



**The West Med MAP
compensation mechanism:
Assessment of the measures
adopted between 2022 and 2026
and recommendations for 2027**

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Executive Summary

The Western Mediterranean Multiannual Plan (MAP) is driving a necessary and significant transition towards more sustainable demersal fisheries. Its principal management instrument is a fishing-effort regime that limits the number of fishing days available to trawlers. However, the key binding objective of achieving fishing mortality within the ranges consistent with maximum sustainable yield (F_{MSY}) by 1 January 2025 for all stocks has not yet been met.

One management tool that was introduced as part of the annual implementation of the MAP in 2022 is the 'compensation mechanism', which allows Member States to allocate additional fishing days to trawl vessels in exchange for implementing certain technical conservation measures. Its stated purpose is to promote selective fishing gear and efficient closure areas that protect juveniles and spawners, while moderating the short-term socioeconomic impacts of restrictions on fishing days. Its central premise is that the conservation benefits delivered by the eligible measures should at least offset the additional fishing mortality generated by the additional days granted as compensation.

This briefing assesses the measures included in the compensation mechanism between 2022 and 2026, drawing on the relevant EU regulations, evaluations and reports by the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF), and scientific

literature. Over this period, the mechanism expanded from four eligible measures linked to a single 2% allocation of additional fishing days, to 14 measures, with varying compensatory allocations, and incentives linked to the timing, fleet coverage, and continuity of their implementation. Even though the compensation mechanism and its potential impact have grown over time, no comprehensive evaluation has been carried out to date. Here, Oceana presents an analysis of the mechanism, which aimed to determine whether: the measures deliver additional, measurable, and lasting conservation benefits aligned with the mechanism's purpose; whether those benefits at least offset the additional fishing mortality generated by the compensatory days granted and justify the level of compensation awarded; and whether the mechanism contributes to achieving the MAP's objectives.

Key findings

Evidence of effectiveness varies substantially across measures. Larger square-mesh codends have the strongest scientific support and clearest link to reducing catches of juveniles and individuals below minimum conservation reference sizes. Their actual benefit nevertheless depends on technical specifications, correct use, enforcement, and escape survival.

Closures can be effective, depending on how they are designed and implemented. Benefits depend on their location, timing, duration, and enforcement, as well as on whether effort is displaced to other areas or periods. Longer, well-targeted closures are generally more likely to produce measurable and lasting benefits than closures lasting only a few weeks.

Several measures have only an indirect or uncertain connection to the mechanism's purpose. An increased minimum conservation reference size does not prevent juveniles from being caught unless it is combined with avoidance and selectivity measures. Low-contact trawl doors and permanent fleet cessation may serve broader policy objectives, but do not in themselves justify additional fishing days.

The relationship between individual measures and the associated compensatory allocations is neither transparent nor demonstrably proportionate to any expected benefits. The annual fishing opportunities regulations do not show that the level of compensation assigned to each measure is related to the fishing mortality avoided. Nor are the additional presumed benefits associated with earlier or wider implementation, continuity, or longer closures consistently quantified.

Additionality, durability, and transparency of measures are not assured. Measures under the compensation mechanism may overlap with existing obligations, displace rather than reduce effort, or reward the same benefit more than once. Reporting focuses mainly on compliance and effort accounting, while data on biological outcomes are fragmented and not systematically available.

Recommendations for 2027 and beyond

The compensation mechanism should be refocused on its stated purpose and supported by a clearer scientific and accountability framework. The following priorities should guide the use of the compensation mechanism for 2027 and subsequent years:

Apply a clear eligibility test. A measure should qualify for compensation only where it delivers scientifically supported, additional, measurable, and durable benefits; can be monitored and enforced; and provides a conservation gain at least equivalent to the fishing mortality expected from the corresponding compensatory days granted.

Scientifically calibrate allocations of additional fishing days. STECF should assess the expected conservation benefit from each measure and the added fishing mortality likely to result from the proposed allocation, differentiating where necessary by stock, area, fleet segment, season, and gear. Where evidence is insufficient, the compensation should either be based on a precautionary estimate or the measure withheld until effectiveness is demonstrated.

Prevent double-counting and clarify incentives. Higher allocations for early implementation, fleet coverage, continuity, or longer closures should reflect a demonstrated additional benefit. Compensation should not be summed for overlapping measures, if those measures produce the same conservation outcome. The effort cap should be retained and clarified.

Prioritise measures that are fit for purpose. Larger square-mesh codends and other proven selective gears should remain central, alongside longer, well-designed closures that deliver benefits beyond existing obligations. Removing or restricting gears with relatively high catchability, such as OTTs, may also contribute directly where it delivers a verified net reduction in fishing mortality that is not offset by the redistribution of effort. Increased minimum conservation reference sizes should qualify only within effective avoidance and selectivity packages. Closures can support juvenile and spawning stock protection if they are science-based, provide additional conservation benefits beyond existing requirements, account for effort displacement, are effectively monitored and enforced, and are designed as sufficiently long-term measures with verifiable outcomes. Given the minimal fishing activity in waters deeper than 800 metres, the eligibility of closures below this depth as a measure within the mechanism should be reconsidered.

Use measures that are fit for purpose. Low-contact trawl doors and permanent fleet cessation should not be compensated under the mechanism, unless a direct contribution to protecting juveniles or spawners is demonstrated. Any habitat, climate, fleet-balance, or socioeconomic benefits should instead be considered through the appropriate conservation, funding, and fleet-adjustment instruments.

Strengthen monitoring and independent evaluation. Member States should report harmonised information on implementation, compliance, effort displacement, catch composition, and biological outcomes. The European Commission should publish an annual consolidated report with this information, and STECF should evaluate the impact of the measures before any measure or associated compensation is renewed. Measures with unproven effectiveness should expire unless the required outcomes are demonstrated.

Ensure that the compensation mechanism remains a temporary and additional incentive, not a substitute for fishing effort restrictions and catch limits in line with scientific advice, or for closure and remedial measures required under the MAP. Measures that become standard practice or part of the legal baseline should cease to qualify unless they deliver new conservation benefits. Socioeconomic impacts should be mainly addressed through transitional support, fair allocation of fishing opportunities and fleet-adjustment measures rather than through additional fishing days unless their proportional conservation benefit is clearly demonstrated.

The compensation mechanism can help the Western Mediterranean demersal fleet, primarily trawlers, adopt more selective and sustainable practices while alleviating short-term socioeconomic pressures. Its purpose, however, should not be to restore fishing days as an end in itself. It must complement, rather than substitute, scientifically advised effort restrictions, catch limits, mandatory closures, and remedial measures.

If each eligible measure delivers verifiable conservation benefits that are sufficient, at a minimum, to offset the fishing mortality generated by its associated additional allocation, the mechanism can contribute credibly to stock recovery and sustainable fisheries management in the Western Mediterranean Sea.

