

REPORT

Meeting: **2nd meeting of Joint Special Group on Marine Action Plan**

Parties: **DG MARE, EU MS, ACs**

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Location: **Interactio**

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1 Introduction

The Chairs recalled the October Joint Special Group meeting, following which two workshops took place: on financing of Marine Action Plan (MAP) and management of eel. Only 1 Member State (MS) has published the roadmap requested in the MAP so far. The purpose of the meeting was to encourage debates and relay MS efforts and intentions in relation to the MAP. The Commission (EC) thanked MS for their efforts in the regional groups and other platforms, with special thanks extended to Greece and Sweden who announced new measures, namely the ban on bottom-trawling (BT) in Marine Protected Areas (MPAs).

A rationale for EC request to ICES for advice on trade-offs was explained. The background being the MSFD with 11 descriptors aiming to achieve GES and specifically descriptor 6 on seabed disturbance, with an agreed threshold value of **2% of the seabed that can be lost, and 25% of the seabed can be under adverse effect**. This descriptor covers **all pressures, not only fisheries-related**. However, fisheries remain one of the important pressures, which

is why the EC asked ICES to provide this advice. The last Marine Strategy Coordination Group (MSCG) agreed on an additional threshold value **on areas without pressure**, where restoration is done passively through conservation (as opposed to restoration).

The threshold values are relevant in terms of MSFD and Habitats Directive, and the newly adopted Nature Restoration Law (NLR) (Article 5 of NRL deals with marine environment). Once threshold values are set, measures will be needed to achieve them. Technical Measures Regulation (TMR) will be instrumental in this.

[2 ICES advice on trade offs between reducing the extent of mobile bottom-contacting gear \(MBCG\) disturbance to seabed habitats and potential costs to fisheries \(link\)](#)

Simon Jennings, ICES, presented the analysis of the economic value of fisheries with mobile bottom gears, distribution of fishing value, and distinguished between core and peripheral fishing grounds. The trade-off analysis was carried out between reducing the extent of mobile bottom-contacting gear (MBCG) disturbance to seabed habitats and potential costs to fisheries. The Greater North Sea was one of the regions included. It showed that fishing was spatially aggregated into core areas accounting for most of the total landings weights and value, with 90% of the total landings coming from less than 50% of the fished area.

Jennings reported that all related work resulted in 5 reports with consistent involvement of stakeholders. The work consists of the main advice documents and 5 interactive HTML documents for different regions, which give information on fishing activity, different metiers, core fishing grounds of these metiers, impacts of fisheries, and a number of scenarios looking at the trade-off analysis.

Fisheries yields and value were calculated as follows:
VMS records + logbook data = landings weight and value.

Fishing impact was calculated as follows:
pressure (VMS data on metiers and gears) + sensitivity of the seabed (rates of recovery) = impact (balance between the depletion and recovery).

For the **Greater North Sea** and the Celtic Seas areas, ICES advises that maintaining a persistently unfished state in 50% of the extent of all MSFD Broad Habitat Types (BHTs) within the overall area is associated with an estimated reduction of 20% of the annual mean MBCG landings value. Maintaining 70% of BHTs in a persistently unfished state in the Greater North Sea and the Celtic Seas areas is associated with estimated reductions in landings values of 31.6% and 36.7% per year respectively. Results for individual subdivisions and BHTs are provided in the main advice document and the accompanying interactive documents.

Limitations apply to the input data, analyses, and advice. These include the omission of data for most < 12 m MBCG fishing vessels, the effects of analytical scale, the use of landings value rather than gross value added (GVA) as a measure of economic impact, not accounting for the ecological and fisheries consequences of displacement or landings value by displaced

vessels, and incomplete vessel monitoring system (VMS) data submissions to ICES. The consequences of these limitations are elaborated in the 'Limitations of the advice' section.

ICES work, looking forward:

- Interactions with Offshore Renewable Energy and MPAs
- Displacement effects (currently not accounted for) and metrics of economic impact (currently only landings value, maybe gross value added)
- Patchiness vs. Continuity of peripheral areas
- Refining scales and completeness of analyses
- Incorporating SSF
- Evolution and benchmarking methods

Smart planning for coexistence was deemed crucial.

