

Considerations on fleet classification in the northern GSA 6

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Institut Català de
Recerca per a la
Governança del Mar

REPORT 25-02 (2025) 6 pp.

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Published in April 2025.

How to cite this document

Institut Català de Recerca per a la Governança del Mar (ICATMAR) 2025. Considerations on fleet classification in the northern GSA 6 (ICATMAR, 25-02) 6 pp., Barcelona. DOI: [10.20350/digitalCSIC/17231](https://doi.org/10.20350/digitalCSIC/17231)

The European Commission defines two categories of vessels, small-scale and large-scale, mainly attending to their length overall and whether their gears are active or passive (Council Regulation No 1198/2006), but admits there is much debate on the question, and often considers other factors such as the duration of the fishing trips or the size of the crew, based on other classifications (Davies et al. 2025). As a consequence, the vast majority of the vessels in the northern GSA 6, i.e. those not strictly belonging to the small-scale artisanal category, are currently classified as industrial fishing. While the difference between the small-scale vessels and the Mediterranean trawlers and purse seiners is clear, so is the contrast between the characteristics and fishing practices of the Mediterranean fleets and those of the North Atlantic zones, where large freezer trawlers spend weeks at sea (Table 1). The gross tonnage (GT) values of Spanish Mediterranean bottom trawlers are 43% lower than the total average for Atlantic and Mediterranean Spanish trawlers (55.47 vs. 130.08 GT, respectively), and their trips are limited to 12 hours per day by law, with effective fishing time ranging from 7 to 9 hours per day (Figure 1). The current classification in two categories leaves these vessels in-between both definitions, since their length overall is over 12 m and their gear is active, but they in fact share all the other aspects with the small-scale category (Table 2).

Table 1: Average gross tonnage (GT) values of different categories of Spanish trawlers. Source: Direcció General de Política Marítima i Pesca Sostenible, Generalitat de Catalunya 2025.

Type of vessel	NAFO Freezer trawlers	Freezer trawlers in international waters and other countries	Bottom trawlers in ICES VB, VI, VII and VIIIa,b,,,e	Bottom trawlers in NW Cantabric	Trawlers in Portuguese waters	Mediterranean Bottom trawlers	Bottom trawlers in Gulf of Cádiz
Average gross tonnage (GT)	1 181.58	524.69	356.14	226.07	152.85	55.47	42.69

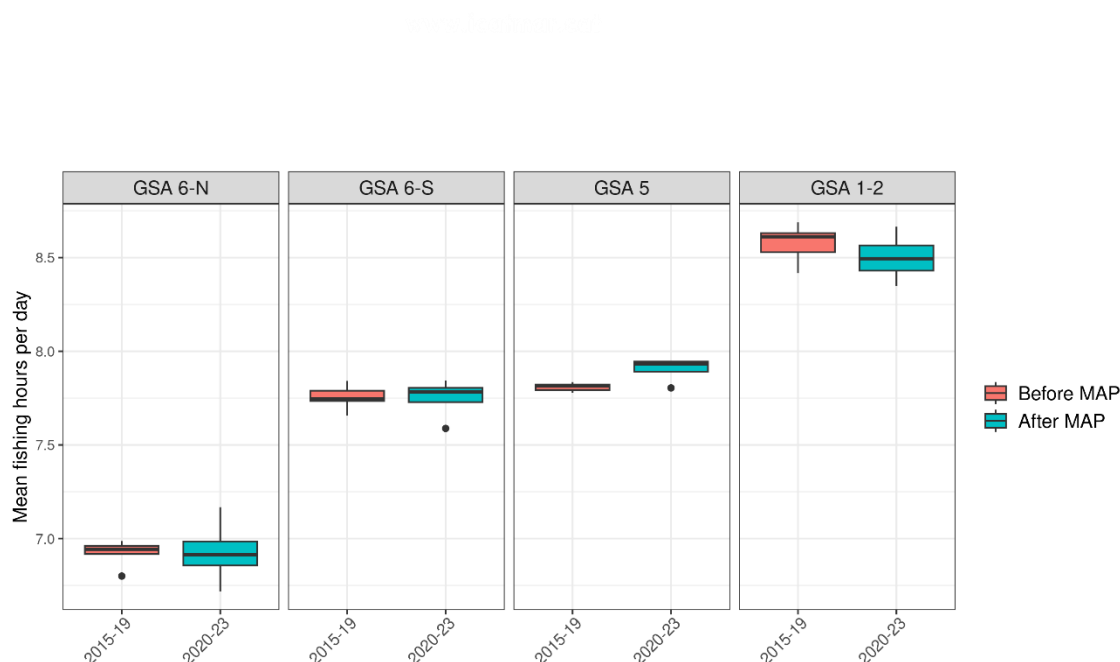


Figure 1. Mean fishing hours per day for Spanish Mediterranean bottom trawl vessels by Spanish GSA before (red) and after (blue) the enforcement of the Western Mediterranean Multiannual Plan for demersal stocks. Data from Vessel Monitoring System (VMS).

Table 2: Characteristics of artisanal (“small-scale”) and industrial (“large-scale”) fishing according to the European Commission (Council Regulation No 1198/2006) and the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF). The characteristics corresponding to the Catalan bottom otter trawling fleet are highlighted in blue. Compiled by authors from: Davies et al. 2025.