1. Introduction

» 1.1 Scope, objectives, and management framework of the West Med MAP

Regulation (EU) 2019/1022 established a multiannual plan for the fisheries exploiting demersal stocks in the Western Mediterranean Sea (commonly referred to as the West Med MAP, and hereinafter 'the MAP').¹ It concerns EU waters of France, Italy, and Spain, within geographical subareas (GSAs) 1 to 11 (excluding GSA 4) as defined by the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM).²

The MAP targets geographically defined stocks of six species: blue and red shrimp (*Aristeus antennatus*), deep-water rose shrimp (*Parapenaeus longirostris*), giant red shrimp (*Aristaeomorpha foliacea*), European hake (*Merluccius merluccius*), Norway lobster (*Nephrops norvegicus*), and red mullet (*Mullus barbatus*). It also applies to stocks caught as bycatch and to other demersal stocks caught in the area for which sufficient data are not available. The MAP's principal objectives are aligned with those of the EU Common Fisheries Policy (CFP).³ It aims to ensure that the exploitation of marine biological resources restores and maintains populations of fished species above levels capable of producing maximum sustainable yield (MSY), to contribute to eliminating discards and implementing the landing obligation, and to implement precautionary and ecosystem-based approaches. In addition, the MAP required target fishing mortality to progressively fall to within F_{MSY} ranges, by 1 January 2025 at the latest.¹

The MAP's principal management instrument is a fishing effort regime, under which the Council annually sets

maximum allowable fishing days for trawlers. This regime is complemented by safeguards requiring remedial measures when stock biomass falls below specified conservation reference points; spatial closures, including restrictions on trawling in coastal areas, intended to protect juveniles and spawners; and the possibility of adopting additional technical conservation measures. In 2022, the annual fishing opportunities regulation⁴ supplemented this framework by introducing maximum allowable fishing effort for demersal longliners, intended to limit fishing mortality on spawning hake, and catch limits for blue and red shrimp and giant red shrimp stocks.⁵ This regulation also introduced the 'compensation mechanism', under which Member States may allocate additional fishing days to trawl vessels in exchange for implementing certain conservation measures.

This briefing analyses the specific conservation measures included within the compensation mechanism in the annual fishing opportunities regulations for 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025, and 2026. It draws on relevant legal texts, evaluations and reports by the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF), and scientific literature. It assesses the extent to which these measures contribute to the fishing mortality target, support stock recovery, and are consistent with the objectives of the MAP.

» 1.2 The compensation mechanism: purpose, expanding role, and need for evaluation



 Giant red shrimp (*Aristaeomorpha foliacea*)

Under the compensation mechanism, Member States may grant an additional allocation of fishing days to eligible trawlers that implement certain conservation measures, such as the use of selective fishing gear, or spatial or temporal closures. The mechanism was introduced to complement the fishing effort regime by encouraging the implementation of such measures while moderating the socioeconomic impacts of restrictions on fishing days.⁶ The underlying rationale was that the resulting conservation gains should at least offset the fishing mortality generated by the additional days, thereby maintaining progress towards the MAP's objectives.

Recitals of the 2023-2026 annual fishing opportunities regulations have consistently described the mechanism's purpose as promoting the use of selective fishing gear and establishing efficient closure areas to protect juveniles and spawners. The 2026 regulation made the intended link to fishing mortality explicit, stating that such measures have a demonstrated impact on fishing mortality.⁷

This approach reflects the STECF's 2021 conclusion that restrictions on fishing days needed to be combined with effective technical measures to secure progress towards the MAP objectives, particularly reducing fishing mortality to within F_{MSY} ranges for all stocks by 2025.⁸ However, the effectiveness of the mechanism depends on whether the measures implemented deliver actual conservation benefits sufficient to offset the fishing mortality generated by the additional days. The mechanism should therefore complement, rather than substitute, restrictions on fishing effort, mandatory closures, or the remedial measures required under the MAP.

Between 2022 and 2026, the compensation mechanism evolved from a relatively simple system comprising four eligible measures that could be implemented in exchange for a single additional allocation of 2% of fishing days calculated from the baseline between 2015 and 2017, into a considerably more complex system comprising 14 measures, with varying compensatory allocations and incentives linked to the timing, fleet coverage, and continuity of implementation. As both the number of potential measures and the compensatory fishing effort associated with them increased, these additional allocations acquired the potential to offset reductions in the underlying maximum allowable fishing effort and even to increase the total number of fishing days. Against this background, the 2025 regulation introduced a cap that prevented total fishing effort, after the allocation of additional days, from exceeding 2024 levels. The same 2024 benchmark was retained for 2026.

As the mechanism's complexity and potential impact have grown, evaluating its effectiveness has become increasingly important. To date, however, no comprehensive evaluation of the mechanism has been carried out. Although STECF has assessed the evidence concerning individual measures in several reports,^{12, 13, 16, 17, 20, 26} these assessments did not systematically evaluate the full set of measures.

In this report, Oceana presents an analysis that aimed to determine whether:

- a. the measures deliver additional, measurable, and lasting conservation benefits aligned with the mechanism's purpose;
- b. those benefits are at least sufficient to offset the additional fishing mortality generated by the compensatory days granted;
- c. the additional fishing effort granted for each of the potential measures is proportionate to their potential benefits; and
- d. the mechanism contributes to the objectives of the MAP.

The findings of this assessment are intended to inform discussions about which conditions are retained, amended, or discontinued in future fishing opportunities regulations.

2. Analysis of the measures under the compensation mechanism

» 2.1 Annual evolution and design

Since its introduction in 2022, the compensation mechanism has been modified through each successive fishing opportunities regulation. These changes have affected the number and nature of the conservation measures, the method used to calculate compensatory fishing days, and the maximum total effort that may result from their allocation. This section describes this evolution, while **Table 1** provides a comparative summary of the measures that have underpinned the mechanism each year.

The mechanism was first introduced through the fishing opportunities regulation for 2022 (Council Regulation (EU) 2022/110).⁴ It included four conservation measures, three concerning gear selectivity and one concerning temporary closures. If at least one measure was implemented, Member States could grant eligible vessels an additional allocation of fishing days within an overall 2% of the fishing effort of that Member State for the fleet segment concerned.

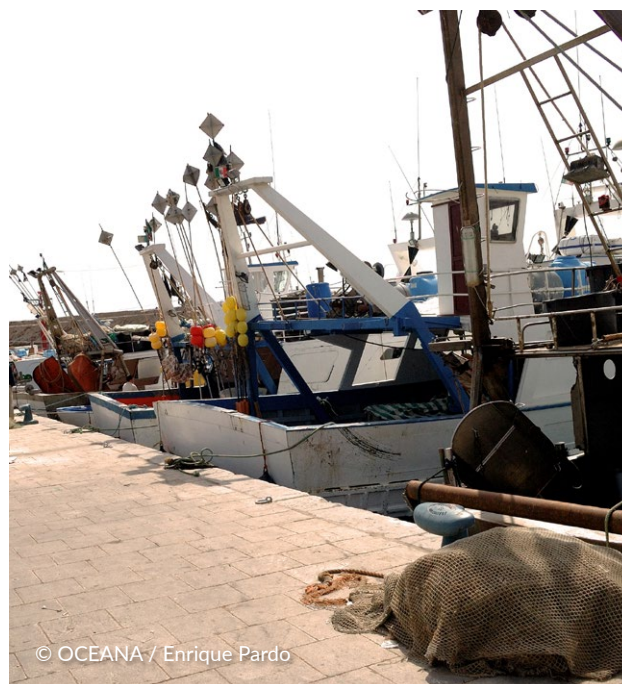


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For 2023, Council Regulation (EU) 2023/195 expanded the number of conservation measures to six.⁹ It retained and further specified the selectivity and closure conditions introduced in 2022 and added two new measures related to increasing the minimum conservation reference size (MCRS) for European hake (*Merluccius merluccius*) and establishing closure areas during periods considered important for protecting spawning hake. In exchange for implementing at least one measure, Member States could grant eligible vessels an additional allocation of fishing days equivalent to 3.5% of the maximum effort during the 2015-2017 baseline period.

Council Regulation (EU) 2024/259 doubled the number of conservation measures, from six to twelve.¹⁰ The additional measures concerned the adoption of MCRS for blue and red shrimp (*Aristeus antennatus*) and giant red shrimp (*Aristaeomorpha foliacea*); closures based on depth (greater than 800 m); closures to protect shrimp species; closures intended to reduce catches of juveniles and spawners of demersal species; and the use of trawl doors that reduce contact with the seabed. The regulation also linked the additional fishing effort allocation to the number of measures implemented: 4.5% for one measure, 5% for two, and 6% for at least three. These percentages continued to be calculated based on the maximum effort during the 2015–2017 baseline period.