2.1 Q&A and discussion

Spain was concerned not only about the reduced value of landings but also the reduced tonnage, noting food sovereignty as a concerning issue. Exporting environmental problems while undersupplying markets seemed like a failed strategy in Spain's view. The representative asked about core areas changes, whether these are taken into account year by year. He recalled that within the EU fisheries management there are already measures to protect the seabed, with tracing systems, restrictions of certain activities, and other mechanisms in place. He reiterated that a consideration must be given to productivity of demersal fisheries and their supply to the markets.

Sweden reported on their activities underway, notably the ban on BT in MPAs, contributing to threshold values of HELCOM and OSPAR, while also considering impact assessment of socio-economic effects. The representative wondered how the location of fishing activities could be included in the advice and whether there is any work planned on the refinement of C-squares. She also queried about the obstacles in taking ecologically important areas into consideration and how are they to be defined. Sweden underlined that stakeholders should be included in all such processes.

Ireland recalled that under MSFD D6 an in-depth analysis is being carried out on adverse effects. The newly agreed threshold values allow adverse effects over 25% of the seabed. It stressed the need to consider socio-economic impacts particularly for SSF.

Cyprus revealed its plans to reduce their demersal fleet to 0 on a voluntary basis.

France warned about displacement effect and regretted the lack of clear conclusions in Mediterranean. It recommended to remain vigilant about the lessons drawn from ICES advice as there are some methodological issues (some vessels not included). France will continue to work with national scientists on trade-off impacts.

Germany follows a balanced and differentiated approach considering different levels of protection. There are different measures available at the national level for the protection of the

seabed, which are included in the roadmap. The roadmap assumes 10% of protected areas in line with biodiverse strategy, there is also ongoing research and development of alternative catch methods. Further measures include fisheries restrictions in MPAs in the North Sea.

The Netherlands is working towards GES by monitoring the species and MPAs, while awaiting further scientific information for areas along the coast to designate these as MPAs. Furthermore, more sites will be designated if they meet biodiversity criteria. NL is to identify main threats and opportunities and formulate suitable measures.

Denmark follows obligations from the EU Biodiversity Strategy. Environmental and fisheries data are used to decide where to designate areas. It aims to protect all marine habitat types within 2-3 years in national regulation and regional processes, protect harbour porpoise, seals, birds, and other protected species. There are political discussions on the future of fisheries planned after summer, after which the roadmap will be finalised.

Belgium intends to do more around multifunctionality (ORE, MPAs), and continues to work on precision fishing, real-time monitoring, and defining different targets. Multi-use of areas will be key. It proposed for ICES to make maps multilayered with energy, seabed sensitivity etc. The Greater North Sea Basin Initiative (GBNSBI) should be interacting with ICES and OSPAR efforts. The guiding question for BE is: “how can we multimap our seabed and oceans and all sectors have the possibility to continue without damaging the targets?”

ICES responded that landings and value rates done at the scale of the metiér give similar results, but across metiér results differ. Regarding the stability of core areas ICES responded that the assessment went from 2017-2022, with some variation year-to-year among regions and metiér. The practical finding was that core fishing grounds assessed in 1-2 years would not be sufficient, as there is some movement year to year due to fish migration and the cost of fuel. Regarding the development of low-impact gear, ICES advice includes some calculations showing the effects of changing the impact of gear on seabed. Further work will include refining of methods in swept area ratio, the use of c-squares etc. The main limitation right now is the frequency of transmission positions. As higher-frequency data become available, it will be possible to conduct analyses at higher resolutions. C-squares are used due to frequency issues and they sit within ICES sub-ares. That said, ICES is willing to refine this once data becomes available. Regarding ecologically important areas, ICES responded it needs to work with managers to develop criteria to start making these assessments. ICES agreed that SSF should be represented in advice in the future.

DG Environment commented that the objective is to allow sustainable use of the marine space and to find a way to combine different competing activities. Threshold values are not the only elements that MS will need to take into account, but they will have to consider them when they are updating their national Marine Strategies. They stressed the importance of planning, and noted they too were following closely the GNSBI. ICES is set to support MS in better planning.

