UN environment programme

ASCOBANS

AGREEMENT ON THE CONSERVATION OF SMALL CETACEANS OF THE BALTIC, NORTH EAST ATLANTIC, IRISH AND NORTH SEAS

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29 July 2026

30th MEETING OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Bonn, Germany, 1–3 September 2026
Agenda Item 16.1

REVIEW OF OVERLAPS BETWEEN THE ASCOBANS NATIONAL REPORTING AND OTHER REPORTING OBLIGATIONS

(Prepared by the Intersessional Working Group on National Reporting Overlaps)

1. The 10th Meeting of the Parties (MOP10) to ASCOBANS decided to establish an Intersessional Working Group (IWG) to implement Work Plan Activity 68:

   > "Review overlaps in national reporting with other reporting obligations (e.g. MPAs to EMODNet, noise and bycatch to ICES) and identify if any topics in ASCOBANS National Reports can instead be accessed in such databases to avoid duplication of efforts." (ASCOBANS Resolution 10.2/Rev.1)

2. The IWG initiated its work in 2025 with representatives from Denmark (Chair), the Netherlands, Poland, the International Whaling Commission, and the Jastarnia Group.

3. The IWG collected input to identify reporting overlaps via ASCOBANS Advisory Committee (AC29), using a spreadsheet review form. Responses were provided by Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom (Annex 2).

4. The IWG further collected input from the Jastarnia Group and the North Sea Group (NSG) on focus points in the streamlining of national reporting during their joint meeting on 14 April 2026 (Annex 3). The proposed revised reporting form is available in Annex 4.

5. This report to AC30 (see Annex 1) contains the results of the review and corresponding recommendations regarding the National Reporting form (Recommendations in Annex 2, column T), including making use of living documents online, or pre-filled reporting points. Many answers don't change that much from year-to-year. Living documents or prefilled answers would allow for responses from previous reporting periods to automatically be entered in the reporting form for certain questions, only needing updating or added information, which makes it less time-consuming.

6. Another recommendation is to change the 'reporting period' to all four years since a topic was last reported on, so all years are covered. Especially if the reporting burden is reduced with the above suggestion, this would become feasible. This would secure better (alignment in) data coverage.

7. The report can be further considered at AC31, if needed, and the final report and recommendations are to be presented for MOP11.

Action requested:

8. The Advisory Committee is requested to:

a) note the input given from Parties concerning overlaps with other reporting obligations as well as streamlining opportunities (Annex 2, columns E-F, and country-specific tabs);

b) note the input from Jastarnia Group and NSG concerning the National Reporting form burden and need for streamlining (Annex 3);

c) consider endorsing the report of the Intersessional Working Group;

d) consider endorsing the IWG recommendation for clarifying and streamlining the national reporting to reduce reporting burden (Annex 3 column T);

e) consider endorsing the suggestion to change the ‘reporting period’ to all four years since a topic was last reported on, so all years are covered;

f) consider endorsing the accordingly updated reporting form (Annex 4); and

g) note and guide on the continued work of the IWG to further investigate the accessibility and reliability of data (bycatch; resource depletion, ocean energy, noise) in other databases (e.g. ICES), potentially leading to further recommendations on the NR form for these topics.

Annex 1

REPORT OF THE INTERSESSIONAL WORKING GROUP

Background and scope

ASCOBANS Parties are obligated to report on a list of subjects to ASCOBANS using the National Reporting (NR) form. The reporting is done every year, but for rotating subjects in four-year cycles, such that one topic is reported on once every four years.

In total, the NR form contains 148 reporting points / questions which cover subjects such as Habitat conservation (Bycatch, Resource depletion), Disturbance (Noise, Ocean Energy) and Area-based conservation (Marine Protected Areas). Many of the reporting points overlap with parallel reporting obligations to other institutions and conventions, such as the International Whaling Commission (IWC), HELCOM and OSPAR, the EU in relation to the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) and the Habitats Directive, as well as the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES). Since all ASCOBANS member states are members of IWC, HELCOM and/or OSPAR, as well as ICES and, with the exception of UK, EU, there is an evident opportunity to relieve some of the reporting burden by eliminating duplications. Meanwhile, importantly, proposals for slimming down the NR form must be delivered with consideration of potential limitations, risks and costs of relying on other institutions' data collection.

In a response to the wish to relieve the reporting burden, the 10th Meeting of the Parties (MOP10) of ASCOBANS decided to establish an Intersessional Working Group (IWG) to implement Work Plan Activity 68:
"Review overlaps in national reporting with other reporting obligations (e.g. MPAs to EMODNet, noise and bycatch to ICES) and identify if any topics in ASCOBANS National Reports can instead be accessed in such databases to avoid duplication of efforts." (ASCOBANS Resolution 10.2/Rev.1)
This report presents results of the review to identify overlaps of national reporting with other reporting obligations as well as streamlining opportunities and delivers recommendations to modify the ASCOBANS National Reporting form accordingly.