For 2025, Council Regulation (EU) 2025/219 retained 12 conservation measures and substantially redesigned the mechanism.¹¹ Rather than applying a common percentage based on the number of measures implemented, it assigned a specific percentage compensation to each measure. For certain measures, such as the use of square-mesh codends, the applicable percentage also depended on when the measure was implemented and the proportion of the relevant fleet adopting it, with greater compensation permitted for earlier and/or wider implementation. As both the number of measures and associated compensation had increased substantially (the highest allocation associated with an individual measure was 50%), the situation arose in which cumulative additional allocations could offset agreed reductions in the total maximum allowable fishing effort, and potentially increase the total number of fishing days in comparison to the previous year. A cap on fishing effort was therefore introduced: although the compensatory effort allocation was calculated from the maximum effort permitted under the 2024 regulation, Member States could not allocate additional days that would cause the effort established for the relevant fishing-effort group under the 2024 regulation to be exceeded.



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Council Regulation (EU) 2026/266 further expanded the mechanism to comprise 14 conservation measures.⁷ As in 2025, each measure was associated with a specific percentage compensation. For certain measures, however, the compensation varies according to the timing or extent of fleet coverage or whether the measures had been implemented in 2025 and continued without interruption in 2026. The regulation therefore introduced stronger incentives for continuity while further increasing the mechanism's complexity. The highest potential effort compensation associated with any individual measure was 55%. The additional days continued to be calculated with reference to 2024 effort levels. If a Member State informed the European Commission of the additional effort allocation after 31 July 2026, the applicable compensation percentages were to be halved. The cap was retained and clarified: the resulting fishing effort could not exceed the combined maximum fishing days established under Article 8 and Annex III of the 2024 regulation.¹⁰



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Table 1. Evolution of the West Med MAP compensation mechanism over time, from 2022-2026, in terms of the conservation measures and total potential additional fishing days granted. Measures are paraphrased to facilitate comparison.

Conservation measure	2022 ⁴	2023 ⁹	2024 ¹⁰	2025 ¹¹	2026 ⁷
45 mm square-mesh codend	At least a 25% reduction in catches of juvenile hake; Annex III; footnote 2(a).	Art. 8(4)(a).	Art. 8(1)(a).	Compensation varied, according to timing and fleet uptake; Art. 8(1)(b).	Art. 8(1)(a). Applied on the continental shelf and upper slope, with incentives for timing, coverage, and continuity.
50 mm square-mesh codend	Targeted reductions in catches of juvenile deep-water shrimps; Annex III; footnote 2 (b).	Art. 8(4)(b).	Art. 8(1)(b).	Compensation varied according to timing and fleet uptake; Art. 8(1)(c).	Art. 8(1)(b). Applied on the continental shelf, upper slope, and in deep waters, with incentives for timing, coverage, and continuity.
Other highly selective gear (e.g. sorting grid)	Annex III; footnote 2(c).	Art. 8(4)(c).	Art. 8(1)(c).	Art. 8(1)(l).	Art. 8(1)(l).
Closure or removal of otter-twin trawl gear	-	-	Closure to fishing using twin trawls; Art. 8(1)(h).	Removal of otter-twin trawl gear; Art. 8(1)(a).	Not an eligibility measure. Its use was prohibited in GSAs 8-11 as a separate remedial measure.
Trawl doors or otter boards reducing seabed contact	-	-	Art. 8(1)(k).	Art. 8(1)(k).	Art. 8(1)(k).
Temporary closures reducing catches of juveniles or spawners of demersal species	At least 25% reduction in catches of juveniles or 20% in spawners; Annex III, footnote 2(d).	Art. 8(4)(d).	Art. 8(1)(d).	Art. 8(1)(i).	Art. 8(1)(h).
Permanent closures reducing catches of juveniles or spawners of demersal species	-	-	Art. 8(1)(j).	-	-
MCRS for European hake of at least 26 cm	-	Art. 8(4)(e).	Art. 8(1)(e).	-	-
MCRS for blue and red shrimp and giant red shrimp	-	-	Art. 8(1)(f).	Not an eligibility measure. Addressed separately as a remedial measure.	-
Closure specifically to protect spawning European hake	-	Four-week closure in specified areas, depths, and periods; Art. 8(4)(f).	Four-week closure in specified areas, depths, and periods; Art. 8(1)(g).	Temporary closure delivering at least a 20% reduction in catches of hake spawners; Art. 8(1)(h).	Temporary closure delivering at least a 20% reduction in catches of hake spawners with an incentive for continuity; Art. 8(1)(g).
Six-week trawl closure at depths of 100-500 m	-	-	-	At least six continuous weeks between May and September; Art. 8(1)(d).	At least six consecutive weeks between February and September, with an incentive for continuity; Art. 8(1)(c).

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Conservation measure	2022 ⁴	2023 ⁹	2024 ¹⁰	2025 ¹¹	2026 ⁷
Four-week trawl closure in GSAs 8-11	-	-	-	Between May and October; Art. 8(1)(e).	Between March and October; Art. 8(1)(d), with incentives for continuity and longer closures.
Four-week trawl closure in GSAs 1, 2 and 5-7	-	-	-	Between May and October; Art. 8(1)(f).	Between March and October; Art. 8(1)(e), with incentives for continuity and longer closures.
Closure covering at least 5% of fishing grounds at depths of 100-500 m	-	-	-	National closure area; Art. 8(1)(g).	Twelve-month closure; Art. 8(1)(f).
Closure to trawling in waters deeper than 800 m	-	-	Art. 8(1)(i).	Permanent closure; Art. 8(1)(j).	Permanent closure, with an incentive for continuity; Art. 8(1)(j).
Closure specifically protecting blue and red shrimp and/or giant red shrimp	-	-	Four-week closure in important areas and periods; Art. 8(1)(l).	-	Permanent closure to deep-water trawling targeting these species in waters deeper than 600 m; Art. 8(1)(i).
Permanent closures protecting Norway lobster fishing grounds	-	-	-	-	Closure covering at least 10% of fishing grounds at depths of 300-600 m in GSAs 6, 9, or 11; Art. 8(1)(m).
Permanent fleet-capacity reduction	-	-	-	-	Permanent cessation affecting 5-10%, or more than 10%, of the fleet concerned; Art. 8(1)(n).

Total number of conservation measures included	4	6	12	12	14
Maximum potential compensatory fishing effort	2% of the fishing effort of the concerned fleet segment as from the date of the notification of the concerned Member State.	3.5% of the 2015-2017 fishing effort baseline for the relevant Member States fleet segment.	6% of the 2015-2017 fishing effort baseline for the relevant Member States fleet segment.	189% of the maximum effort permitted under the 2024 regulation. Total effort could not exceed the relevant 2024 effort level.	217%* of the maximum effort permitted under the 2024 regulation. Total effort cannot exceed the level established for 2024 under Annex III and Article 8.

* The calculation does not include the potential 2% increase in the allocation of fishing days for each additional consecutive week for certain types of closure.

» 2.2 Detailed analysis of measures by category

For the purposes of this analysis, the measures included in the compensation mechanism between 2022 and 2026 are grouped into three main categories:

- a. Gear-related measures
- b. Spatial and temporal closures
- c. Other conservation and fleet-structure measures

The following subsections detail the assessment of the measures within each category, and **Table 2** summarises the indicative contribution of each category of measure to the compensation mechanism's purpose.

a. Gear-related measures

Gear-related measures are intended to reduce catches of juveniles, fish below the MCRS, spawning fish, and non-target species, and to reduce damage to benthic habitats. However, not all gear-related measures contribute directly or to the same extent to the aims of the compensation mechanism, or more broadly, the MAP objectives.