[3 ICES advice on sensitive species by-catch monitoring \(link\)](#)

The Commission noted that mitigating bycatch of sensitive species remains a priority issue for the Commission. The legal obligations stem from Birds and Habitats Directives, MSFD, CFP, TMR and CR.

Monitoring bycatch is a responsibility of MS. Current monitoring is not sufficient and the COM launched 7 infringement procedures against MS for failing to monitor bycatch. There is a need for robust monitoring programmes and support is envisaged from ICES, Horizon, LIFE, and EMFAF.

Heen Ojaveer, ACOM vice-chair, presented ICES recurrent advice to COM on bycatch.

The current monitoring advice is Special Advice Request to:

- Review available information and data on monitoring programs implemented by MS between 2017-2022
- Propose criteria that monitoring programmes should fulfill.

General advice:

- there is no one single monitoring design that is universally applicable
- increasing the number of fishing vessels monitored increases accuracy and precision
- monitoring coverage to achieve a reliable and accurate BPUE is highly dependent on the bycatch probabilities of the ETP species
- Substantial increases in the current monitoring coverage is required

Advice on monitoring coverage and accuracy precision are simulations and not real-life representations.

As an example, ICES recommends:

0.5% of monitoring coverage for ETP species of very high bycatch probability

7% for medium/high bycatch probability

30% for very rare bycatch probability

Six case studies were carried out. For monitoring coverage of more than 10%, bycatch estimates were shown to be adequate with low bias. At lower monitoring levels (0.5%), estimates are uncertain and biased. To be able to certainly detect bycatch event when it happens, certain monitoring coverage is required.

Biological parameters to be monitored: mandatory: species, sex, length

Recommended parameters include: dead/alive, age, weight, maturity, gravidity, health and body condition, state of decomposition and vitality.

Observers should document bycatch events with photos.

Fishing activity parameters to be monitored:

- Fishing effort (days at sea)
- Soak times for passive gears, gear dimensions, towed gears vertical opening, and fishing hours
- Record of whether mitigation devices are fully functioning.

Monitoring approaches:

- High-risk bycatch fisheries: independent observations under the at-sea sampling programmes are optimal
- Electronic monitoring
- For low bycatch risk fisheries; self-sampling, self-reporting by industry, and interviews/questionnaires
- Electronic monitoring methods

Recommendations:

- Evaluate expected bycatch probability
- Sample more vessels
- Consider if sampling should be stratified to improve precision especially for rarely caught species
- Choose a sampling programme type representative of the fishery
- Reach monitoring coverage
- Develop standardised protocols for the reporting of technical gear etc.

3.1 Q&A and discussion

Spain adopted a national plan to reduce bycatch in fishing in February 2022. It noted that MAP was not legally binding. The MS must comply with community acquis, while acknowledging public concerns. A proper scientific basis should be ensured for management decisions.

Germany is strengthening research efforts in reducing bycatch, and development of monitoring programs.

Sweden's monitoring programme is designed in line with ICES advice. Programme is adaptive and could change in parts in time without losing time if new advice is received or if knowledge base improves. The monitoring programme is in place since 2022, based on CCTV and observers. The risk-based approach is applied. Sweden intends to include bycatch in the definition of GES of MSFD. National measures in areas where monitoring programme identified increased bycatch. Sweden echoed that decisions need to be based on the CFP regulation and underlined the added value of inter-state collaboration on conservation measures.

The Netherlands noted that 'one size fits all' for monitoring of ETP species is not appropriate. Monitoring is very costly, and regulations do not prescribe how monitoring should be done. Priority should be given to high-risk species, and monitoring should be practical for fishers. NL also informed it has initiated the EU LIFE CIBBRINA project on mitigation of bycatch of ETP. ETP species bycatch monitoring is already in place in the NL, with sufficient coverage in pelagic and BT fleet. A project for gillnets to be launched in 2025.

France plans to collect fisheries data requested by the Data Collection Framework and for sensitive species bycatch. Declaration of marine mammal bycatch is mandatory for fisheries in FR. Their programme OSMOSE aims to collect data on bycatch, monitoring programme

called OPSCAM focuses on electronic monitoring devices in Bay of Biscay. AI is used to analyse videos, and observation onboard will be reinforced to collect data on species and gears. FR aims to improve data collection system based on the lack of information identified from these projects.

