proposed with a very tight timeline during the negotiations.

For **technical service situations**, such as zero catch advice in mixed fisheries, ICES provides numbers that would allow fishing in the areas without seriously affecting the stock in danger.

All requests are made public by ICES for all cases under Special Requests and Technical Services: <https://www.ices.dk/advice/Advice-activities/default.aspx>

Ivanescu also encouraged ACs to signal any changes they would like to see to the ICES website, to make it more attuned to users’ needs.

STECF

The STECF is the Commission’s expert group providing scientific advice in concrete contexts, related to management, which are not delivered by ICES.

The meetings occur at the beginning of the year when political priorities are defined in setting up the work programme. The plenary provides advice (there is one in March, one in July, and one in November). Extraordinary meetings are possible, but not appreciated by STECF.

In a similar process to ICES, the TOR are prepared internally in DG MARE and discussed with the STECF Bureau. Once an agreement is reached, experts are identified by the STECF. The expert WG then looks at the issue with the available data. The WG then drafts a report, which is sent to the next plenary, where it is discussed and possibly adopted.

Unlike in ICES, in the STECF process, the Commission is present in all stages. The final STECF Advice/report includes the Commission’s request/TOR. The TOR is also published on the STECF website.

The nature of work/advice:

- a) **Regular:** balance-capacity resources, AER fleet reports, review of scientific advice on fish stocks, implementation of the LO (discard plans), evaluations of JR etc.
- b) **Strategic drivers:** CFP, EU commitments to international agreements (evaluation of long-term management plans)

c) **Ad-hoc:** (mainly in plenaries) i.e. technical measures and selectivity

Exchange of views

On behalf of the NSAC, Tamara Talevska thanked DG MARE for the meeting noting that this response has turned out faster and more positive than expected. She noted that this can be seen as a move towards a more inclusive, bottom-up approach to governance, in line with the Better Regulation, which is welcomed by the stakeholders. She also relayed gratitude that this engagement is channelled specifically through the ACs.

In her intervention, she supported the positions of BSAC and LDAC, seeking stakeholder engagement to advance concepts such as Ecosystem-based fisheries management (EBFM), and noted that this was also in line with NSAC's position. In addition, the NSAC would be interested in seeking a pragmatic approach to rebuilding plans with a potentially longer timeframe, so as to mitigate socio-economic impacts. She noted that this engagement could be ensured through written procedures or dedicated Inter-ACs meetings, adding that the earlier the engagement could be granted the better. She also proposed that the ACs draft guidelines with potential scenarios/options regarding the format of participation/general principles for the managers to choose from, to which DG MARE responded positively.

Other AC interventions included proposals for:

- Establishing an internal AC FG with experts to discuss the scientific requests to ICES and STECF;
- Proactively engaging ACs in a timely fashion;
- Improved exchanged between ACs and STECF;
- Taking into account ecosystem considerations with the knowledge of the industry integrated early enough to avoid socio-economic issues;
- Early signalling that certain request is in the pipeline in order to have the right experts involved in responding to these requests in ICES workshops.
- Exploring requests to allow for EBFM (some requests are too narrow to even allow for this);
- Receiving feedback to AC advice on Fishing Opportunities, which was particularly important for stakeholders. MIACO meetings could offer an opportunity for oral exchange, as written responses were deemed too time-consuming.

DG MARE recognised the need for a more coordinated approach to scientific request formulation. It proposed industry scientists acting as AC representatives in the meetings between ICES, DG MARE and ACs, however this was rejected by some industry experts and indeed by ACs representatives. Given that the industry scientific experts are funded by the industry, they should not have the responsibility to advocate for ACs, whose positions are consensus-driven and forged between the industry and OIGs. As such, this is the responsibility of AC Chairs and Secretariats.

DG MARE also proposed to organise an **overlap meeting before MIRIA and MIACO** to secure open space for stakeholder engagement and exchange between scientists, managers,

and stakeholders. This was agreed and the Commission will seek to **arrange this trilateral cooperation for January 2025**.

Talevska sought to understand better why recurrent requests would not be appropriate for stakeholder engagement and DG MARE confirmed that their services are not yet ready for any change to recurrent single-species requests. Therefore, starting with special advice was deemed more appropriate. Once the Commission's services are ready to operationalize EBFM for stocks under recurrent requests, stakeholder engagement might be considered in those cases as well.

DG MARE noted that looking through the list of examples sent by ACs, the occasions where a change to advice was needed were not that substantial. Talevska responded that the list of examples sent to DG MARE was not exhaustive and that once stakeholders get a guarantee that they will have the window of opportunity to engage, more ideas will start flowing.

There was also some misunderstanding regarding EBFM, as DG MARE noted that any requests for EBFM must be addressed to ICES. However, stakeholders disagreed, noting that science responds to managers' requests and sometimes these requests are too narrow to allow for the EBFM approach to be reflected in scientific advice.

It was also noted that coordination in general and with the Member States on stakeholder engagement in scientific processes (also at national levels) should be strengthened, without affecting the objectivity of the scientific processes and without adversely affecting the tight timelines.

Conclusion

The meeting concluded with the agreement that at this point the focus should be on the process rather than content. The **ACs will have about three months to come up with draft guidelines on a systematic approach to stakeholder engagement** with some of the options displayed that allow for flexibility, yet still provide a general framework for engagement. It was agreed that **starting with trilateral meetings between DG MARE, ICES and ACs before MIRIA** (Meeting between ICES and DG MARE) in January each year would be a good starting point and an opportunity to frontload principles and flag stock-specific issues. At the same time, a request will be relayed to the Member States for more coherence and further information to stakeholders on scientific matters.