Gear-related measures were included in all five fishing opportunities regulations analysed. Several measures have been maintained over the years with minor modifications or additional specifications.

■ Larger square-mesh codends.

Measures involving the use of trawl nets with square-mesh codends of either 45 mm or 50 mm have been included under the compensation mechanism since it was created in 2022. Up to and including Council Regulation (EU) 2024/259, the two measures specifically aimed to reduce catches of juveniles of hake, blue and red shrimp, and giant red shrimp.

According to STECF reports, the use of 40 mm square-mesh codends has resulted in substantial catches of juveniles for several species.¹² While a 40 mm square-mesh codend alone is insufficient to achieve F_{MSY} targets for the stocks covered by the MAP, it may reduce catches of undersized European hake and Norway lobster (*Nephrops norvegicus*).¹³ A transition to a 50 mm square-mesh codend is expected to substantially reduce catches of European hake that are smaller than the MCRS and of immature Norway lobster, deep-water rose shrimp (*Parapenaeus longirostris*), and red mullet (*Mullus barbatus*).¹² Further evidence from trials in the north-western Mediterranean hake fishery found that a net fitted with a 52 mm square-mesh codend allowed 90% of undersized hake to escape. Although the study projected an overall short-term income loss of 27%, it estimated that income would recover after approximately two years and that yield per recruit

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would increase after four years.¹⁴ Available evidence indicates that larger square-mesh codends may effectively contribute to reducing catches of juveniles and individuals below the MCRS, thereby reducing unwanted catches and discards.¹³

In the case of a 50 mm square-mesh codend, studies also indicate that the economic costs associated with its adoption may be limited and largely short-term, depending on recruitment patterns and fishing area.¹² Modelling suggests that these losses could be offset in subsequent years through improved recruitment and stock productivity.¹⁵

From 2025, the effort compensation associated with certain mesh-size measures was higher if measures were implemented earlier or adopted by a larger proportion of the relevant fleet. Earlier implementation can plausibly increase the annual conservation benefit because the measure is in place

for a longer part of the year. Wider fleet uptake may also increase the aggregate benefit. However, the proportion of vessels adopting a measure is not, by itself, evidence of greater sustainability per vessel and does not necessarily justify a higher effort allocation for each participating vessel. Any additional benefit attributed to wider uptake depends on verified per-vessel performance, the relationship between fleet coverage and resulting conservation gains, and ensuring the avoidance of double counting where multiple conservation measures are implemented.

■ Other high-selectivity gears.

Other gear-related measures concern using highly selective gear whose technical specifications are expected to reduce catches of juveniles of all demersal species by at least 25% or catches of spawning individuals of all demersal species by at least 20% compared to 2020. A sorting grid with 20 mm spacing is one such common example. However, a literature review carried out by STECF did not find sufficient evidence that this particular sorting-grid configuration could produce the required reduction.¹⁶ Furthermore, given the mixed nature of Mediterranean demersal fisheries, achieving the required reduction across all demersal species may be challenging.¹⁷ This uncertainty concerns the evidence available for the 20 mm sorting grid specifically. Other selective gears may achieve the required reductions, but should only qualify for inclusion under the compensation mechanism if their performance is scientifically demonstrated.

■ Removal or restrictions of specific gears.

The 2024 and 2025 regulations introduced measures related to the removal of otter-twin trawl gear (OTT). In the 2026 regulation, the removal of OTT was not retained as an eligibility measure; instead, a restriction on its use was introduced as a separate remedial measure in GSAs 8–11. OTT was reported as being used only in GSA 7, meaning that the direct effect of its removal would be concentrated in that area.¹³ This gear has also been demonstrated to be more efficient in terms of catchability than a single bottom otter trawl (OTB).¹⁸ Managing both gear types under the same effort regime without accounting for differences in catchability could therefore undermine the expected effects of fishing-effort restrictions implemented under the MAP.¹² Nevertheless, removing OTTs can deliver conservation benefits, although the extent of these impacts depends on the number of vessels involved and on whether the associated fishing activity is discontinued or transferred to other gear.

■ Gear modifications to reduce seabed contact.

The fishing opportunities regulations for 2024, 2025, and 2026 include measures concerning trawl doors and otter boards designed to reduce contact

with the seabed. While studies show that such gear modifications can, depending on how they are configured and used, partially mitigate the impacts of trawling on the seabed and reduce CO₂ emissions,¹⁹ they may have minimal or no effect on catch yields and therefore on fishing mortality. These measures may contribute to the MAP's broader ecosystem-based objective, but their principal conservation benefit is not linked to the mechanism's stated purpose of protecting juveniles and spawners through selective fishing gear and efficient closure areas.²⁰ Their implementation cannot therefore be assumed to offset the fishing mortality generated by additional fishing days.

Overall, gear-selectivity measures can potentially reduce fishing mortality, but their effectiveness depends on the specific fishery and conditions in which they are used. Their suitability for the purpose of the compensation mechanism therefore depends on demonstrated and sustained performance under commercial fishing conditions. This includes empirical validation of their selectivity and, where relevant, evidence of post-escape survival of individuals released from the gear.^{21,22} In addition, selectivity measures should be economically viable and operationally feasible to ensure sustained uptake by fishers, as short-term losses in catch efficiency or income may limit adoption even where biological benefits are demonstrated.^{14,23} Finally, selectivity measures should be considered as part of an integrated management strategy, as gear modifications alone are unlikely to achieve management objectives without complementary measures.²⁴



b. Spatial and temporal closures

Spatial and temporal closures aim to protect key life stages of demersal species and safeguard ecologically important habitats, including spawning and nursery areas. However, their effectiveness depends on their location, timing, duration, and enforcement, and on ensuring that fishing effort is not simply displaced to other areas, seasons or target species.

Article 11 of the MAP already establishes several obligations concerning closure areas, independently of the compensation mechanism. It prohibits trawling within six nautical miles of the coast, except in areas deeper than the 100 m isobath, for three months each year. Member States may establish alternative closures where justified by particular geographical constraints, provided that they achieve at least a 20% reduction in catches of juvenile hake. Article 11 also required Member States to establish further closures by July 2021 in areas with high concentrations of juvenile fish or spawning grounds of demersal stocks. These obligations apply without granting any additional fishing days. This creates potential overlap with the closure measures included in the compensation mechanism, raising questions about the latter's validity. Unless compensation mechanism closures go beyond those already required under Article 11, their additional conservation benefit, and therefore the justification for granting additional fishing days, remains unclear.

■ **Outcome-based closures.**

The first closure-related measure under the compensation mechanism was introduced in the fishing opportunities regulation for 2022 and retained in later regulations. This measure requires the establishment of temporary closure areas that are intended to reduce catches of juveniles of all demersal species by at least 25%, or catches of spawners of all demersal species by at least 20%. However, the available data do not allow an assessment of whether the implemented closures have achieved these required reductions.²⁰

The 2024 regulation included two measures related to closures which were aimed at reducing catches of juveniles of all demersal species by at least 25% or catches of spawners by at least 20%. One of these measures involved temporary closures, while the other concerned permanent closures. However, implementing either measure counted equally when in terms of additional fishing days as compensation. The mechanism therefore provided no greater incentive to adopt a permanent closure, even though it may deliver larger and more lasting reductions in fishing pressure than a temporary closure, provided that it is appropriately located and enforced.²⁰



 European hake (*Merluccius merluccius*)

■ **Stock-specific closures.**

Specific closures to protect spawning hake have been included under the compensation mechanism since 2023. In 2025 and 2026, the conditions of these closures expressly required that they reduce catches of European hake spawners by at least 20%. Assessing the effectiveness of these measures is difficult because adult hake in the Western Mediterranean are distributed across a broad depth range and do not appear to form clearly identifiable spawning aggregations comparable to those formed by juveniles.²⁵ According to the available evidence, closures may reduce fishing pressure on adult hake if they are aligned with the most likely spawning periods (e.g. August-November, potentially extending to February in western areas, and January-March in Sardinian and Tyrrhenian waters).^{13,25}

The 2026 fishing opportunities regulation added two additional closure measures: a permanent closure for trawlers targeting blue and red shrimp and giant red shrimp in waters deeper than 600 m; and a permanent closure covering at least 10% of trawl vessel's fishing grounds for Norway lobster in GSAs 6, 9, or 11 between 300-600 m depth. These measures are more clearly targeted at particular fisheries and stocks than several of the earlier closure measures. However, their potential impact on fishing mortality still depends on the overlap between these closures and the actual spatial distribution of fishing activity and vulnerable stock components. As these measures were only introduced in 2026, their implementation and biological outcomes have not yet been evaluated, and their actual contribution to reducing fishing mortality remains to be demonstrated and quantified.

