



**Courtmacsherry Skate Tracking Project  
LIC230039**

**Assessment of Impacts of the Maritime Usage (AIMU) Report**

**March 2024**

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## Introduction

To ensure MARA can fully assess all potential impacts of a proposed maritime usage, all applicants are required to submit the AIMU report in support of their maritime usage license application. The scale and complexity of the AIMU should reflect the scale and complexity of the project. This report contains an analysis of the likely effects (positive and negative) for the proposed maritime activities involved in the deployment and monitoring of twenty-two temporary moorings equipped with acoustic receivers in Courtmacsherry Bay, Co. Cork to assess the seasonal residency, site fidelity and potential dispersal of flapper skate (*Dipturus intermedius*). The research has a core conservation management objective, with the purpose of understanding the fundamental ecology of this Critically Endangered species, and to assess its amenability to spatial protection.

## Project Description

The proposed maritime usage aims to assess the seasonal residency, site fidelity and dispersal of the flapper skate (*Dipturus intermedius*) in Courtmacsherry Bay, one of the last known hotspots for this species both in Irish waters, and in globally. The work is being carried out as part of a large multidisciplinary research project called CETUS. The CETUS project: Cetacean, Elasmobranch, Turtle, and Seabird distribution modelling platform supporting the sustainable development of offshore renewable energy and is funded by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland.

This application is to support the ‘Courtmacsherry Skate Tracking Project’ element of the CETUS Project. The proposed array of acoustic receivers is supported by a Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland grant (€850k) and a grant from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (€200k). The project will involve the deployment, and maintenance of temporary sub-surface moorings, equipped with acoustic receivers (passive underwater listening devices). The project is proposing the deployment of 22 moorings in the Celtic Sea. The moorings will be recovered every 6-12 months for maintenance and redeployment. The aim of these deployments is to use this passive, low impact, monitoring methodology to record the presence/absence, seasonality and potential migratory routes of the Critically Endangered, OSPAR listed flapper skate, *Dipturus batis*. This project

has been through strict animal welfare licencing and review, with approval from the University College Cork Ethics Committee and governing body for animal research in Ireland, The Health Products Regulatory Authority. Licences for animal tagging were granted in 2023. The resultant findings on flapper skate space use will be reported to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and will help inform the sustainable management of OSPAR listed species, which will coexist with the proposed offshore renewable development in this area.

### Programme of Works

The start date for the maritime usage would preferably be in April 2024. A local vessel operator will be contracted, to deploy the moorings in the Courtmacsherry Bay area. The vessel for operational activities, or company contracted is subject to budget, weather, and vessel availability. The moorings will be recovered every 6-12 months for maintenance and redeployment, for up to three years.

## Consideration of the

### EIA Directive

Under the EU's Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Directive (2011/92/EU as amended by 2014/52/EU), major building or development projects in the EU must first be assessed for their impact on the environment. For our study, the design of the temporary mooring systems, and the technical equipment used, are non-invasive and small in scale, and therefore their impact on the seabed and the marine ecosystem is assessed as negligible. Therefore, there is no need consider an EIA for our proposed project.

### WFD Directive

The Water Framework Directive (WFD) focuses on ensuring good qualitative and quantitative health i.e. on reducing and removing pollution and on ensuring that there is enough water to support wildlife at the same time as human needs. The WFD is the main law for water protection in Europe. It applies to inland, transitional and coastal surface waters as well as groundwaters. Our study site is >500m from shore, and not connected to any areas relevant for the WFD. Therefore, there is no need to consideration the WFD for our proposed project.

### MSFD Directive

The EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) was put in place to protect the marine ecosystem and biodiversity upon which our health and marine-related economic and social activities depend. In the directive it is stated that, "The marine environment is a precious heritage that must be protected, preserved and, where practicable, restored with the ultimate aim of maintaining biodiversity and providing diverse and dynamic oceans and seas, which are clean, healthy and productive".

Our research objective, to gain knowledge about the seasonality and distribution of flapper skate, which are an OSPAR-listed, Critically Endangered skate species. This animal is high up the food chain, and potentially a key indicator of ocean health and may be affected by offshore renewable energy. Therefore, our objectives align with those stated in the MSFD directive.

Negative impacts stated in the MSFD is for example pollution, biodiversity loss, seabed damage, overexploitation, spread of non-indigenous species, marine litter, underwater noise, and ocean warming and acidification. The design of our temporary mooring systems, and the technical equipment used, are non-invasive, silent, and small in scale. The design of the mooring set up is a sub-surface system hydrophone deployment, with no surface buoy, and a large ship chain weight.

Because of the sub-surface system, there is no surface buoy, meaning that the entanglement risk is minimized. To reduce entanglement risk, the line length has been reduced to 5m for 'pop up moorings', and to lengths of up to 30m for 'pick up moorings'. The effect of the mooring is localised to where the weight sits directly on the seabed. Overall, because of the non-invasive design of our temporary moorings, the negative environmental impact from the proposed maritime activity is assessed as negligible. Therefore, we do not assess any negative impacts on the objectives of the MSFD from our research project.

#### Planning & Development (including Statement of consistency with the National Marine Planning Framework (NMPF))

We assess that there will be no impact on planning and development in the area, due to our temporary moorings.

#### Land & Soils

The proposed application is in the coastal marine environment. We assess that there will be no impact on the land and soils in the area, due to our temporary moorings.

#### Water

We assess that there will be no impact on the water quality in the area, due to our temporary moorings.

#### Biodiversity

We assess that there will be no significant impact on the biodiversity in the area, due to our temporary moorings.

#### Fisheries and Aquaculture

We assess that there will be no significant impact on the fisheries and aquacultures in the area, due to our temporary moorings. Effort has been made to codesign this research alongside the local maritime tourism and fishing community, and to gain approval on the proposed mooring design, location and duration to minimise conflict with other maritime activities (see document '8. Supporting evidence').

#### Air Quality

We assess that there will be no impact on the air quality in the area, due to our temporary moorings.

#### Noise & Vibration

Due to our technical equipment being silent, we assess that there will be no impact on the noise and vibrations in the area, due to our temporary moorings.

#### Landscape/Seascape

The footprint on the seafloor of this anchor will not exceed 0.2m<sup>2</sup>. The height of the mooring will not exceed 30m, and the diameter less than 1m. The effect of the mooring will be in direct relation to where the weight is set in the seabed.

#### Traffic & Transport (including navigation)

We assess that there will be no significant impact on the traffic and transport in the area, due to our temporary moorings and sub-surface deployment.

### Cultural Heritage (including underwater archaeology)

We assess that there will be no impact on the cultural heritage, including archaeology in the area, due to our temporary moorings.

### Population & Human Health

We assess that there will be no impact on population and human health due to our temporary moorings.

### Major Accidents & Disasters

We assess that there will be no risk for major accidents and disasters due to our temporary moorings.

### Climate

We assess that there will be no significant impact on the climate, due to our temporary moorings.

### Waste

We assess that there will be no risk for waste due to our temporary moorings.

### Material Assets

We assess that there will be no risk for material assets due to our temporary moorings.

### Interactions

We see no potential interactions to consider, due to our temporary moorings.

### Summary of Mitigations

Our moorings are temporary, small, sub-surface, silent, and non-invasive in nature, and they will have no, or no significant impact on the environment, people, or animals in the area itself, or more broadly. Therefore, no mitigation measures regarding our proposed research project are needed.