Report of the first UK and EU expert workshop on skates and rays

Specialised Committee on Fisheries

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Contents

Introduction

Combined Total Allowable Catch (TAC) management for certain skate and ray (SRX) stocks poses challenges for effective fisheries management. While SRX fall under the elasmobranch group, they encompass a range of species with varying life histories, population dynamics, and responses to fishing pressure.

Grouping them under a single TAC can obscure the status of individual species and complicates the process of managing the exploitation of each species according to its specific needs.

Additionally, some stocks are more resilient to fishing pressure than others, meaning that a group TAC can lead to unintended pressure on more vulnerable species while underutilising others. This approach makes it challenging to implement measures that support the sustainable exploitation of each species within the complex, particularly those with slower growth rates or lower reproductive rates.

Discussion on the group-TAC for SRX has been an ongoing process, with debates and evaluations continuing over many years. Despite the continued exploration of potential solutions, reaching consensus on the best approach has proven challenging, as it requires balancing ecological considerations with practical aspects of fisheries management.

As part of a shared commitment in the UK and EU written record of fisheries consultations, the UK and EU are collaborating through the Specialised Committee on Fisheries (SCF) to explore alternatives to the current group TAC management for SRX.

Significant progress has already been achieved, including:

- agreement on a joint methodology for interpreting the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES)
- single stock advice for the group TACs for UK and EU negotiations
- an indicative roadmap setting out shared ambitions and direction for the work over the coming years
- a jointly hosted workshop with SRX experts

The aim of the workshop was to build a shared understanding of the current status of the SRX group TACs and explore potential next steps. This expert workshop allowed scientific experts from the EU and UK to discuss the complexities involved in managing these group TACs and to highlight areas that may need further attention or improvement. It also provided a platform to acknowledge and appreciate the scientific efforts made in addressing these challenges, including ongoing research, data collection, and assessment work.

By recognising the progress achieved so far, the workshop aimed to build a foundation for collaborative action and identify paths forward that could enhance the effectiveness of the SRX group TAC management.

The workshop concentrated on understanding the scientific principles underlying the SRX group TACs, rather than pinpointing specific management solutions for individual stocks at this stage. Discussions centred around the scientific data, assessment methodologies, and biological characteristics of the species within the group TAC, providing a scientific basis for future decision making.

By focusing on the scientific aspects, participants aimed to ensure that any eventual management options would be based on robust, evidence-based understanding.

The workshop was organised to first focus on addressing the challenges associated with the group TAC, followed by an exploration of the available options. Presentations from policy officials and scientists, (from both the UK and EU) were provided in each session. It is important to note that the views presented by the participants were not official policy positions. The UK and EU will continue discussions in 2025 to further explore options and next steps.

The agenda for the workshop was as follows:

1. **The problem:** includes UK and EU science presentations on current SRX fisheries management. The discussion will explore what is working, what is not working, and which stocks or species are of greatest sustainability concern.
2. **The options:** includes UK and EU science presentations on the main management options for SRX. This will cover the pros, cons, barriers, and knowledge gaps, including management measures such as Minimum Conservation Reference Sizes (MCRS) and potential changes to the group TAC structure, such as species-specific TACs, genus-based TACs, and other approaches.
3. **Next steps:** agree the actions to take forward following the workshop discussions.
4. **Small-eyed ray 7.e sentinel fishery:** review the current status of the sentinel fishery and discuss next steps.

Part 1: The challenges

The management of SRX fisheries in the ICES area is complex, as it theoretically could encompass around 33 species from 2 main families: the softnose skates (*Arhynchobatidae*) and the hardnose skates (*Rajidae*). In practice, however, only about 12 species hold commercial value. The fisheries on SRX are regulated through a combination of group TACs, species-specific TACs (for selected stocks), and other measures. While data collection and assessment methodologies have improved significantly, key challenges related to management and conservation remain.

Current quota management framework

The group TAC system plays a central role in regulating SRX fisheries. Initially introduced in 1999, the SRX group TACs have since expanded to include 5 broad TAC areas: 3 in the North Sea ecoregion (SRX/03A-C, SRX/2AC4-C, and SRX/07D), one in the Celtic Sea ecoregion (SRX/67AKXD), and one in Biscay-Iberian waters (SRX/89-C).