■ Seasonal and fishing-ground closures.

In 2024, one closure-related measure applied specifically to vessels using otter twin gear. As noted above, the use of this gear is limited to GSA 7, and any direct effect would therefore be concentrated in that area. In addition, the details of the measure did not specify the location, duration, or measurable conservation outcome required from the closure. Member States could therefore potentially establish closures providing limited conservation benefits while still qualifying for additional fishing days. Moreover, approximately 30% of the trawlable area in GSA 7 was already estimated to be subject to closures. Additional closures would consequently have been expected to deliver limited benefits unless they targeted areas of significant fishing pressure or otherwise delivered demonstrable additional reductions in fishing mortality.²⁰

In 2024, a closure of at least four weeks was included under the mechanism, which was intended to be established in areas considered important for the protection of blue and red shrimp and/or giant red shrimp. STECF found it difficult to determine an appropriate period for such closures to be in place, because the landings of these species showed no strong seasonality.²⁰ This makes it more difficult to select a period in which the closure could be expected to produce a significant reduction in fishing mortality, although spatially-targeted closures could still provide benefits where concentrations of vulnerable life stages are identified.

Other closure measures introduced in 2025 and retained (with some modifications) in 2026 included: a closure of at least six continuous weeks for trawlers operating between 100-500 m depth; closures of at least four consecutive weeks between May and October in GSAs 8-11 and in GSAs 1, 2, and 5-7; and a closure covering at least 5% of vessels' fishing grounds at depths between 100 m and 500 m.



 Norway lobster (*Nephrops norvegicus*)



 Blue and red shrimp (*Aristeus antennatus*)

The applicable implementation periods were broadened in 2026, and the stipulation added that the closure of at least 5% of fishing grounds should be of 12 months duration. These types of closures can displace fishing activity towards either deeper or shallower grounds. A short temporary closure during a peak fishing period may also have negative economic impacts and push vessels to increase effort after the closure, potentially reversing its benefits.¹³ The net effect on fishing mortality therefore depends on changes in fishing activity across the entire management area and year, rather than only on the reduction recorded within the closed area.

■ Deep-water closures.

From 2024 onwards, measures have been included that concern closures in waters deeper than 800 m, with the 2025 and 2026 regulations specifying that these closures must be permanent (i.e., year-round).^{7,11} According to STECF, deep-water trawling activity in the Western Mediterranean occurs predominantly at depths shallower than 800 m.²⁶ A permanent closure of waters deeper than 800 m therefore removes little existing fishing effort and is expected to make only a limited contribution to reducing fishing mortality. This calls into question its value as a measure under the compensation mechanism, particularly as the compensatory effort granted appears to exceed the documented fishing days that would otherwise have been deployed in the closed waters. This should not occur under any circumstances, and contradicts the purpose of the mechanism. While a permanent closure below 800 m can provide a precautionary benefit by preventing the expansion of deep-sea fishing activity at depths characterised by species and habitats that are particularly vulnerable to damage from fishing,²⁷ this prospective benefit is distinct from a demonstrated reduction in current fishing mortality. It therefore does not, by itself, justify granting additional fishing days as compensation.

Overall, the available evidence provides conditional rather than unequivocal support for the use of spatial and temporal closures under the compensation mechanism. Their effectiveness is highly context-dependent and influenced by biological, ecological, and operational factors. While well-designed closures can contribute to reductions in fishing pressure and improvements in stock or ecosystem indicators, this review did not identify any studies that have demonstrated clear and measurable biological outcomes directly attributable to the closure measures included in the compensation mechanism. Evidence from Mediterranean and other fisheries indicates that biological benefits are more likely when closures are aligned with the spatial distribution and timing of vulnerable life stages or sensitive habitats and are maintained for sufficient duration to allow recovery. Conversely, closures that are poorly targeted, too short to generate measurable responses, or result in displacement of fishing activity may provide limited conservation benefits or fail to achieve the intended reduction in fishing mortality.²⁸⁻³²

Taken together, the evidence indicates that the effectiveness of each closure depends on whether it targets an area and period of demonstrated ecological importance, provides an additional reduction in fishing mortality beyond existing measures, accounts for displacement and post-closure increases in effort, and is supported by effective monitoring, enforcement and adaptive management. Closures are also expected to be more effective when combined with complementary measures, including improvements in gear selectivity.

c. Other conservation and fleet-structure measures

■ Increase in MCRS.

MCRSs are intended to protect juvenile fish. In the Mediterranean, these size limits are established under Annex IX of the Technical Measures Regulation.³³ Although MCRSs are important tools for regulating the retention, permitted use, and marketing of individuals below a specified size, they do not in themselves prevent those individuals from being caught. Their contribution to reducing fishing mortality therefore depends on accompanying avoidance and gear-selectivity measures that reduce their capture or allow smaller individuals to escape and survive.

MCRS-related measures were included in the fishing opportunities regulations for 2023 and 2024. The 2023 measure concerned an increase in the MCRS for European hake to at least 26 cm. However, STECF considered that this measure, as worded, would increase unwanted catches of hake and illegal discarding without improving the stocks' status or supporting its recovery.¹⁷ The 2024 regulation sought to address this shortcoming by further specifying the measure and requiring the enforcement of appropriate technical measures to comply with the MCRS and improve the status of hake stocks.²⁰

Another MCRS-related measure that was included in the fishing opportunities regulation for 2024 involved increasing the MCRS of blue and red shrimp to 25 mm carapace length and of giant red shrimp to 35 mm carapace length. Even though these two sizes were consistent with the sizes at which 50% of individuals reach maturity (L50), as assessed by STECF,³⁴ it remains unclear whether these measures would actually reduce fishing mortality, rather than increase unwanted catches and illegal discards. The analysis nevertheless indicates

that, when implemented effectively and accompanied by appropriate technical measures, MCRSs can contribute to stock conservation.²⁰

The mixed nature of demersal fisheries in the Mediterranean makes it difficult to identify a single gear configuration that is suited to two or more different MCRSs.²⁰ A precautionary approach would be to require gear-selectivity specifications to be set, as a minimum safeguard, according to the smallest applicable MCRS.

■ Permanent fleet-capacity reduction.

A further measure within this category was introduced by Council Regulation (EU) 2026/266.⁷ It allows a 15% increase in fishing days where a Member State implements a permanent cessation affecting between 5% and 10% of the fleet concerned, and a 30% increase where the permanent cessation applies to more than 10% of that fleet. Some segments of the Mediterranean fleet, particularly trawl-fleet segments, are characterised by an imbalance between fishing capacity and available fishing opportunities,³⁵ and permanent cessation can therefore help improve the structural balance and economic viability of the remaining fleet. However, its contribution to reducing fishing mortality under an effort-management regime is uncertain. If the same total number of allowable fishing days is redistributed among fewer vessels, reducing the number or capacity of vessels will not necessarily reduce aggregate fishing effort. Whether cessation results in any conservation benefit depends on whether it produces a durable net reduction in deployed effort. If this is not the case, then such a measure would not be in line with the purpose of the compensation mechanism.