Denmark noted more and higher resolution data is needed. Danish DTU Aqua runs projects on CCTV on gillnetters. Data is being collected on bycatch of harbour porpoise, seals, and birds, which is then analysed by DTU. Toolbox for best practices in ETP species mitigation is being developed. More advice is needed for further protection of targeted species. Once JR for Baltic sea harbour porpoise populations is finalized, DK aims to move on to the North Sea and tackle bycatch there. In terms of Natura2000 measures, DK plans to look into bycatches of seabirds, skates and rays, etc., applying risk-based management of sensitive species.

ICES responded that it is positive that MS are considering additional surveys through international projects like CIBBRINA, where ICES scientists are also participating. ICES expressed hope that national scientists will make this data available to ICES via data calls.

COM acknowledged that knowledge-policy interface is important for sound policy-making and commended calls for action within the regional approach.

[4 ICES advice on innovative gears \(link\)](#)

Under the Technical Measures Regulation (TMR), ICES was asked for this advice three years ago and in 2023. This is a recurrent request and new advice is due in two years. ICES acknowledged efforts in regional groups and scientific fisheries testing new gears. A more structured approach and more consistent consideration of socio-economics is desirable and ICES is currently considering how to approach the upcoming advice with improved methodology (a WG might be established to this end).

The advice request included the request to update the catalogue of innovative gears, evaluate the level of uptake, identify main drivers that prevent use, such as behavioral drivers, and social and economic trade-offs.

Advice:

- 80% of innovative gears have high technological readiness
- 47% have minimal level of complexity – easy to implement
- Most gears improved catch efficiency, gear selectivity
- 37% of gears require low investment and are economically viable
- Level of uptake and main drivers need to still be identified.

PESTEL framework was used and innovation matrix analysis applied.

The first evaluation of economic performance through cost matrix showed that:

- Capital costs are low for 48% of innovations
- Only 6% provide significant ROI
- 19% provide substantial ROI

- 53% ensure minor ROI.

More than 78% of low-cost innovative gears were considered to provide positive ROI and could therefore be considered reasonable replacement for currently used gears.

Factors influencing uptake:

- 53% deployment and retrieval comparable to baseline gear. 28% were more difficult to deploy
- 44% of innovations are more difficult to maintain or repair
- 72% of gears have similar risk to fisher health and safety with only 1% posing higher risk

Further developments envisaged:

- improving methodological approaches on uptake
- Identifying the level of uptake and drivers
- Suggestion for management authorities is to start collecting gear type for innovation used for each fishing trip

4.1 Q&A and discussion

The Netherlands supported the ambition of gear innovations which help fulfill obligations of the CFP. They noted the deployment of Kiwi gear (Modular Harvest System also presented at the NSAC Symposium), noting that first results are very promising. They also drew attention to their project on Fully Documented Fisheries, noting that automatic catch registration can help fleets become more sustainable. They underlined the need to share good practices and international cooperation in addition to their national group on innovations. Strengthen cooperation between MS was encouraged.

Spain highlighted their strong commitment to improving gear, with proposal for increasing mesh sizes in the Mediterranean. They also noted the innovation of flying gates minimizing/eliminating contact with seabed.

Germany noted their research on selectivity, as well as projects and measures on further development of fishing gear, particularly for crab fishing in the North Sea. Cooperation between research and fisheries is deemed very important in Germany. They also welcomed ICES advice on gear as very pertinent and were keen to address hurdles to uptake, including simplification of regional procedures for new innovative gear. They also welcomed taking stock of diversity of fisheries in order to remove hurdles to uptake.

Sweden posed a questions to ICES: is it possible to ask joint questions with UK and NO? Sweden is working actively on selective gear. A Work has been organised and based on collaboration between fishers, researchs and managers. They noted that funding is important with significant funds coming from EMFAF. Sweden noted that more work is to be done on regionalisation and around the flexibility of the new Technical Measures Regulation.