	Artisanal fishing (small-scale)	Industrial fishing (large-scale)
Length overall	< 12 m	> 12 m
Fishing area	coastal areas	inside or outside EU waters
Duration of the fishing trip	< 1 day	> 1 day
Product preservation	Fresh	Fresh or frozen
Local sale	Yes	No
Predominant fishing gear	Passive	Active
Type of contract	Temporary	Indefinite
Crew	< 5	> 5
Target species	Multi-specific	Monospecific
Number of ships per company	Few	Many
Ship material	Wood or fiber	Steel

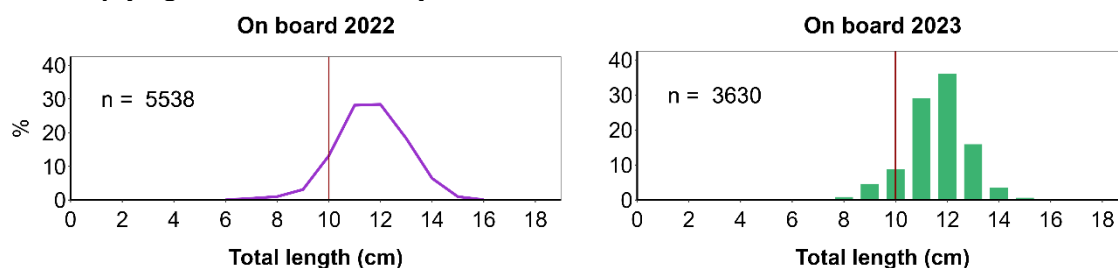
A different classification of the fleet is proposed by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), in which vessels are classified as small-scale if they comply with at least three of the following characteristics:

- length overall under 12 m
- vessel fishing exclusively inside the territorial waters of the flag CPC
- fishing trips with a duration of less than 24 hours

- maximum crew number of 4 people
- vessel fishing using techniques which are selective and have a reduced environmental impact

In the case of the fleet of the northern GSA 6, most vessels that are currently classified as large-scale fisheries (the bottom otter trawl and purse seine fleets) do fulfill three of these conditions (Table 3). The entire fleet fishes exclusively inside the territorial waters of the flag CPC, and the duration of the trips is set to a maximum of 12 hours by law. Additionally, the bottom trawl fleet is currently working with an average of 3.48 crew per vessel (Spanish Maritime Authority – Capitanía Marítima, 2024). As for the purse seine fleet, the use of acoustic sensor techniques allows to select for species and size, ensuring the survival of juvenile individuals of target species (Figure 2, ICATMAR 24-05), and effecting minimal environmental impact since the gear makes no contact with the sea bottom. In the case of boat seiners, their fishing area is strictly limited to the habitat of their target species, and they are regulated by a long-lasting management plan based on quotas that maintains a controlled effort on the resource.

Anchovy (*Engraulis encrasicolus*)



European sardine (*Sardina pilchardus*)

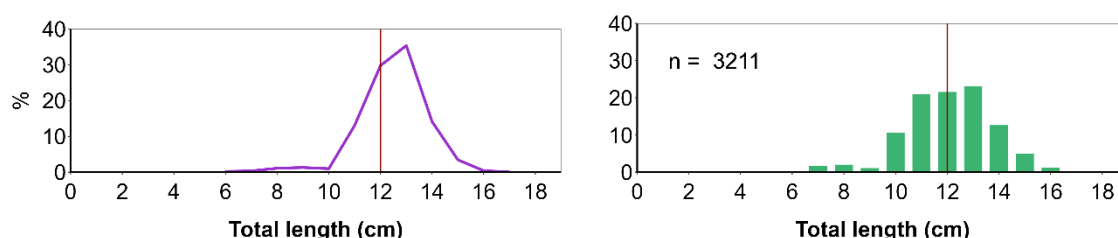


Figure 2. Size distribution of anchovy (*Engraulis encrasicolus*, top) and European sardine (*Sardina pilchardus*, bottom) catch in the northern GSA 6 for the years 2022 (left) and 2023 (right) from on-board samplings. Red vertical line indicates Minimum Conservation Reference Size. Source: ICATMAR 24-05.

Table 3. Characteristics of the different fleets of the northern GSA 6 attending to the classification by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT).

	LOA <12 m	Fishing inside territorial waters	Fishing trips < 24 h	Maximum crew of 4	Selective techniques, reduced environmental impact	* Observations
Small-scale (hook)	x	x	x	x	x	
Small-scale (nets)	x	x	x	x	x	
Small-scale (mechanized and boat dredges)	x	x	x	x		
Small-scale (traps)	x	x	x	x	x	
Surface longline				x	x	
Bottom longline	x	x	x	x	x	
Boat seine	x	x	x	x	x *	Selectivity by fishing zone
Purse seine		x	x		x *	Fish school location gear is selective for species and size
Bottom trawl		x	x	x		
Tuna purse seine					x *	Fish school location gear is selective for species and size

These considerations aim to contribute to the ongoing debate on the segmentation of the EU fleet into categories with the available information from our region. Far from arguing that all Mediterranean vessels should be categorized as artisanal or small-scale, it would be useful to consider a category which can differentiate small, coastal trawlers and purse seiners from large-scale vessels which have clearly contrasting fishing dynamics and operate at a completely different socioeconomic scale. A finer classification would reflect an understanding of the Mediterranean fisheries dynamics and could result in management measures that are better tailored to the particularities of the region.

References

- Davies, M., Macfadyen, G., Brugere, C., Chiarelli, N., Dale, F., and Caillart, B., Foresight Study on Fishers of the Future, Publications Office of the European Union, 2025, doi: 10.2926/3984926
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