

Guidance on interpreting the matrix

The generic matrix is a relatively simplistic assessment of the interaction of fishing gears and European marine site habitat and species interest features, according to the level of risk fishing gears pose to the conservation objectives of the interest features for which the site was classified.

It is completed at a generic level – that is at the subfeature and broad gear type level, which means it must account for all national variability in those habitat types and fishing activities. This results in the following limitations.

Habitats with limited or nil exposure

To ensure that the matrix is applicable nationally, any local variability must be included at the generic level. This means that any infrequent habitat and gear combinations occurring locally must still be represented by the appropriate categorisation according to sensitivity, to avoid precluding some impacts from the correct level of assessment. However, this may mean that conclusions in the matrix appear overly precautionary when considered for some regions where the gear is not operated on those habitats, specifically heavy towed gear is largely not used in the intertidal area. An additional consideration is that should these gears be used in the intertidal (or other areas), either by chance or on an exploratory basis, significant impacts would be expected, as a result of the sensitivity of the habitat.

To describe these locally, infrequently or currently not fished habitats better in the context of prioritising management, the following assumptions have been made:

- (i) categorisation must still reflect sensitivity (this is the intent of the matrix), irrespective of exposure (unless exposure is impossible and a blue category is assigned) and therefore habitats are assigned on this basis (largely as red)
- (ii) the text 'low or nil exposure' has been added to identify that, **unless local exposure is already occurring in which case habitat and gear combinations should be considered as with other red categorisations**, immediate management of these habitats is a lower priority, as interaction and therefore impacts are either not occurring or are very unlikely to occur.

Representing variability in impacts

The matrix's aim is to prioritise the most sensitive habitats by categorisation. However, as only four categories are used, it is difficult to fully describe, what is actually, a continuum in impact representatively. This results in these limitations:

- (i) The amber category is extremely broad and includes gear types which may be relatively high risk to features' conservation objectives (towed gear on mussel beds on mixed and sandy sediments) and those which are low risk (static gear on intertidal mixed sediments). This variation is not currently represented by the broad categorisation.
- (ii) As this exercise is intended to represent habitat sensitivity irrespective of site-specifics, any management considerations have not been incorporated. This means any categorisation does not consider the feasibility of achieving feature specific management, it is simply a recommendation based on sensitivity.