Table 2. Indicative contribution of the types of measures under the Western Mediterranean MAP compensation mechanism to the mechanism's purpose.

Proposed type of measure	Indicative contribution to reducing fishing mortality of juveniles and spawners
 Larger square-mesh codends (e.g., 50 mm)	Relatively strong and direct contribution. Available evidence indicates that larger square-mesh codends can reduce catches of juveniles. Their contribution depends on the performance demonstrated under commercial conditions.
 Other high-selectivity gears (e.g., 20 mm sorting grid)	Potentially strong contribution, but further evidence required. Such gear can directly protect juveniles or spawners where it demonstrably meets the required catch-reduction thresholds. Evidence is currently insufficient to confirm that the cited 20 mm sorting grid achieves those thresholds across Mediterranean demersal fisheries.
 Removal or restrictions of specific gears (e.g., otter-twin trawl gear)	Potentially direct contribution, conditional on an effective reduction in fishing activity. Removing or restricting a gear type with relatively high catchability may reduce fishing pressure on juveniles and spawners, but the benefit depends on the number of vessels affected and on whether the associated activity is discontinued, rather than transferred to other vessels or gear.
 Gear modifications to reduce seabed contact (e.g., low-contact trawl doors)	No demonstrated direct contribution. These gear modifications are not designed to protect juveniles or spawners and may have little or no effect on catch rates and patterns.
 Outcome-based closures protecting juveniles or spawners (including general percentage-based closures)	Potentially strong and direct contribution, but highly conditional on how they are implemented. These closures can directly serve the mechanism's purpose where required reductions in catches of juveniles or spawners are verified. Their benefit depends on appropriate location, timing and duration, additionality beyond Article 11 obligations, effective enforcement, and the avoidance of displacement of fishing activity.
 Seasonal and fishing-ground closures (including four- and six-week regional or depth-based closures and closures covering part of fishing grounds)	Uncertain contribution, highly conditional on how they are implemented. Benefits depend on alignment with vulnerable life stages and fishing activity. Short or broadly defined closures may deliver limited benefits, while displacement to other areas or periods and increased effort after reopening may offset conservation gains.
 Stock-specific closures (including closures targeting deep-water shrimp or Norway lobster fisheries)	Variable contribution, highly conditional on how they are implemented. Stock-specific closures can protect vulnerable components, if they overlap with important habitats and actual fishing activity. Any compensatory days granted should therefore be strictly proportionate to the fishing activity and mortality that are demonstrably avoided.
 Deep-water closure below 800 m	Limited direct contribution. Closures below 800 m avoid very little current fishing effort and mortality because fishing activity at these depths is minimal.
 Increase in MCRS	Indirect and uncertain contribution, conditional on accompanying measures. MCRSs may create an incentive to avoid undersized catches where the landing obligation is effectively enforced, but they alone do not prevent juveniles from being caught. Their contribution depends on effective monitoring and accompanying avoidance and gear-selectivity measures; otherwise, they may increase unwanted catches and illegal discarding.
 Permanent fleet-capacity reduction	No direct contribution. Permanent cessation does not involve selective fishing gear, does not establish effective closure areas, and does not specifically protect juveniles or spawners.

3. Key findings

The assessment identifies four cross-cutting findings concerning the strength and relevance of the evidence, the calibration of additional fishing days to conservation benefits, the additionality and durability of those benefits, and the adequacy of monitoring, evaluation, and transparency. Together, these findings provide the basis for the recommendations in **Section 4**.

» 3.1 Evidence of effectiveness varies substantially across measures

While the 2026 fishing opportunities regulation states among its recitals that selectivity measures and efficient closures have a demonstrated impact on fishing mortality,⁷ this generalisation cannot substitute for scientific evidence about the effects of each specific measure or the appropriate compensation. To date, however, across the various measures, there is a wide variation in the strength and relevance of the available evidence.

Increases in the size of square-mesh codends have the clearest evidential basis among the measures assessed. They can improve catch patterns and reduce catches of juveniles and individuals below the MCRS. Even for these measures, however, reductions in catches or retention cannot automatically be equated with an equivalent reduction in fishing mortality: performance under commercial conditions, escape survival, the fisheries and stocks affected, and the fishing mortality generated by the additional days must also be considered. The implementation of other highly selective gear types could also qualify as eligible measures under the mechanism, but their performance must be assessed and calibrated against any additional fishing days granted.

The effectiveness of spatial and temporal closures is more context-dependent. Well-targeted and enforced closures can reduce fishing pressure on vulnerable life stages and sensitive habitats, particularly if they are

permanent and coincide spatially with the distribution of juveniles or spawners. Their net benefit may nevertheless be weakened by poor siting, insufficient duration, non-compliance, displacement to other areas or periods, or increased effort after reopening.

Several measures have only an indirect or uncertain connection to fishing mortality. Increasing an MCRS does not prevent capture or mortality unless it is combined with effective avoidance or selectivity measures. Low-contact trawl doors have minimal or no effect on catch yields, despite any potential benefits in terms of reduced seabed impacts and carbon emissions. Similarly, closures below 800 m avoid little current fishing effort and make only a limited direct contribution to reducing fishing mortality, regardless of their important precautionary benefit for vulnerable species and habitats. Permanent fleet cessation and the subsequent redistribution of days among fewer vessels would not necessarily reduce fishing mortality. These measures may support broader policy objectives, but that alone does not justify the granting of additional fishing days under this mechanism.

» 3.2 Link between compensatory allocations of fishing days and conservation benefits remains unclear

The relationship between individual measures and the associated compensatory allocations is neither transparent nor demonstrably proportionate to any expected benefits. The compensation mechanism does not provide a transparent scientific basis for the precise percentages of compensation assigned to individual measures or demonstrate that the expected conservation gain from each measure is at least equivalent to the additional fishing mortality generated by the compensation days. For example, until (and including) 2024, measures counted equally in terms of compensation; the number of days allocated depended only on the number of measures implemented, even where their likely conservation benefits differed. This meant, for example, that a temporary closure and a comparable permanent closure had the same weight.

The measure-specific compensation introduced in 2025 and 2026 created stronger incentives for early, widespread, and continuous implementation. However, it is unclear how – or indeed, whether – those compensation values were derived from expected reductions in fishing mortality. Earlier implementation may generate greater annual benefits, because a measure operates for longer, but it is unclear that the associated increase in compensation is proportionate to this additional benefit. Wider fleet coverage may increase the aggregate benefit, however, a higher per-vessel percentage compensation should be granted only where the total conservation gain increases at least in proportion to the total additional fishing days. Continuity of implementation may preserve benefits and prevent measures from being discontinued. However, additional compensation for

continuity should be granted only where it secures a demonstrated conservation gain beyond the benefit that was already rewarded. Similarly, granting an additional 2%

for each consecutive week by which certain closures are extended assumes an unproven linear relationship between closure duration and conservation benefit.

The compensation cap included in the mechanism in 2025 and 2026 prevents the total resulting effort for a fishing-effort group from exceeding the level established for 2024. This is an important safeguard against an uncapped increase in fishing days. However, it does not address the lack of demonstrated equivalence between the conservation benefits the measures delivered and the additional mortality generated, either overall or for individual stocks, effort-management units, or fleet segments. Nor does a cap based on 2024 levels ensure that fishing effort follows the trajectory required by current scientific advice to meet the MAP's objectives, particularly the fishing mortality target.