Belgium gives high priority to selectivity for which it uses EMFAF and other ongoing research programmes. Belgium support NL on FDF, especially on a regional scale. BE also supported the need for improvements in regionalisation processes.

Denmark noted that innovation is important for them and they are also using EMFAF. It has proven challenging and time consuming to introduce fishing gear within the current legal framework, noting especially challenging evaluations by the STECF. Better dialogues between MS drafting JR, STECF, and stakeholders should be established, which would support innovations as well.

France highlighted their online platform on innovative gear and the project [Solupeche](#), a programme to test bycatch mitigation devices at large scale (LIFE programme). Feasibility studies for new gear, acoustic deterrent devices tests etc. are conducted through this.

ICES response: there are planned improvements in PESTEL framework. In response to Sweden on the possibility to have joint advice requests ICES noted it will pass this on to ACOM Chair, and then initiate discussion in January's MIRIA meeting. It also noted that evidence in the advice is not limited to EU waters only, but it consists of global international evidence on innovations, which might be relevant in the EU. ICES remains open to diffident stakeholders, including industry representatives, and strongly commits to using industry data in ICES advice. There are some advice sheets where industry data are excessively used and this will likely be the case also in the future work on innovative gear in order to get a more complete picture of innovations and applications.

The Commission took note of difficulties in relation to the innovative gear approval procedure and pointed to certain flexibilities under the TMR and within regional groups mechanisms. The COM keeps looking at what is possible within the existing legal framework. Also noting that implementation report on TMR is to come in July.

5. Presentation of EEA on fisheries management measures in Natura 2000

It was noted that Nature Restoration Law (NRL) was adopted by the Council and will be published in the official journal in July. It will come into force immediately and will be directly applicable 20 days after publication.

The EEA report on fisheries management measures in Natura2000 sites and other MPAs was presented. The EEA compiled data on information from MS regarding fisheries management measures in Natura2000 sites and other MPAs.

In MPAs, all activities with impact must be managed to achieve conservation objectives. It is a priority under the European Green Deal, EU Biodiversity Strategy, Marine Action Plan (MAP), Birds and Habitats Directive, MSFD, and CFP to effectively manage MPAs. In that sense, MPAs should have clearly defined conservation objectives and measures. Fisheries management measures must be established in all MPAs and must be taken according to the rules of the CFP, where, in the regionalisation process, MS have a shared responsibility to propose conservation measures.

On the MAP, the COM produced a guidance document on Natura2000 and fisheries. It also supports MSs' endeavors in the use of less damaging gear.

So far, unequal processes in different sea basins regarding MPAs have been identified. MPAs can only deliver biodiversity and socio-economic benefits if they are managed effectively. The current pace of adoption of measures is insufficient to ensure compliance and effective management. The MS should fully use existing CFP tools and step up national measures and regional cooperation. They are to be supported by the COM guidance document on Natura2000 and fishing activities, nature dialogues, and co-financing mechanisms (LIFE, EMFAF).

Results of the report:

The state of the ocean is poor. The status and trends for some marine habitats remain unknown.

Drivers for loss:

- Overexploitation
- Pollution
- Bycatch
- Damage from leisure activities
- Habitat loss
- Invasive species
- Noise
- Climate change

EU Biodiversity Strategy stipulates that fisheries management measures must be established in MPAs. Currently, the MPAs cover 12% of EU seas, however less than 1% are strictly protected.

A series of questions was asked to MS in order to get more information on fisheries measures:

1. Is fishing identified as pressure within the site?
2. Level of implementation of fisheries management measures
3. Types of measures: national, EU, both?
4. Is bottom fishing prohibited on the site?

19 MS reported back, 3 did not respond. This constitutes the first report on fisheries management measures. In 76% of total area of MPAs, MS reported fishing as pressure. The percentage was 63% for nationally designated MPAs and for North Sea subregion, over 80% was reported as impacted by fisheries.

Only 3% of the MPAs, 3% of national MPA sites, and 4% of Natura2000 sites have all necessary fisheries management measures to achieve their conservation objective.

Over 60% of measures are partly or entirely based on EU regulations. 10% of MPAs prohibit Mobile BT.