Additionally, to provide more targeted conservation efforts, four stock-specific TACs or sub-TACs have also been implemented, namely for undulate ray in divisions 7.d to e, Subarea 8, and division 9.a, and for small-eyed ray in divisions 7.f to g.

Alternative management measures have also been introduced to support sustainable fisheries. By-catch quotas have been established, limiting the proportion of retained catch for larger vessels (more than 15 metres) in the North Sea.

Species-specific regulations, including non-retention and prohibited species listings, gear regulations, such as minimum mesh size requirements (Reg. (EU) 2019/1241), MCRS, closed seasons, and maximum landing lengths (particularly for undulate ray) have also been applied.

Improvements in management and data collection

In recent years, significant progress has been made in fisheries data collection and stock assessments. Improved species-specific data and discard survival estimates have enhanced the scientific basis for management decisions. ICES now conducts stock assessments for 39 different skate stocks, significantly improving the understanding of stock status and sustainability. The adoption of new methodologies, such as the Surplus Production in Continuous Time (SPiCT) model, has refined population estimates and provided more precise catch advice.

In 2023, of the 20 assessed stocks evaluated against proxy reference points, 5 were subject to fishing pressure exceeding the F_{MSY} proxy, while 14 remained within sustainable limits. In terms of stock size, 18 stocks were above the proxy reference points, indicating healthy population levels, whereas one stock fell below the threshold (Table 1).

Table 1: Overview of stocks with reference points

Species	Stock	Fishing Pressure	Stock size
Raja clavata	Rjc.27.3a47d	below threshold	above threshold
Raja clavata	Rjc.27.6	above threshold	above threshold
Raja clavata	Rjc.27.7afg	below threshold	above threshold
Raja clavata	Rjc.27.8abd	above threshold	above threshold
Raja clavata	Rjc.27.8c	below threshold	undefined
Raja clavata	Rjc.27.9a	above threshold	above threshold
Raja montagui	Rjm.27.3a47d	below threshold	above threshold

Species	Stock	Fishing Pressure	Stock size
Raja montagui	Rjm.27.67bj	below threshold	above threshold
Raja montagui	Rjm.27.7ae-h	below threshold	above threshold
Raja montagui	Rjm.27.8	below threshold	above threshold
Leucoraja naevus	Rjn.27.3a4	below threshold	above threshold
Leucoraja naevus	Rjn.27.678abd	below threshold	above threshold
Leucoraja naevus	Rjn.27.8c	below threshold	above threshold
Leucoraja naevus	Rjn.27.9a	below threshold	above threshold
Raja Brachyura	Rjh.27.9a	below threshold	above threshold
Raja Brachyura	Rjh.27.4bc7d	below threshold	above threshold
Raja microocellata	Rje.27.7fg	undefined	above threshold
Amblyraja radiata	Rjr.27.23a4	above threshold	below threshold
Raja undulata	Rju.27.7de	below threshold	above threshold
Rajidae spp.	Raj.27.1012	above threshold	above threshold

Further advancements have been made in understanding stock structure and distribution through tagging studies and improved statistical models, such as the Delta Generalised Additive Model (GAM) and the Integrated Nested Laplace Approximation (INLA), which are more effective at handling survey data with a high occurrence of zero-hauls.

Additionally, genetic research is also playing an increasingly important role, with studies on stock structure and close-kin mark-recapture methods providing valuable insights into population size, such as recent work on thornback ray in the Bay of Biscay and North Sea.

Another key development has been research on discard survival, which has provided essential information on species vulnerability in different fisheries. These findings have been incorporated into stock assessments and used in joint recommendations under the landing obligation, helping to refine management approaches and ensure more sustainable fishing practices.

Ongoing data challenges

A primary data challenge arises from inadequate survey coverage for some species and stocks, both in inshore and offshore areas. In many cases, the geographical scope of surveys is limited, leaving certain regions under-sampled. This results in critical data gaps, which may lead to assessments relying on incomplete or unrepresentative data, compromising their accuracy and reliability. Stock assessments are often based on a limited subset of data that does not fully capture the broader dynamics of the stock or population.