» 3.3 Additionality, durability, and the avoidance of displacement are not assured

Some measures under the compensation mechanism may overlap with measures already required under the MAP, particularly the safeguards and closure obligations set out in Articles 6 and 11,¹ respectively. Where a measure would have occurred without the compensation mechanism, only an added conservation benefit can justify granting compensatory fishing effort. The current mechanism does not consistently guarantee that this is the case, nor does it prevent compensation from being granted to overlapping measures, effectively rewarding the same underlying benefit more than once.

The durability of benefits also varies. Temporary closures may shift effort to other periods or areas, while permanent closures may displace it to neighbouring or previously less-exploited fishing grounds. Fishing pressure can therefore

be transferred rather than necessarily reduced, and may increase on other stocks, vulnerable life stages, or sensitive habitats. Similarly, effort may increase after a temporary closure ends. The net effect must therefore be assessed across the entire management area and year, rather than only within the closed area or closure period.

Permanent fleet cessation without the removal of effort may leave the total allowable effort unchanged where fishing days are redistributed among the remaining trawlers. Incentives based on timing, fleet coverage, or continuity can promote uptake, but this does not replace evidence of actual and sustained reductions in fishing mortality.

» 3.4 Monitoring, evaluation, and transparency remain insufficient

The information that is currently reported and available is insufficient to determine whether the compensation mechanism delivers its intended conservation benefits. Member States are required to notify the European Commission of the measures implemented under the compensation mechanism, the vessels or fleet segments concerned, and the additional fishing days allocated. They must also report on the use of those days. The 2026 regulation also requires enhanced monitoring, control, and surveillance. However, these requirements focus largely on compliance with the conditions associated with the conservation measures and on the accounting of effort, rather than on the biological outcomes of individual measures. Information needed to evaluate their effectiveness, including compliance levels, changes in catches of juveniles and spawners, gear performance, effort displacement, and the outcomes of closures, is not systematically reported or made publicly available.

The technical measures, closures, and allocations adopted nationally are generally published in Member States' official gazettes. However, this information is often fragmented across different publications and subsequent amendments, making it difficult to obtain a comprehensive and up-to-date picture of the measures implemented and the associated compensatory days allocated. National audit reports on the implementation of the MAP, including the compensation mechanism, are not accessible to stakeholders.^a

Consequently, these information gaps limit public accountability, impede a robust understanding of the measures adopted, and prevent their evaluation, refinement, or discontinuation in cases where these measures perform poorly or are not fit for purpose.

a. In 2026, Oceana requested public access to the European Commission's audit reports concerning implementation of the West Med MAP in France, Italy and Spain, with a particular focus on the compensation mechanism. The Commission refused both full and partial access, invoking the exception under Article 4(2), third indent, of Regulation (EC) No 1049/2001 concerning the protection of the purpose of audits.

4. Recommendations for the compensation mechanism in 2027 and beyond



From 2027 onwards, the compensation mechanism should be refocused on its stated purpose: promoting selective fishing gear and efficient closure areas that protect juveniles and spawners and demonstrably reduce fishing mortality. Any allocation of additional fishing days under the mechanism should be supported by scientifically demonstrated, measurable, and lasting conservation benefits that would not otherwise occur and that are, at a minimum, sufficient to offset the fishing mortality generated by those days. To assess the mechanism's effectiveness, a comprehensive and up-to-date overview of the measures implemented, compensatory days allocated and used, and conservation outcomes achieved should be publicly available. This is essential to ensure that the mechanism contributes to, rather than undermines, the objectives of the MAP. The following additional recommendations should guide both the fishing opportunities regulation for 2027, and the design and evaluation of the mechanism in subsequent years.

» 4.1 Refocus the mechanism

Before introducing or retaining a measure within the compensation mechanism, the Commission should establish, supported by STECF advice, whether it:

- **Directly protects juveniles or spawners through scientifically supported improvements** in gear selectivity or the establishment of an effective closure;
- **Provides conservation benefits that are additional to those resulting from existing legal obligations**, established practice, or measures that would have been implemented regardless, without compensation;
- **Produces measurable and sufficiently lasting outcomes**, accounting for effort displacement, increases in fishing activity following closures, and changes in fishing capacity;
- **Can be effectively monitored, verified, and enforced** at the vessel, fleet-segment, and relevant spatial-management-unit level; and
- **Delivers a conservation benefit at least equivalent to the additional fishing mortality** expected to result from the corresponding compensatory days granted.

Compliance with an existing legal obligation, or a contribution to the broader objectives of the CFP, the MAP, and other legislation, should not, by itself, qualify a measure for compensation. Unless their impact on the reduction of fishing mortality is clear, measures that contribute to other valuable objectives such as reducing seabed impacts or emissions, protecting habitats that

are currently unfished, or addressing fleet-capacity imbalances should instead be supported through the appropriate conservation, climate, fleet-adjustment, or funding instruments. Their implementation should be compensated with additional fishing days only where they also demonstrably contribute to the compensation mechanism's stated purpose.

» 4.2 Scientifically calibrate allocations and clarify the effort cap

Before specific compensation percentages are included or renewed in annual fishing opportunities regulations, STECF should estimate the conservation benefit expected from each measure and compare it with the added fishing mortality that is likely to result from the proposed compensation. Assessments should be differentiated, where relevant, by stock, GSA or effort-management unit, fleet segment, season, and gear. Where evidence is insufficient, the compensation should either be based on a precautionary estimate or the measure withheld until effectiveness is demonstrated.

Where the degree of compensation for a particular measure depends on how it is implemented, the relevant factors should be considered in terms of demonstrable additional benefits:

- **Earlier implementation** may generate greater annual benefits because a measure operates for longer, but **any increased compensation should be proportionate to the expected added conservation impact**.
- **Wider fleet coverage** may increase aggregate benefits, but it also increases the number of vessels that receive additional fishing days as compensation. **A higher per-vessel percentage compensation should be granted only where wider uptake of the relevant measure produces additional or more-than-proportional benefits**, rather than simply multiplying both benefits and additional effort.
- **Continuity of implementation** may preserve benefits and prevent measures from being discontinued. However, maintaining an existing measure does not necessarily generate an additional benefit. **Any higher allocation granted specifically for continuity should be supported by a demonstrable additional conservation benefit, and be proportionate to that benefit**.
- Shorter closures, such as those of only a few weeks' duration, are generally much less likely than longer closures to produce measurable and lasting conservation benefits. **Longer closures should therefore be prioritised, where supported by scientific advice**. Any additional compensation granted must be calibrated to the demonstrated added benefit, rather than increasing automatically by 2% for each additional week.

Compensation should not be summed for overlapping measures, if those measures produce the same conservation outcome. Where a single measure is insufficient, eligibility for compensation could instead require a complementary package of measures (e.g. selective gear combined with a targeted closure), provided that the combined effects are demonstrated, genuinely additive, and sufficient to at least offset the total additional compensation. This would also reduce the risk of eligibility being secured through implementing the least demanding measure simply to obtain additional fishing days.

