



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR MARITIME AFFAIRS AND FISHERIES

The Director-General

Brussels,
MARE/C.5/JB/vr

Dear Mr Emiel Brouckaert (Chair of the NWWAC),
Dear Mr Kenn Skau Fischer (Chair of the NSAC),

Thank you for the letter of 3 April 2024 from the North Sea Advisory Council (NSAC) and from the Northwestern Waters Advisory Council (NWWAC) regarding the TAC setting for skates and rays.

Since STECF's 2017 assessment on skates and rays' management ⁽¹⁾, significant progress has been achieved, including improved species identification and more robust quantitative assessments that are crucial for advancing this work. The workshop organised by NWWAC on 9 February 2023 was a useful collaborative initiative to address key issues on skate and ray fisheries management, including the exploration of sub-TACs for specific species and alternative management strategies.

As indicated by DG MARE colleagues at the recent Inter-AC Brexit Forum on 17 May 2024, the Commission seeks to identify alternatives to the current group TAC approach to follow up on the commitment in the Written Record on fishing opportunities with the UK since 2023. The observations and recommendations in your letter are certainly timely in this regard.

To advance this work, several key next steps have been identified, beginning with preliminary simulations to assess the impact of implementing **stock specific** or **sub-**

⁽¹⁾ Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) – Long-term management of skates and rays (STECF-17-21). Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2017, ISBN 978-92-79-67493-8, doi:10.2760/44133, JRC109366

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TACs on the management and conservation of skates and rays. This work is essential for several reasons highlighted in your letter, inter alia the need to map the risks related to choke species and to evaluate the socio-economic impacts of various management strategies. The insights gained from these simulations will inform our technical discussions with the UK. The recommendations and concerns you have raised in your letter will be essential in shaping our discussions and guiding the development of effective management solutions.

On **discard survival** for skates and rays, I acknowledge the various studies conducted by scientific institutes, which have generally shown promising results regarding the survivability of these species during the catch process. Continued research and data collection on discard survival is key to ensure informed management decisions and the effective conservation of skates and rays ⁽²⁾.

Another topic addressed in your letter is **data collection** and the facilitation of collaboration between scientific bodies and industry. Collecting data on skates and rays presents significant challenges, mainly due to uncertainties in species identification and the rarity of some species, which often go unreported. Industry contributions are valuable in this context, and the Commission supports such efforts when they are conducted in collaboration with scientific validation. A notable example is the small-eyed ray in area 7e that benefits from a sentinel fishery, a collaborative initiative involving government, industry, and science to enhance data collection.

In this regard, I value the NWWAC and NSAC continuous engagement on this topic. The insights provided by the ACs focus group have been particularly helpful to develop strategies to address the complex challenges of managing skates and rays and promote sustainability of this sensitive species. I would like to encourage the ACs to continue to contribute to this exercise, as your expertise is crucial in refining and implementing effective management solutions for skates and rays.

I am looking forward to our continued and productive cooperation. Should you have any questions on this reply, please contact Mr Jurgen Batsleer (Jurgen.BATSLEER@ec.europa.eu) or Ms Julia Rubeck, coordinator for the Advisory Councils (functional mailbox: MARE-AC@ec.europa.eu).

Yours sincerely,

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⁽²⁾ Article 9 of Regulation (EU) 2023/2459 and Article 5 of Regulation (EU) 2023/2623 mandate that Member States with a direct management interest must submit a meta-analysis of survival by 1 May 2027 to assess the impact of the exemption for skates and rays under the Landing Obligation.

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