A particular concern is the lack of survey coverage for coastal species that interact with local, inshore fisheries, where specific stocks targeted by small-scale fisheries are often under-sampled. Without dedicated surveys in these areas, critical stock trends may go unnoticed, resulting in incomplete data that hampers effective assessment. Commercial data, such as the Landings Per Unit Effort (LPUE) index, may offer an alternative, providing insights into stock abundance of those stocks. However, this approach requires time to establish and must be evaluated by ICES before being incorporated into official stock assessments.

The ICES 2020 workshop on the use of surveys for stock assessments and reference points for rays and skates (WKSKATE, 2020) explored the LPUE index in Iberian waters, where it is now included in stock assessments for thornback ray and blonde ray in division 9.a. Expanding this approach to other stocks and regions could enhance data availability and improve management strategies.

Another challenge in data collection is the lower catchability of certain species or size classes during surveys. Habitat preferences, behavioural traits, and seasonal distribution patterns can make some species or sizes more difficult to detect or capture. This reduced catchability contributes to under-representation in the data, making it harder to achieve accurate stock assessments and implement effective management strategies.

The lack of species-specific catch data is another significant problem. Relying on generic landings data does not account for variations between species, leading to incorrect stock allocations or, in some cases, the absence of assessments. Species misidentification further undermines data quality, skewing estimates and reducing the accuracy of stock status evaluations.

The challenges of patchy survey coverage, low catchability, and reliance on generic data are particularly detrimental for rare or prohibited species. For these species, few to no data may be available, making accurate assessments difficult. Most fall under the data-poor ICES category 5 or 6 stocks, which face systematic 20% reductions in advice every second assessment cycle. Unless ancillary information (such as a reduction in fishing effort) clearly indicates that the current level of exploitation is appropriate for the stock. Sentinel fisheries, such as those for small-eyed ray in the western English Channel, may provide valuable insights, informed by targeted data collection.

Management challenges

Effective management of SRX fisheries is complicated by mismatches between stock assessments, scientific advice, and regulatory frameworks. Discrepancies in biological stock boundaries and varying regional regulations further add to these challenges.

In many cases, stock assessments do not align with the areas used for management, which creates inconsistencies between scientific advice and regulatory measures. This mismatch makes it difficult to apply targeted management strategies effectively. Additionally, SRX are often caught in mixed fisheries alongside other species, such as teleosts and shellfish, which means that the fishing pressure they are subjected to is often influenced by the management developed for other species.

As a result, SRX stocks can face pressures not directly addressed by direct management measures. Furthermore, differences in regulations across regions, such as varying MCRS requirements, can lead to challenges in maintaining consistent conservation standards across their distribution.

Species of greatest concern

Among the species of greater concern, blonde ray stands out as the most commercially valuable skate species. It is represented by five identified stocks, currently classified under ICES categories 2, 3, and 5, all of which suffer from limited survey data. In addition to its economic importance, the blonde ray also exhibits high biological vulnerability, similar to the sandy and shagreen rays, due to traits such as among the largest lengths-at-maturity sizes within the exploited skate complex, and an offshore distribution with poor survey coverage. These combined factors make the assessment and conservation of these species particularly complex and challenging.

Future considerations

Despite improvements in data collection and stock assessments, managing SRX fisheries remains challenging. Mismatches between scientific assessments and management frameworks, along with data gaps for certain species, continue to hinder effective decision making. The biological diversity of SRX, their varying vulnerabilities, and their frequent bycatch in mixed fisheries add further complexity.

Experts agreed that a key priority is addressing data deficiencies, particularly for commercially important species such as blonde ray. Advances in species-specific data, discard estimates, and survival rates have improved scientific advice, but further efforts are needed. Genetics was identified as a crucial area for collaboration, offering insights into stock structure and population dynamics.

Additionally, improved use of fishery-dependent data (for example, developing LPUE indices) and involving fishermen in data collection (for example, providing biological parameters and establishing reference fleets), were recognised as essential for improving stock assessments in areas lacking scientific surveys. Gathering high-quality data remains

a long-term effort requiring sustained cooperation between scientists, industry, and fisheries managers.

Part 2: The options going forward

The management of SRX in ICES areas has traditionally relied on a group TAC system, which applies broadly across the Order Rajiformes. While this approach provides administrative simplicity and flexibility for fishers, it has also been criticised for its inability to adequately protect vulnerable stocks or to align fishing pressure with species-specific stock status. To address these concerns, the expert group explored some alternative management strategies that could be considered, ranging from more refined TAC structures to alternative regulatory mechanisms.