Review of National Reporting overlaps

The IWG invited all ASCOBANS member states to provide their input in identifying reporting overlaps and streamlining opportunities via ASCOBANS Advisory Committee (AC) 29, using a spreadsheet review form containing every ASCOBANS reporting point. Responses were provided by seven out of ten member states: Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom (Annex 2).

Many overlaps in reporting obligations were identified (106 / 148 reporting points), including with ICES, OSPAR, HELCOM; EU Habitats Directive reporting and MSFD and the IWC. However, it was evident that member states disagreed on how to handle overlaps. For 143/148 reporting points, at least one country had wished to maintain the ASCOBANS reporting regardless.

The review to identify overlaps with the intention to eliminate duplicate efforts resulted in five candidate reporting points to be deleted from the NR form. Four of these are duplicates within the NR form (Ocean Energy points 4.5-4.8 duplicated in points 4.9-4.12). The fifth point identified for deletion due to overlap is point 6.6 under recreational sea use. The overlap identified was with a review questionnaire question, however, so the IWG recommendation is therefore not to delete the point.

Importantly, it was underlined in the responses that many ASCOBANS reporting points are used directly for HELCOM-countries' reporting on HELCOM recommendation 17/2, which requires Baltic Sea states to give highest priority to avoiding harbour porpoise bycatch and to establish protected marine areas. The IWG has highlighted which points are used in this context for a holistic consideration of streamlining (Annex 2, column S).

Apart from identifying direct reporting overlaps, the respondents have identified a range of opportunities to streamline or rethink the NR form (see Annex 2, column F). Although much of this falls outside the (widened) scope of this IWG, the responses hold valuable information and represent efforts that should be consulted in any future revisit of the NR form. This report and annexes therefore present not only direct overlaps for deletion, but primarily some easily implementable streamlining opportunities that can relieve some of the reporting burden.

Direction from Jastarnia and NSG

Given the large range of responses and non-alignment on potential eliminations of reporting points between the member states, the IWG asked the Jastarnia and North Sea Group for direction in the review process. Especially, input was requested on the use of “living” or prefilled documents (see below) or check points (is data reported elsewhere? Then ASCOBANS reporting is not needed), as well as the most important reporting topics to streamline. The discussions at Jastarnia and NSG were collected and summarised using Mentimeter during the meeting. From the Mentimeter material it is evident that there was great support for the use of “living documents” to alleviate the reporting burden, while using check points received more opposition. Furthermore, important topics to streamline were identified as: bycatch, strandings, resource depletion and noise, although several believed no topics needed streamlining at all (Annex 3).

Recommendations

In summary, the recommended streamlining amendments (Annex 2, Annex 4) cover:

a) Four reporting points are identified for **deletion due to duplication** within the NR form.

b) Some NR sections benefit from **merging very similar questions** to achieve better overview and workflow for the respondent (e.g. under cetacean watching industry).

c) Many reporting points would only occasionally contain new information and would benefit from being pre-filled or “living documents”. In both cases the focus would shift to new information, instead of re-entering the same data every (reporting) year:

   - **Pre-filled reporting points** would contain the same text as previous reporting years, which could then be updated when relevant. This is most relevant for shorter statements, and questions that refer to existing systems or measures. This information generally doesn’t change a lot throughout years.

   - **Living documents** would be online documents per country, to be updated with new information when available. These could be linked to the NR form, instead of requiring efforts in each reporting cycle. This is most relevant for collations and longer lists of information that would take up a lot of space if kept in the NR form.

d) Bycatch, Resource depletion and Ocean Energy would strongly benefit from an in-depth review of NR points and assessment of data availability at other institutions

   - The IWG found that data is largely available at ICES, and OSPAR, EMODNet, etc. It should therefore closely be considered whether the type of data is within the remits of ASCOBANS to collect and who would be best suited to procure the data in these cases of (near) duplicates.

   - The relevant reporting topics could be altered to validating relevant existing database entries at other institutions and report potential gaps.

e) An earlier deadline of the NR would enable Jastarnia and NSG to discuss NR results.

f) The '**reporting period'** should cover all four years since the topics were last reported on. Alternatively, all topics could be reported on every year. Especially if the reporting burden is reduced with the suggestions above, this would become feasible. This would secure better (alignment in) data coverage.

g) Making the NR form an **online document** (e.g. on SharePoint) would alleviate some of the burden of the contact person collating information from national experts and authorities, since everyone could work in the same document in parallel.

List of annexes:

Annex 2 – Spreadsheet with collected input on streamlining from Parties
Annex 3 – Summary of input on direction from North Sea Group and Jastarnia Group
Annex 4 – Updated National Reporting form with track changes