Next steps:

- Analyse data to look at patterns
- Determine differences between 1-12nm and beyond 12nm
- determine differences between SPAs and SACs
- Determine differences among habitats types
- Dive deeper into comments for further insights

5.1 Q&A and discussion

Cyprus asked whether fisheries restricted areas are also included in this report/evaluation.

EEA responded that it reported only the data and information submitted to them, noting that fisheries-restricted areas are not included as they are not MPAs by definition.

Spain highlighted the need to look at what needs protection so that resources can be used appropriately. It saw EEA recommendations as kind invitations, but failing to acknowledge the enormous amount of work done by the MS. It also underlined that MAP is not legally binding. The focus should be on the importance of harvesting marine resources sustainably, noting that stopping BT requires robust scientific basis. They felt that “overexploitation of fishing grounds” is not a driver in the Atlantic and felt this was misrepresented/generalised.

COM responded that MAP is based on other directives, which are binding.

Finland noted that it's important to know why an area was originally protected. It queries whether gear, which has no contact with the bottom, was still considered a fishing pressure in the analysis.

EEA responded that it analysed the pressure on habitats and species protected by the MPAs, not the rest. It reiterated that MS are still able to update this information. The information is about national MPAs, and so it is up to the MS to assess this.

Sweden recently sent the final version of the assessment and thanked for the opportunity to update information. Sweden is working on introducing fisheries conservation measures in protected areas together with other MS. There are several MPAs where they may submit JR in 2024.

France did not include other kinds of MPAs in the Natura2000 network with N2000 being their largest network. They noted that the deadline did not allow for a full analysis of other kinds of MPAs. FR is currently assessing fisheries impacts on N2000sites, based on scientific method defined at national level following uniform standards taking into account local specificities and ensuring dialogue with stakeholders. Every time an impact is identified, measures are taken to reduce it to meet conservation objectives for all sites. All measures shall be implemented by 2027 at the latest.

In Germany, 30% protection was reached in the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. DE is working on fisheries measures through JR mechanism.

The Netherlands noted its North Sea Agreement, a work between the administration and stakeholders, committing to protect 15% of seabed by 2030. At this moment, around 5% of the Dutch North Sea is protected. To increase this %, JRs were and will be submitted. Dogger bank JR proposes 1/3 of the Dogger Bank protected from BT. NL hopes for a Delegated Act adoption soon, so it can contribute to achieving nature objectives (DA would raise seabed protection from 5 to 6,7%. The NL is working on 17 other JRs amounting to 13,7% of habitat protection.

Denmark participates in developing JRs to protect Natura2000 sites. It recognises the necessity to ensure the protection of species and habitats, and plans to have in place protection measures for all N2000 sites by end of 2027. It also noted the excessive length of regionalisation procedure. DK is in the process of designating MPAs, and will reach 32% of the Danish marine areas in total. It also queried: What does it mean to protect N2000 areas? What measures are needed to protect the identified sensitive species? Noting that it is not necessarily that BT needs to be banned, but perhaps gillnetting or other types of fishing. There is currently a discussion in DK whether protecting 30% should protect the bottom, water column, or birds. The Nature Restoration Law will have to be taken in consideration as well.

Spain is doing a lot of work to table management plans in zones already identified. There are 21% of marine area designated as N2000 area, which is a result of work with NGOs, fishers, stakeholders, shipping, etc. to protect the species. In the opinion of Spain, the Action Plan's ban of BT by 2030 is not helpful in the endeavor to protect species and habitats. It also drew attention to the fact that in many areas where there is fisheries activity the impact is not that great, noting that "activity and impact is not the same."

Portugal agreed with Spain. PT is doing lots of data collecting in the Atlantic, which is a large EEZ for PT, but deep and not that rich in fish species, therefore fishing effort was reduced in that zone. PT also does not allow BT in great depths. There are different MPAs within 12nm and no vessels are in contact with the seabed there. PT disagreed with the conclusion that N2000 areas should be put on an equal footing. It called for better use of scientific data, mitigation measures, and recognition of fisheries as an important activity and link in the food chain. PT does not support the reform of the CFP on MPAs and conclusions on protected birds. It suggested progressive implementation of measures regarding BT gear, with first we need to prove that there is an impact on the habitat of N2000 network.