Historic management approaches

The current TAC system for SRX has evolved through a series of regulatory changes, reflecting concerns over conservation and stock sustainability. The current TAC setting is based on broad species groupings, with some sub-TACs introduced for specific stocks. The advantages and disadvantages of this current group TAC management are listed in below. Concerns over the effectiveness of this system led to several proposals, including the introduction of stock-specific TACs where feasible, the use of sub-TACs for vulnerable species, footnotes and prohibitions for particularly species at risk, as well as using a weighted averaging approach to adjust TAC changes according to stock abundance.

Advantages of the current group TAC management:

- system is already in place, with quota shares agreed between relevant nations
- fewer TACs may provide flexibility for quota allocation and monitoring uptake
- the current system (and allied measures) seems to have regulated landings
- more resilient against any future changes in skate taxonomy or stock definition
- accounts for all SRX in the Order Rajiformes that may be reported
- low incentive for fishers to deliberately misreport different skate species or stocks
- fishers have a degree of flexibility as to which species they harvest and in what relative quantities

Disadvantages of the current group TAC management:

- current approach to converting ICES' advice for multiple skate species to TAC units may be impacted by new ICES assessments (SPiCT) and resulting advice
- how to address straddling stocks?
- annual changes to the TAC do not necessarily result in re-direction of fishing pressure (landings) to 'healthier' stocks or reduced fishing pressure (effort or landings) on stocks of concern.
- the reported landings of some stocks can exceed what is advised by ICES, and thus may not be viewed as either 'precautionary' or 'in line with scientific advice'

In 2017, the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) reviewed the group TAC system for SRX. The review explored different approaches to TAC management, including the feasibility of implementing sub-TACs and stock-specific

TACs or using a weighted approach, where more influence was given to abundantly caught stocks while imposing stricter controls on vulnerable species.

The STECF found that applying uniform reductions to the TAC for all SRX species was ineffective, as it placed unnecessary pressure on more resilient stocks while failing to provide adequate protection for the most vulnerable ones. They recommended a tiered approach with specific sub-TACs for the most vulnerable species to better balance conservation and industry needs.

The management of SRX has undergone a significant shift with the adoption of a new methodology for interpreting ICES advice in 2023; the EU and UK jointly agreed on an approach that directly interprets ICES advice by summing implied landings. This new method, originally proposed by the UK and reviewed by STECF in 2022, directly reflects the most up-to-date ICES advice, leading to more accurate and effective management of SRX populations.

While this agreed methodology marks progress, both parties recognised that the group TAC approach still presents significant challenges, particularly in terms of managing mixed fisheries and accounting for the varied vulnerabilities of different species within the group.

Alternative management options

Given the limitations of the current system, as set out above, several alternative management strategies have been explored. During the 2022 STECF meeting, experts discussed various approaches, including removing the main commercial species from the group TAC or restructuring the group TAC based on ICES stock categories. One of the key options evaluated was splitting category 3 stocks from category 5 and 6 as an interim step, using simulations based on different stock sizes.

This approach aimed to improve management by applying more tailored measures to stocks with better data (category 3), while maintaining a precautionary framework for stocks of more uncertain status (categories 5 and 6).

Potential benefits included clearer alignment with scientific advice, improved control of fishing pressure, and a stepwise transition toward more refined management. However, challenges remained, such as the complexity of quota allocation and the need for further data improvements.

Ultimately, STECF acknowledged that while implementing such a split would be challenging, it presented a potential pathway for progress in refining the management of SRX.

In this expert workshop the implementation of stock-specific TACs was discussed, where quotas are set for individual stocks based on ICES' species-specific advice. This method would enable more precise control over exploitation rates and allow fishing pressure to be adjusted according to scientific assessments of each species. However, the approach presents several challenges. The increase in the number of TACs, potentially exceeding

30 individual stocks, would significantly raise the administrative burden, requiring complex negotiations and ongoing adjustments.

Additionally, the risk of increased discarding could arise, as species with smaller quotas may be more likely to be discarded. The strategy would also necessitate improvements in species identification and reporting to ensure accurate management.