The binding cap on total effort should be retained as a minimum safeguard. Annual fishing opportunities regulations should:

- **Set a clear maximum number of fishing days for each Member State and fishing-effort group**, covering both the initial allocation and all additional days potentially granted through the compensation mechanism;
- **Clearly define the historical effort benchmark on which the cap is based**, including **whether it reflects fishing days that were actually used or the maximum number legally available**; and
- **Ensure that the total effort ceiling after compensation is consistent with current scientific advice**, stock management objectives, and any remedial measures required under Article 6 of the MAP.¹



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» 4.3 Prioritise proven measures and remove those that are not fit for purpose

From 2027 onwards, the compensation mechanism should prioritise measures with the strongest evidence of a direct impact in terms of protecting juveniles and spawners and reducing fishing mortality. The main recommendations are:

- **Larger square-mesh codends should remain central to the compensation mechanism.**

The use of 45 mm and 50 mm square-mesh codends and other selective gear should continue to be promoted, while further progressive increases, including 55 mm and 60 mm meshes, should be tested and encouraged where they deliver additional conservation benefits. A predictable multiannual pathway should provide the fleet with sufficient time to adapt and allow the biological, operational, and economic effects of each increase to be evaluated. Larger mesh sizes should qualify for compensation only where performance is independently demonstrated under representative commercial conditions. Requirements should include precise technical specifications, gear inspections, and, where relevant, evidence of post-escape survival.



- **The removal or restriction of gears with relatively high catchability, such as OTTs, can directly reduce fishing pressure.**

Compensation should be limited to cases where the gear is actively used and its removal or restriction delivers a verified net reduction in fishing mortality that is not offset by redistributed effort or increased use of other gears. The conservation benefit must also be additional to existing obligations. Accordingly, the restriction on OTTs introduced as a remedial measure in GSAs 8–11 by the 2026 regulation should remain outside the mechanism until scientific evidence demonstrates that it is no longer required as a remedial measure.

- **Closures have clear potential to protect juveniles and spawners under the compensation mechanism.**

To qualify, their location and timing should be determined using the best available biological and fishing-activity data, and they should deliver additional conservation benefits beyond existing obligations, particularly the closures required under Article 11 of the MAP.¹ Because closures generally displace fishing effort rather than eliminate it, their design and assessment should consider the redistribution of effort across the entire management area and year and ensure that pressure is not transferred to equally or more vulnerable stocks, habitats, areas, or periods. Where eligibility depends on achieving a specified reduction in catches of juveniles or spawners, the baseline and assessment method should be established in advance and the required outcome subsequently verified. Closures should also be effectively monitored and enforced. Priority should be given to longer closures that allow conservation benefits to materialise and persist. Short closures of only a few weeks should be avoided and not normally qualify unless scientific evidence demonstrates that their precise timing and location can deliver the required outcomes.

- **The inclusion of closures in waters deeper than 800 m should be reconsidered.** The minimal current fishing activity at these depths raises doubts about such closures' contribution to the purpose of the compensation mechanism, and about the proportionality of the associated compensation. Such closures may provide an important precautionary benefit by protecting vulnerable deep-sea species and habitats and preventing the expansion of fishing activity into deeper waters, but this benefit should not be considered sufficient, on its own, to justify compensation.

- **An increase in an MCRS should only qualify for compensation if it is part of a verified avoidance and selectivity package capable of reducing catches and mortality of undersized individuals.** Where one gear configuration cannot accommodate several MCRSs, its selectivity specifications should, as a precautionary minimum, be guided by the smallest applicable MCRS.

- **The use of low-contact trawl doors should be removed from the compensation mechanism unless their contribution to protecting juveniles or spawners is scientifically demonstrated.** Although they may support the MAP's ecosystem-based approach by reducing seabed impacts and emissions, these broader benefits do not, by themselves, justify additional fishing days under the compensation mechanism.

- **Permanent fleet cessation should be removed from the compensation mechanism.** It does not specifically protect juveniles or spawners. Where fleet segments are structurally imbalanced with available fishing opportunities, permanent cessation may be necessary and, with the right conditions, may improve the viability of the remaining operators, but it should be pursued through dedicated fleet-capacity and socioeconomic instruments rather than rewarded with additional fishing days.

» 4.4 Strengthen monitoring, transparency, and independent evaluation

Under existing notification, effort-reporting, and monitoring requirements, some of the information listed below is already requested from and provided by Member States. However, these requirements should be consolidated, harmonised, and expanded to enable a consistent assessment of compliance, biological outcomes, and proportionality. Eligibility for compensation under the mechanism should therefore be conditional on complete and timely monitoring and reporting. For each measure, Member States should provide information on:

- The **vessels and fleet segments concerned** and the **relevant effort-management unit**;
- The **implementation period, spatial coverage, and baseline** against which additionality is assessed;
- The **additional compensatory fishing days allocated and used**;
- **Gear specifications, inspections, infringements**, and other compliance results;
- **Changes in catch composition**, particularly catches of **juveniles and spawners**;
- **Changes in fishing capacity** and the **spatial and temporal distribution of effort**, including displacement and post-closure increases; and
- The **biological outcomes** used to justify the compensation.



The Commission should establish common reporting formats and publish an annual consolidated report detailed by Member State and conservation measure, subject to appropriate protection of commercially sensitive vessel-level information. National implementing measures, subsequent amendments, and audit reports on implementation of the compensation mechanism should be made accessible through a central public repository.

STECF should evaluate the reported outcomes before any measure or compensation percentage is renewed. Measures for which effectiveness remains uncertain should be introduced only as time-limited trials and should expire unless the required outcomes are demonstrated.

» 4.5 Keep the mechanism complementary and transitional

The compensation mechanism should not substitute for restrictions on fishing effort and catch limits based on scientific advice, or for the remedial measures and closure obligations required under Articles 6 and 11 of the MAP,¹ respectively. Fishing opportunities should first be set at levels consistent with the MAP, without assuming that additional days will subsequently increase the overall effort.

The mechanism should remain a temporary incentive rather than becoming a permanent source of additional fishing days. Measures that have become standard practice, form part of the legal baseline, or have been delivering biological and/or socioeconomic benefits over several years should no longer qualify for compensation unless a new and additional conservation benefit is demonstrated.

Compliance with the CFP and the MAP's requirement to exploit stocks sustainably is necessary irrespective of compensation. Socioeconomic impacts of implementing the MAP should be mitigated through transitional funding, fair allocation of fishing opportunities, and appropriate fleet-adjustment measures, not through the granting of additional fishing days that have not been clearly demonstrated to be proportionate to the outcomes of the conservation measures they reward.



5. Conclusion

Implementation of the MAP is driving a necessary and significant transition towards more sustainable fishing practices in the Western Mediterranean demersal fleets. However, the binding target of achieving fishing mortality within F_{MSY} ranges by January 2025 has not yet been met. In this context, the compensation mechanism can be a valuable tool for accelerating the uptake of selective fishing gear and effective closures, embedding improved conservation practices across the fleet, and mitigating the short-term socioeconomic impacts of restrictions on fishing days. Its role, however, should not be to restore fishing days as an end in itself, but to secure additional conservation benefits that would not otherwise occur.

The increasing reliance on the mechanism over time also raises questions regarding its actual contribution to the objectives of the MAP. Its rationale rests on the assumption that the measures implemented deliver conservation benefits sufficient to at least offset the fishing mortality generated by the additional days of fishing granted as compensation. However, not all of the measures included in the fishing opportunities regulations are supported by sufficient evidence, and some do not directly contribute to the mechanism's stated purpose of protecting juveniles and spawners through selective fishing gear and efficient closures. Their inclusion in the mechanism puts its credibility and effectiveness at risk. Each measure must deliver proven, additional, and lasting benefits that are sufficient to justify the extra fishing days granted.

As the European Commission and Member States, particularly France, Italy and Spain, prepare the fishing opportunities regulations for 2027 and subsequent years, the compensation mechanism should be further refined and refocused on its stated purpose. Strengthening scientific evaluation, improving monitoring and public transparency, preventing double counting, and ensuring proportionality between conservation outcomes and compensatory fishing days are essential. The mechanism should complement, rather than substitute for, effort restrictions, catch limits, mandatory closures, and remedial measures under the MAP. If made fit for purpose, it can help the fleet transition towards more selective and sustainable fishing while supporting stock recovery and sustainable fisheries management in the Western Mediterranean Sea.

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