COM reiterated the link of MAP to longstanding obligations from old directives going back 30 years. It agreed that a ban on BT is not always required, and MS should work on the longstanding obligations stemming from those existing directives, stipulating assessment of fishing pressure and introduction of adequate measures. It acknowledged significant efforts by MS.

6 Stakeholders interventions

EBFA called for a better way for stakeholders to engage beyond just a statement. It acknowledged the ongoing work, with lots of information still missing for robust decisions. It

recognized the improvements in ICES models, noting a move from C-square towards a more precise resolution would increase effectiveness. In MS there is lots of concerns regarding socioeconomic impact and food security in the EU, which is also a concern of the industry. It remarked that COM seems to be rushing to meet criteria from CBD and BBNJ, not considering the consequences. It noted that the COM is advancing the MAP while disregarding that was rejected by the parliament. Also, the MAP was presented as the solution replacing the reform of the CFP, however the Commissioner now nevertheless tabled a possible CFP reform – EBFA wondered if that meant the possibility to drop the MAP. EBFA felt there was no coherence in consideration of protected areas, noting that N2000 were included, but not fisheries restricted areas. EBFA proposed to pause to see the future political mandate and to get proper data to execute any measures. EBFA also called for inclusion of other disturbing factors, such as shipping, to obtain a holistic picture in an ecosystem-based approach. EBFA invited the legislators to work together with the industry, particularly to address data gaps, noting that industry should be included in the scientific process. Finally, EBFA noted that the industry shares the COM goals, but not the chosen path.

EAPO regretted the lack of consideration of socio-economic impacts. On innovative gear, EAPO recalled their symposium with NSAC where it was noted that the uptake of innovative gear needs to be improved from fisheries and regulatory perspective, seeking level playing field with the UK. The evaluation of the CFP should also look into improving the uptake of innovative gear. EAPO highlighted the need for MS and POs to find their way under increasing pressure of environmental regulations and lack of coherence.

Seas at Risk welcomed the JSG platform, noting that it should not agree on the lowest common denominator. Maintaining the status quo is not an option. MS failed to reach GES, resulting in dire state of fisheries. A system is needed that is beneficial for fishers, coastal communities, and environment. COM should prioritise fishing for human consumption, and phase out fishing for fish oil and fishmeal. In addition, COM should prioritise SSF providing most jobs and prosperity of fishing communities.

Oceana supported MAP and acknowledged the progress and efforts of MS. Nevertheless, further and faster efforts are needed. MPAs lack robust management, requiring robust management plans with further restrictions on BT. Scientific evidence on the impact of fishing sector must be considered. MAP needs clear and transparent process, starting by MS making roadmaps public to allow for public scrutiny and accountability. Ecosystem-approach and precautionary management are needed.

Europeche underlined the contribution of farmers and fishers to food security, which they felt was not mentioned sufficiently at th meeting. They noted the 28% reduction of the fleet since 2000, and 55% emissions cut since 1990. They stressed the need to increase food production and queried how the EU plans this without increasing less sustainable imports. They also deplored the COM asking ICES how to reduce fishing effort and how much money that will cost instead of asking how to manage fisheries in sustainably in VMEs. They also queried why the NRL seem to contain many derogations but not fishing. They pointed to possible bias in ICES advice with all values from different fishing being seemingly of the same nature, which, they warned, is not the case. Europeche also pointed out that new technological innovation will not solve the Landing Obligation issue and suggested that change of policy is needed. They queried how the COM expects for the industry to to continue efforts in BT

improvements/innovation with all looming restrictions and regulations and with no extra funding also (with EFMAF being cut). They asked how the COM intends to finance all the new environmental targets.

ETF did not share the main approach, and believed there was no strategic view of fisheries applied, and no underlying industry issues considered, including the increase in average age and generational renewal. They felt there was no account of article 13 of CFP to mitigate the negative impacts of the conservation measures. The approach between fisheries and environmental policies is not balanced in their view, and there is no account of socioeconomic impact. Robust scientific work needs to be done upstream. Socio-economic aspects need to be on an equal footing with environmental aspects.