Advantages of stock-specific TAC management:

- potential for clear alignment between TAC and ICES' stock-specific advice
- the TAC units could equate with the defined stock units (thus no issue of 'straddling stocks')
- annual changes to stock-specific TACs should result in fishing pressure being focused on those stocks for which more quota is available, and fishing pressure on fisheries targeting species with more limited quota are expected to be reduced (though it may simply increase discarding)

Disadvantages of stock-specific TAC management:

- TAC shares and (national) quota allocation would need to be re-examined. What would be the 'reference period'? Would fishers get viable quota access for appropriate stocks?
- potential future changes in stock delineation and/or new stocks having advice may require periodic updates
- larger number of smaller TAC units could be more challenging for both fishers and quota managers
- may require more studies on discard survival (landing obligation)
- not all SRX landings are allocated to 'assessed stock units' at the present time, how would exploitation on these be managed?
- skate species can co-occur, and so potential increase in discarding (or misreporting) may occur for species with more limited TACs if caught in fisheries with species with larger TACs

Another approach under consideration is genus-based TACs, which would group species with similar biological and ecological characteristics. This method could involve separate TACs for *Raja* species (spp.), *Leucoraja* spp., and *Dipturus* spp., with additional footnotes or trip limits for particularly vulnerable species within each genus. This strategy maintains some flexibility for fishers while providing a more targeted conservation approach (see below).

A related alternative is the introduction of sub-TACs for vulnerable species within the broader group TAC, focusing on those identified as particularly at risk. This could involve setting sub-TACs for coastal SRX species such as undulate ray and small-eyed ray, as well as implementing specific measures for offshore species with limited data, including shagreen ray and sandy ray.

Additionally, prohibitions or strict limits could be applied to deep-water species that are more susceptible to overfishing.

Advantages of genus-based TAC management:

- simplifies species identification and reporting, reducing misidentification issues, relative to a stock specific approach
- less complexity in quota management compared to stock-specific TAC – fewer TAC units make it easier for managers and fishers to track and allocate quotas
- more resilient to future changes in taxonomy and stock definitions – avoids disruptions when species classifications or stock boundaries change, relative to a stock specific approach
- provides precautionary protection for data-deficient species – ensures unassessed species within the genus are still covered under management
- aligns with ecosystem-based management by considering the ecological roles of closely related species

Disadvantages of genus-based TAC management:

- risk of overexploiting certain species – some species within the genus may be more vulnerable but still subject to the same TAC
- less precise alignment with scientific stock assessments, relative to a stock specific approach – ICES provides species-specific advice, which may not match a genus-based TAC
- potential for increased discarding or misreporting – if fishers prefer high-value species within the genus, they may discard less desirable ones
- challenges in managing unassessed species – some landed SRX are not assigned to assessed stock units, complicating exploitation control
- straddling stocks and regional differences may still pose challenges – species composition within a genus can vary by region, making transboundary management more difficult
- disruption to quota allocation and relative stability keys – switching to a genus-based TAC may require reallocation of national quotas

A potential way forward is to adopt a management approach based on Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY), as several SRX stocks now have MSY assessments available. This raises the question of whether stocks assessed at MSY levels, particularly those categorised as ICES category 2, could be managed under individual TACs while leaving other, less data-rich stocks within the group TAC framework.

A possible compromise between the current system and full species-specific TACs could involve selecting several commercially important stocks for individual TACs while implementing additional management measures, such as trip limits, to ensure sustainable exploitation.

It is worth noting that, for the option of separating out category 2 stocks, no specific list of advantages and disadvantages has been included. This is because the expected pros and

cons would largely reflect a combination of those already presented for the stock-specific and genus-based approaches. A genus-based TAC is itself a hybrid between a full group TAC and more refined stock-level management, and the separation of category 2 stocks follows a similar logic.

