

DRAFT NWWAC & PELAC Minutes Joint Seismic Focus Group

June 15 2020, WebEx

Participants

Gonçalo Carvalho, chairman	Sciaena
Anne-Marie Kats	Pelagic AC
Gerard van Balsfoort	PFA
Martin Pastoors	PFA
Sean O'Donoghue	Killybegs Fishermen's Organisation Ltd.
Serena Rivero	Stichting de Noordzee/North Sea Foundation
Stella Nemecky	WWF Deutschland
Mo Matthies	NWWAC
Patrick Murphy	Irish South and West FPO, IE
Enda Conneely	Irish Islands and Marine Resources Organisation

1. Opening of the meeting by the chairman, Gonçalo Carvalho

The chairman opened the meeting at 15:00 hrs and welcomed the participants to the first meeting of the joint NWWAC – PELAC Focus Group on seismic impacts. Due to the covid-19 circumstances the meeting was held through WebEx. A tour the table followed.

2. Adoption of the agenda, chairman, TOR and election of vice-chair

The chairman explained that the joint Focus Group was set up because both ACs have sent the Commission a similar request asking for the setup of an ICES working group to investigate impacts of seismic activities on the life stages of relevant commercial stocks. The Commission response to the NWWAC, indicating that such a request could only be met in the form of a non-recurrent request to ICES, was relevant to both ACs. The PELAC and NWWAC have decided to join forces to co-draft a basis for such a non-recurrent request, in order to develop knowledge and research on these issues.

The aim of the Focus Group meeting was to formulate specific research questions that will enable the drafting of a non-recurrent request to ICES, that maximises a successful output for both ACs.

The chairman added that he had informally been in touch with Mark Dickey-Collas from ACOM, and had learned that the draft request could be checked by the ICES secretariat before submission to the Commission, to receive informal feedback on whether the request would be feasible or would require submission of separate requests.

The agenda was adopted without amendments. The Focus Group agreed on the proposed chairman, and elected Patrick Murphy as the vice-chair.

The TOR was agreed with inclusion of the vice-chairman, and minor adjustments in relation to the proposed timeframe and scope of the Focus Group (**action 1**). It was agreed to finalise a draft special request to ICES to the NWWAC and PELAC for adoption at the July ExCom meetings (**action 2 & 3**).

3. Formulation TOR/research questions for non-recurrent ICES request on seismic impacts

The chairman explained that the Commission reply to the NWWAC pointed towards the rationale of today's meeting. He underlined the importance of taking into account the specific stocks relevant to both AC's. He thought it would be good to do as ICES suggested and check the draft request at the end of this exercise with ICES to understand how feasible a request on for e.g. seismic activities as well as wind farms would be.

Sean O'Donoghue thought the Focus Group was dealing specifically with seismic impacts, and asked if the scope would be broadened to include overall noise impacts, such as wind parks. Or would the special request to ICES only deal with seismic activities from oil and gas exploration?

The chairman said that was up to the Focus Group to decide, but felt both impacts were relevant and important. He added that ICES mentions the impacts of anthropogenic activities in their stock advice for several relevant stocks, such as herring. In his view, three main topics would be important to consider: seismic surveys, wind farms and cabling. In the end, the scope of the Focus Group could be expanded to cover broader noise impacts. When dealing with this specific task in formulating a special request to ICES, he was unsure ICES would be able to address both seismic and wind farms in one request.

Patrick Murphy remarked the main issue is the disturbance of the seabed resulting from seismic surveys, pile driving etc. All these activities are considered relevant as well as understanding their cumulative effects. Stella Nemecky echoed this remark. In her view cumulative impacts from all these activities should be addressed in a request to ICES.

Sean O'Donoghue agreed with the importance of all these points, but thought that the questions should be looked at very carefully to avoid over-asking ICES and ending up without an answer at all. He suggested to separate the seismic and wind farm impacts requests, since the amount of work involved in both topics is considerable. The specific questions covering seismic surveys alone will require a lot of ICES' time.

The chairman agreed, and thought the sand/gravel extraction point while important, could be parked for a later stage. Perhaps it could also be dealt with separately by the PELAC in the context of herring spawning grounds. Focussing on two requests: one for seismic and one on wind farm impacts seemed like a good way forward.

Stella Nemecky asked what the Focus Group specifically wanted to ask ICES. It was clarified that both ACs originally asked for the setup of an ICES working group to continuously develop research in this specific field. The Commission responded that an ICES working group cannot be activated on this topic, but it would be possible to submit a special non-recurrent request to ICES. This is a one-off exercise performed by ICES that deals with a specific research problem. It will be up to ICES to decide if they organise a workshop or a specific working group on this.

Sean O'Donoghue underlined the importance of formulating very precise questions to ICES, from a NWW and pelagic point of view. For a one-off advice, asking for both impacts of seismic and wind farms will be too broad.

Gerard van Balsfoort agreed. He proposed to strictly limit the request to seismic impacts. Elements in the relevant sea-basins such as wind farms and cabling are important as well, but would entail understanding impacts on sedimentation, water currents, migration patterns etc. Including these types of questions is far too complex for ICES to deal with in one request. The request should focus on impacts from seismic activities and nothing else.

Mo Matthies wondered what element is more important and how this could be ranked. Would it be possible to ask ICES to carry out a risk analysis on all topics and rank them?

Sean O'Donoghue said ICES would not be in a position to do so until they have done the assessment. The starting point should be to look at seismic impacts, and ask ICES to evaluate existing scientific studies investigating impacts on fish and spawning grounds. Once that is done, it would be useful to understand where the knowledge gaps are that need to be addressed. Impact assessments have been carried out in Irish waters, but most are reliant on research from Australia and not in North Western Waters. He proposed to include the noise from wind mill construction to this request.

