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MEDAC ADVICE
on the use of the trap-line in the Mediterranean swordfish fishery (SWO-MED stock),
(to be transmitted to the EC and ICCAT)

Context

The trap line is a recent modification of the surface longline: monofilament rings surround the bait, which is attached to the mainline. This configuration does not fit within ICCAT's current gear categories, and raises additional questions regarding CPUE monitoring, sampling, and regulation.

Recent scientific studies (2024–2025, Italy and Spain, see reference list) document the emergence and effects of this technique in the western Mediterranean. A first spatio-temporal assessment and bycatch analysis have been conducted over 303 fishing operations.

The SWO-MED stock remains fragile—historically overfished, with fishing mortality close to but slightly below F_{RMS} , and a high proportion of juveniles (<4 years old) in the catches—calling for caution and greater selectivity.

Scientific findings (state of knowledge 2024–2025)

The trapline alters the capture mechanics (an entangling-like effect around the bait) and preliminary data seemingly show a different CPUE, making it non-trivial to calibrate CPUE indices and ensure comparability with historical time series.

Authors recommend standardized data collection, dedicated monitoring, and an appropriate management framework.

According to the STECF PLEN 25-01 (based on ICCAT-SCRS analyses), the trap-line's catching process—based on entanglement rather than hooking—differs fundamentally from traditional longlines. Therefore, the trap-line should be considered a distinct fishing gear rather than a gear component, and separate gear codes should be created within ICCAT and EU databases to ensure proper traceability and data collection.

The Spanish study (SCRS/2025/098) shows that, compared with traditional longline sets (TRADSET), trapline configurations (LOSET) yield lower catch-per-unit-effort values but significantly larger individuals (mean 132 cm vs 112 cm LJFL; $p < 0.001$). This suggests a potential for reducing the relative proportion of juveniles in catches.

The first datasets begin to document associated bycatches, but evidence remains limited and needs consolidation (observer coverage, harmonized protocols).

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Both STECF and SCRS underline the importance of distinguishing between surface and mesopelagic trap-lines, given the different bycatch compositions already observed for corresponding longline strata.

ICCAT 2024 papers emphasize the need for observation and standardization mechanisms before drawing robust conclusions.

The STECF further recommends that Member States and the Commission verify whether onboard observer and electronic-monitoring programs are already collecting trap-line data, and—if not—establish a dedicated monitoring scheme in collaboration with the SCRS.

If the increase in average fish size is confirmed, the trapline could contribute to the selectivity objectives of the ICCAT multiannual plan (Rec. 16-05 and EU updates), without increasing fishing effort or juvenile catches — a key issue for SWO-MED.

Moreover, since Swordfish is a species subject to quotas, any increase in CPUE would only result in the quota being reached sooner, rather than an increase in fishing effort.

Uncertainties (CPUE, bycatches) call for a wider access to fisheries data and justify a controlled authorization rather than a general ban, in order to filling the gap of missing data through a robust monitoring protocol under the aegis of the SCRS.

Preliminary qualitative evidence (Garibaldi 2024; UNIMAR 2024; STECF PLEN 25-01) also suggests a lower incidence of bycatches (birds, mammals, elasmobranchs), while quantitative assessment remains insufficient due to small sample sizes.

MEDAC Position

The MEDAC supports the regulated and authorized continuation of trapline use in the Mediterranean for the following reasons:

- Improved selectivity potential –larger individuals caught, consistent with the goal of reducing juvenile mortality; results remain to be confirmed but are encouraging. These preliminary results are consistent with the findings of Garibaldi et al. (2024) and UNIMAR (2024), as summarized in the STECF PLEN 25-01 report.
- Need for a dedicated database (effort, catches, sizes, bycatches) with a wider access to fisheries data to objectively assess the gear within the ICCAT framework, which would be impossible under a total ban.
- Consistency with the ICCAT/EU adaptive management approach: test, measure, adjust — rather than excluding a potentially more selective gear.

The STECF also notes possible socio-economic benefits of this gear (lower bait costs, reusable lures, higher catchability), which should be included in the monitoring framework.

Operational recommendations (to the European Commission for ICCAT)

Authorization under protocol:

Allow the trapline within the SWO-MED plan under a common framework: standardized technical description (rings, materials, branchline length, hook-to-ring distance, setting depth) and strict monitoring scheme. Mandate the SCRS to define gear sheets and variables. Ensure formal registration of the gear as a distinct category within the RCG-ISSG framework for naming conventions and gear codes.

Enhanced scientific monitoring: Minimum observer/electronic monitoring (EM) coverage (e.g. 20 % of trapline trips) with harmonized bycatch protocols (sharks, turtles, birds, mammals). Data to be transmitted to the SCRS for with the “no data-no landing” approach used in ICCAT for other stocks. Monitoring should distinguish between surface and mesopelagic trap-lines, as recommended by STECF.

Annual scientific review: Provide standardized CPUE, size, and bycatch comparisons between trapline and traditional longline; issue an updated opinion before 2029 on potential integration into Rec. 16-05.

Explicit reporting: Declare “trapline” use in national fishing plans and apply separate gear codes in ICCAT reports to avoid dilution of data series. Implement targeted inspections under the ICCAT inspection program.

Specific MEDAC requests to the European Commission

- (i) Promote at EU level a common position in favour of regulated authorization of trapline use (and not its restriction to “experimental” use only);
- (ii) Fund, during 2026–2028, dedicated observer/EM programmes and SCRS analyses on trapline (including CPUE standardization).
- (iii) Support the formal process to include trap-lines as a distinct gear in ICCAT and EU reporting systems, following the STECF PLEN 25-01 roadmap for legal integration.)

Specific MEDAC requests to the EU for ICCAT (Commission & SCRS)

- (i) Register the trapline as a distinct gear configuration;
- (ii) Adopt a common minimal data protocol (effort, sizes, bycatches);

- (iii) Produce a CPUE methodological note for time series with gear change.
- (iv) Develop, in coordination with the EU and Member States, a monitoring program distinguishing surface vs mesopelagic trap-lines and assessing both selectivity and socio-economic effects.)

References

Garibaldi F. et al. 2024. The use of an innovative fishing gear (trap-line), ICCAT CVSP 81(7). Highlights CPUE definition, data collection, and regulatory framework challenges related to trapline.

Garibaldi F. 2024. The swordfish CPUE poses several questions... ICCAT CVSP 81(7). Emphasizes analytical challenges induced by trapline introduction since ~2021.

Macías D. et al. 2025. Spatiotemporal distribution and bycatch associated with surface longlines using traplines in the western Mediterranean Sea (SCRS/2025/098). LOSET: larger individuals vs TRADSET; early bycatch data to be consolidated.

ICCAT SCRS – Executive Summary SWO-MED (9.13). Stock status: historically overfished, high juvenile share, need for increased selectivity.

SWO-MED Regulation & Control (EU/ICCAT) – implementation of closures & control measures.

STECF (2025). *Technical and scientific advice on the innovative fishing device “trap-line”*. 78th Plenary Report (PLEN 25-01), JRC Technical Report JRC142271, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.