To better understand the implications of such an approach, a case study from the North Sea was conducted, examining the removal of key commercial species, blonde ray (RJH), thornback ray (RJC), and spotted ray (RJM), from the overall SRX group TAC. These 3 species account for a substantial share of landings and are already assessed using an MSY approach under ICES category 2. Managing these species under separate TACs improved alignment with scientific advice; however, it also introduced significant challenges for the remaining stocks (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1: Combine commercial SRX

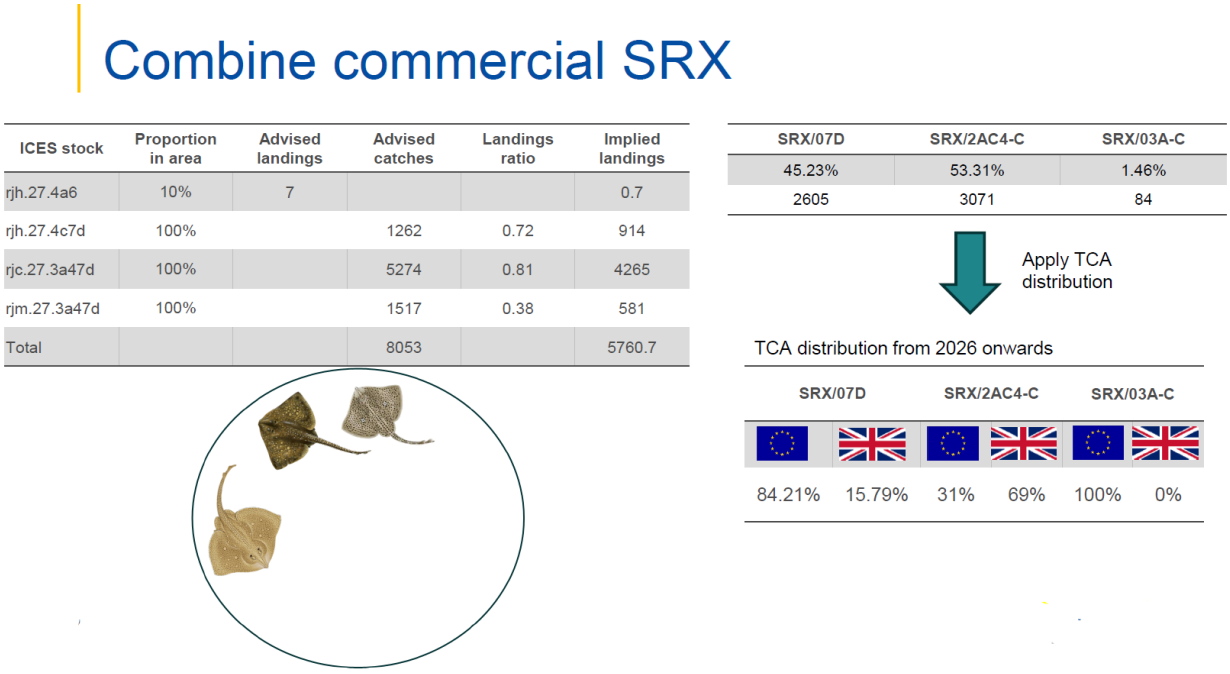

Figure 1: Example separation of category 2, the commercially important, SRX stocks (blonde ray (RJH), spotted ray (RJM), thornback ray (RJC)) from the North Sea group TAC showing that this would result in a high group TAC for these stocks. The quotas would then be subject to TCA distribution for the UK and EU vessels.