Environmental Justice Foundation underlined the need to rely on scientific data, but respect the scope of existing legislation which stipulates precautionary approach. They believed that the illegality of BT in MPAs was not correctly addressed in the implementation of the existing legislation. Only 4% of MPAs of N2000 have adequate measures. This is not only a question of political will, but of implementation. Fishers need stability and security, but also need to rely on legislation. There is a need to step up enforcement of existing legal obligations for N2000 sites. They proposed technical workshop on the implementation of environmental legislation including NRL and called on MS to publish their roadmaps publicly.

NSAC welcomed the initiative as a way to build bridges between the fisheries and environmental files to better reflect the reality and to foster better understanding between environment and fisheries pressure. It recalled the recently published NSAC/EAPO advice on Innovative Fishing, emphasizing political, economic, social, technological, environmental, and legal factors in gear innovation, enabling fishing sector to meet environmental goals while ensuring healthy seafood provision and sustaining fishing communities' livelihoods. NSAC has established a Focus Group on Mapping of Fishing Grounds, aimed at gathering information on Members States' best practices on data collection, technical issues, and stakeholder engagement while addressing existing concerns of fishing displacement due to proposed environmental measures (i.e. MPAs and offshore wind). Regarding ICES work it was noted that C-square resolutions must be improved, so that the data used for N2000 areas are robust. It is important to monitor these areas and their objectives. NSAC is also working on advice on **Other Effective Conservation Measures**, due to be published shortly. There are different ways of designating spatial measures, but all should be done in consultation and close collaboration with fisheries and environmental stakeholders. The NSAC is committed to a just transition to an industry with minimum negative environmental impact and meaningful positive social impact.

The **COM responded** that it remains committed to continued implementation of the CFP and expert group's work continues. The evaluation of the CFP regulation does not presume a reform, on which the results of the evaluation will bring clarity and also the political mandate to the COM. The COM has published a call for evidence and it remains in contact with wider stakeholders, ACs, etc. Regarding the NRL, clarity and stability are needed and when evaluating the CFP coherence, relevance, contribution to other aspects of policy, such as environmental legislation, will be crucial. The CFP requires balancing of all objectives. It remains important to base discussions on available science. The current legislation leaves

lots of room for MS action in balancing the objectives and taking into account socioeconomic impacts.

7 Take aways, Member States roadmaps and way ahead

In response to previous comments it was noted that other pressures are being tackled in other existing groups, even when not mentioned in the Joint Special Group. The remaining MS were invited to send their roadmaps and also to make those public.

Participants were also informed about the Call mission Ocean relevant for the implementation of the MAP. These are yearly calls for research and innovation actions, and the one for 2024 is open since March, with deadline for submission 18 September.

Relevant for the North Sea is the call on reducing environmental impacts of fisheries on marine species and habitats. A project should target accelerated transition to sustainable fishing practices, elimination of accidental catches of non-target species, effective mitigation measures to protect sensitive species, and increase of the value of seafood products from sustainable fisheries. The aim is to identify, test and validate a set of economically viable solutions, practices, and processes to minimize impact, and protect ETP and juvenile fish. Projects should also involve end users, fisheries communities, and be tailored to seabasins' regional specificities. Regional local authorities should also be engaged. Examples include innovative gears and techniques, exclusion devices, escape panels, and acoustic deterrent devices, restricted fishing activities, safe handling of bycaught species etc.

There is also Call for evidence on carbon sequestration capacity and seabed disturbing activities. The study should be starting soon and finish in 18 months. The aim is to review existing knowledge to evaluate the impact of human activities on the long-term provision of ecosystem services.

8 Wrap up

The Joint Special Group would normally convene twice a year. However, in view of the fact that the COM is expecting the change of the mandate, the meeting in October will not take place. Instead, the **group is to reconvene in Spring 2025** with the new COM in place, while the COM will continue to work on the implementation of existing legislation. The COM encouraged MS to send ideas for topics for next meeting. One of the options to consider for next agenda is NRL and interaction with existing pieces of legislation.

The COM also took note of the Greater North Sea Basin Initiative and its upcoming ministerial declaration between North Sea energy ministers, fisheries ministers, and environment ministers in October 2024 in Antwerp.