Serena Rivero clarified that seismic activities cover surveys in oil/gas exploration, as well as surveys used to decide on the locations for offshore wind farm installation. So the surveys are relevant for both offshore activities. She added that surveys for wind park installation hardly occur off the Dutch Coast though. Seismic noise does not include noise from pile driving.

Sean O'Donoghue suggested including one or two very general questions, and a few more precise questions covering species relevant to the ACs. For example, he explained that seismic surveys can occur in the same area and at the same time as the mackerel egg survey. It would be useful to understand how the seismic surveys affect the mackerel egg survey. Similarly, the same question can be asked for seismic surveys occurring near the spawning burrows for Nephrops at the time of spawning. What are known impacts from existing studies and what are the knowledge gaps?

Patrick Murphy agreed with these proposed questions on the egg surveys and added that the Marine Institute observed a striking overlap between seismic activities and observed low recruitment that wasn't seen before.

The chairman agreed with the way forward to propose a few broad questions on seismic impacts on life stages aspects, and several specific questions for pelagic and demersal species in the NWW region. He also agreed with the request to evaluate what is known, and what knowledge gaps exist.

Sean O'Donoghue proposed to include another dimension: to ask ICES what parameters should be part of environmental impact assessments prior to seismic surveys, which are not specifically covered in existing ones. This question could also be included in a request on wind farm impacts.

Anne-Marie Kats recalled that the original request from the PELAC came forth from wanting to better understand the impacts on herring spawning grounds specifically. She suggested to include this element into the stock-specific questions. Stella Nemecky agreed on the need to include herring spawning grounds in the request, and added it would be important to look at both short and long term impacts. Even if long term impacts are left unanswered, it would be an important statement to make that the ACs are interested in long term impacts of these activities, as well as cumulative impacts.

Martin Pastoors intervened that when asking questions to ICES, it is important to know what answers you are looking for and what will be done with these answers. Usually, in non-recurrent advice from ICES there is a specific problem that needs solving. He wasn't sure what the specific problem was here. Asking for known/unknown impacts on fish and shellfish is far too general. What is the specific problem? The question related to the egg surveys is more specific: are fish scared away and does that affect the survey? It's important to consider where the information is going when you receive an answer. Asking general questions will only give bland answers that doesn't get you anywhere. The more specific the question, the better.

The chairman thought the intention of the ACs could also be to start the thinking and showing the importance of these issues. They can suggest additional fields of research that should be explored by the Commission.

Sean O'Donoghue proposed to look specifically at brown crab in the NWW sea-basin. Crab fishermen have indicated brown crab migration for a number of miles away from seismic surveys.

Martin Pastoors underlined the importance of concrete cases. It could be interesting to check the underwater noise portal from ICES on noise events, and see if information there can be matched up with the type of questions we want to raise.

The chairman added that for herring spawning grounds, PELAC members could help highlight important spawning grounds and make reference to ICES subareas. There is also language in ICES advice sheets for several of the herring stocks that make reference to anthropogenic activities. This could also be looked into to help develop more specific questions. North Sea herring could be an example of this.

Sean O'Donoghue asked if effects of seismic activities on fish larvae could be included. Martin Pastoors insisted on the need for the question to be more concrete, why look at larvae? Concrete experiences help in formulating the questions.

The chairman pointed out that Patrick Murphy had shared a note in advance of the meeting, highlighting some research on the effects of seismic activities on larvae and plankton. This could be used as a reference to make the question more concrete. Patrick Murphy added he would be interested in knowing more about the effects of seismic blasting on shallower waters. This was echoed by Enda Conneely.

Martin Pastoors said there is a literature overview on seismic activities. He could check it to see if there's anything available on shallower waters and would share this information (**action 4**).

Serena Rivero asked what essential habitats are affected by seismic surveys and what measures could be proposed to mitigate the effects, such as seasonal closures.

4. Updating Focus Group TOR

The chairman concluded there was an interest in a broader noise discussion within the Focus Group, though not all elements are realistic to include in the current task of developing requests to ICES. He proposed to adjust the TOR by removing the reference to seismic in the Focus Group name and to include a reference to wind farms as well (**action 1**).

It was agreed to separate the topics into two requests: one for seismic impacts, one for wind farm impacts. The chairman thought other noise sources would also be interesting the monitor within this group if the scope is broadened.

It was agreed the draft special request to ICES would be amended to focus specifically on impacts from seismic activities and circulated to the Focus Group members for approval (**action 2**).

Martin Pastoors indicated that ICES has set up a [working group on offshore wind development and fisheries](#). He suggested the specific questions on wind farms could be incorporated into the TOR for that group directly. The Focus Group agreed (**action 5**).

5. Listing of action items

1. Adjust TOR and broaden the scope to include impacts of wind farms (secretariats)
2. Redraft special request to ICES to focus specifically on seismic impacts and circulate for Focus Group comments and approval (PELAC)
3. Present final draft request to both NWWAC and PELAC early July 2020 ExCom meetings for adoption (Focus Group, secretariats)
4. Check literature overview and share information on seismic impacts on shallower waters (Martin Pastoors)
5. Create second request on wind farm impacts and check if research questions can be incorporated directly into the TOR of the ICES working group on offshore wind development (secretariats)
6. Create a shared folder to share information (secretariats)

7. Provide minutes of the meeting (PELAC)

6. AOB

Martin Pastoors asked if an online space could be created to share information within this group. The secretariats will look into options for either a shared Dropbox or Google drive folder (**action 6**).