Figure 2: SRX North Sea- combine commercial SRX

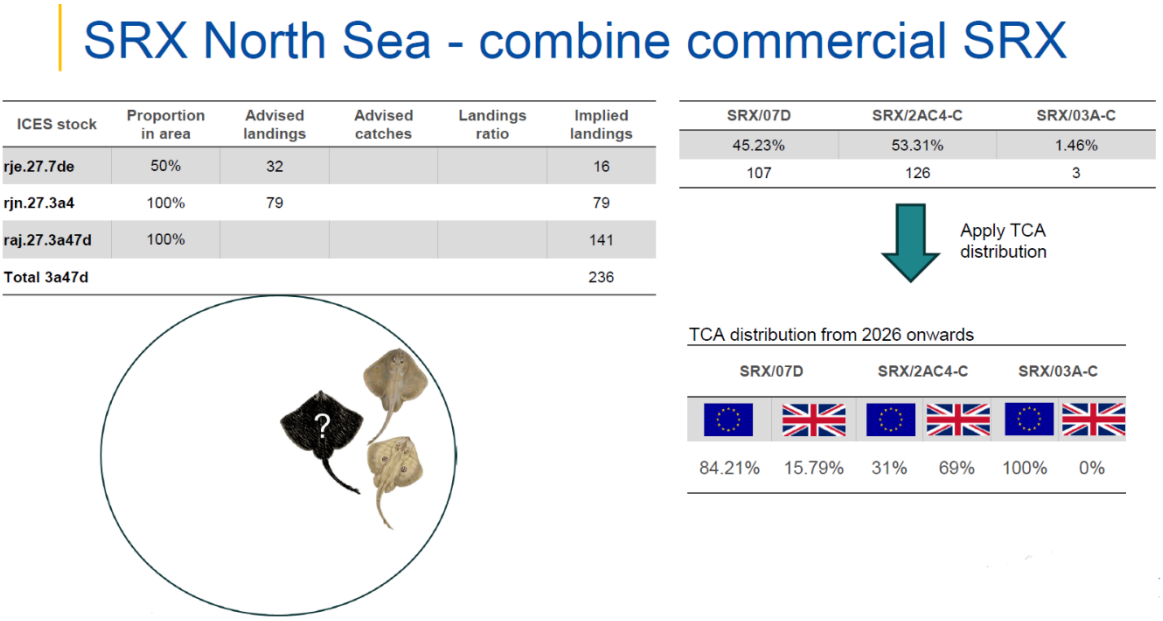

Figure 2: Example separation of category 3 to 6 SRX stocks, (small-eyed ray (RJE), cuckoo ray (RJN), and other SRX (RAJ)), for the North Sea ecoregion, showing that the impact of removing the 3 category 2 stocks in figure 1 would mean a much lower TAC for these remaining stocks in the group TAC. These already low quotas would then would further subject to TCA distribution for the UK and EU vessels.

The redistribution of quotas resulted in a much lower TAC for less commercially targeted species, increasing the risk of choke situations under the landing obligation. Furthermore, the reduced TAC for these remaining stocks could lead to increased discarding or misreporting, complicating compliance and enforcement efforts. This case study highlighted the trade-offs involved in restructuring the TAC system and underscored the need for a balanced approach that carefully considers the consequences of separating certain stocks.

While moving towards species-specific TACs may improve scientific alignment for some stocks, any transition must be managed carefully to avoid unintended negative impacts on the broader ecosystem and fishery operations.

Furthermore, experts discussed that when evaluating alternative management strategies, 2 key approaches may emerge:

- focusing on vulnerable, data-limited stocks – prioritising the protection and management of these stocks may help mitigate risks associated with scientific uncertainty
- managing well-studied, commercially valuable stocks separately – stocks with robust data could serve as prime candidates for individual TACs, allowing for more effective management. If handled correctly, this could also contribute to broader stock sustainability, including the management of more vulnerable species

However, it was cautioned that removing the largest commercial stocks from the group TAC could inadvertently reduce overall landing data of the data-limited stocks, potentially further compromising data quality and stock assessments. Any changes must therefore be carefully analysed to ensure they do not undermine longer-term management objectives.

In addition to TAC-based management, non-TAC measures can also contribute to improving stock sustainability. These include spatial and temporal closures to protect critical habitats and spawning areas and seasons, minimum conservation reference sizes to prevent the exploitation of juveniles, effort control measures to regulate overall fishing pressure, and advancements in fishing gear selectivity to reduce bycatch of vulnerable species. Reference was made to the work conducted under the 2017 STECF, which examined the effectiveness of such measures.

Given the availability of new data and improved analytical methods, there is now an opportunity to revisit and reassess these measures to determine whether updates or refinements are needed.

Conclusions and next steps

While no single management approach is without challenges, the experts acknowledge the need to explore alternatives to the current group TAC management system to ensure the long-term sustainability of SRX in ICES areas. Future steps should focus on further scientific evaluations, stakeholder consultations, that any changes should involve a gradual and well-structured transition, taking into account both scientific evidence and practical implementation challenges.

It was also recognised that maintaining the current management system remains a viable option if scientists, managers, and stakeholders determine it is more effective than any proposed alternatives. The existing approach may not be inherently flawed, especially if complemented by parallel measures to improve sustainability. Experts emphasized the need for careful consideration before implementing changes, as rushed decisions could lead to unintended consequences in the coming years.

The UK and EU joint expert workshop highlighted the need to establish a solid foundation for evaluating the scientific trade-offs of alternative management approaches while ensuring practical solutions that balance stakeholder interests and economic viability. The continued advancement of ICES assessment methods, coupled with regulatory adaptations and collaborative decision-making, will play a crucial role in shaping the future management of SRX.

Potential next steps

The following actions were identified as potential next steps that fisheries managers and experts could take forward subject to further internal and policy level discussions:

1. **Scientific and technical review:**
    1.1. experts to update the 2017 STECF table evaluating management measures to reflect new data, methodologies, and management approaches.

1.2. continue scientific discussions on whether certain stocks, particularly those with MSY assessments, could be individually managed.
1.3. explore potential ways to mitigate the risk of choke situations if species are removed from the group TAC.

2. **Internal discussions and feasibility analysis:**
   2.1. Internal reviews by the EU and UK of the identified options to assess their feasibility and implications, including compatibility with the TCA.

3. **Regulatory and administrative considerations:**
   3.1. Review of the footnotes in the grouped SRX TACs to determine if these need to be updated.
   3.2. Assess how the introduction of multiple new TACs could be managed administratively and practically within existing regulatory frameworks.

4. **Stakeholder engagement:**
   4.1. Engagement with Member States, industry representatives, and scientific bodies by EU and UK to refine potential management strategies.
   4.2. The Commission is suggesting holding a dedicated meeting on SRX hosted by the North Western Waters Advisory Council (NWWAC) in 2025 to further discuss and refine proposals using stakeholder input.

5. **Maintaining momentum in 2025:**
   5.1. Discussions to continue in 2025 to ensure steady progress in developing a viable long-term management strategy.
   5.2. Experts work intersessionally to refine specific proposals and technical details.

Small-eyed ray 7e sentinel fishery

The expert workshop also briefly covered updates on the sentinel fisheries for small-eyed ray in division 7.e. In the UK and EU Written Record of fisheries consultations for 2024 (EU publication, UK publication), the Parties first agreed on permitting scientific observation data collection programmes for small-eyed ray in division 7.e and so allowing limited landings. The overall aim of this is to improve the availability of data and therefore quality of the assessment of the stock (rje.27.7de). This is reflected in the accompanying footnote of the western SRX group TAC 8 (SRX/67AKXD) in Annex 1.

Only vessels participating in specific monitoring programmes, collecting relevant data to inform future assessments (data on catch rates, size compositions and/or biological information (length, weight, sex and maturity of individual fish) and associated samples), would be able to land small-eyed ray in 7.e. Data on these landings and from these programmes will be used to improve the understanding of the stock and contribute to assessments.

The parties agreed to continue this commitment in the written record for 2025 and will continue to monitor this in the SCF.

As part of the expert workshop, the EU and UK provided updates on their respective data collection programmes in the both the EU and the UK small-eyed ray in 7.e sentinel fisheries.

France is currently the only EU country taking part in a data collection programme for small-eyed ray in 7.e. The French data collection programme, run by the French national institute for ocean science and technology (Ifremer), was initiated in May and at the time of the expert workshop has 3 voluntary vessels participating in this program. The data collected is the position and number by sex and weight.

The UK's data collection started in July. The UK allocated some of the fishing opportunities to 2 larger vessels participating in Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) studies, and another proportion to 3 self-sampling vessels operating in more coastal habitats. The UK data collection by inshore vessels was delayed during the summer due to the presence of large numbers of spider crabs, meaning there was no possibility of setting nets and fishing for small-eyed ray.

Actions

Centre for Environment, Fisheries, and Aquaculture Science (Cefas) and Ifremer to work together on collating data from both sentinel fisheries.

Annex 1 - participants list

- Ellen Colebrook - Defra
- Katie Plumridge - Defra
- Anabel Andujar Vazquez- The Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG MARE)
- Jurgen Batsleer- DG MARE
- Katinka Bleeke - Wageningen Marine Research
- Christopher Griffiths - The Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU)
- Graham Johnsto - Irish Marine Institute
- Loic Baulie - Ifremer
- Noemie Deleys - Ifremer
- Morten Vinter - DTU Aqua
- Lies Vansteenbrugge - The Institute for Agricultural and Fisheries Research (ILVO)
- Jim Ellis - Cefas
- Sophy Phillips - Cefas
- Ewen Bell - Cefas
- Matthew Sayer - Welsh Government