ERSWG Chair's report on outcomes from the 16th meeting of the ERSWG, March, 2026 (EC Agenda item 9.2)

1. Introduction

The 16th meeting of the Ecologically Related Species Working Group was held from 3 to 6 March 2026 as a hybrid meeting. Australia provided funding to run the hybrid meeting when budgetary constraints put the meeting at risk, and I am very grateful for that generosity. Australia, Indonesia, Japan, New Zealand, Fishing Entity of Taiwan, the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP), BirdLife International (BLI), and Humane World for Animals (HWA), together with the ERSWG Chair, the CCSBT secretariat and the CCSBT Seabird Project Manager, attended the meeting in person in Canberra. Korea, South Africa, other Observers and the interpreters attended online, together with some delegates from Members represented in person.

This was the first time that the ERSWG has been held as a hybrid meeting, although the ERS-Tech has been successfully run using hybrid approaches in recent years. The format is especially challenging for online participants and interpreters and requires diligence by both the Chair and in-person participants to ensure meaningful engagement by all participants. I believe the approach can work, although in-person meetings are easier and more productive, especially if the material under consideration is very technical.

ERSWG16 covered all standing agenda items but focused strongly on next steps and potential management responses following the EC's adoption of the finalised CCSBT 2025 **S**patially **E**xplicit **F**isheries **R**isk **A**ssessment (SEFRA) for seabirds and request for advice on potential management actions. Work also started on reviewing progress against other objectives of the Multi-Year Seabird Strategy and the complementary ERS Bycatch Strategy, and building a work program to help deliver on those strategies.

2. Summary of outcomes from ERSWG16

A detailed summary of the outcomes from ERSWG16 and its advice to the EC is included in the agreed report from the meeting (CCSBT-EC/2610/Rep04). I will highlight here what I consider to be the key outcomes from the ERSWG, especially those relating to a potential management response to the 2025 seabird SEFRA.

2.1 Key agreements stemming from Actions in the Multi-Year Seabird Strategy

Action 1A: To agree on a SBT seabird bycatch target for reducing the level of impact of SBT fishing operations on seabird populations, including, but not limited to: a. Targets based on nominal reported seabird bycatch rates. b. Targets based on SEFRA outputs.

ERSWG16 Outcome

ERSWG agreed that relative mortality for each seabird population (as estimated using a SEFRA model like that finalised in 2025) should be reduced, so that the median is less than 0.10 and the upper bound of the 95% confidence interval is less than 0.50.

Action 1D: Agree on the list of priority species and corresponding management targets, taking into account the status of seabird population, distributional overlaps with SBT fisheries, and significance of SBT fisheries in their mortality

ERSWG16 Outcome

Thirteen species of seabirds were assessed as having relative mortality with a median or upper 95% C.I. of 0.1 or 0.5, respectively, from contributing CCSBT member pelagic longline fisheries. ERSWG agreed that these should be considered as priority species. Within this group, the four species at highest risk, Gibson's, Amsterdam, Tristan, and sooty albatrosses, had the largest effect on the overall risk surface for priority species.

Action 1C: Evaluate the effectiveness of the seabird CMMs introduced around 2005 by tuna RFMOs, in the context of reducing the overall seabird mortalities, taking into consideration fleet differences and seabird distributions and identify the areas for improvement. The outcomes from the evaluation will be communicated across tuna RFMOs and used as a basis for future evaluations.

ERSWG16 Outcome

In conjunction with all other threats and risks to seabird populations, despite the seabird CMMs in place for tuna RFMOs, many seabird taxa are still threatened with extinction, declining, and still subject to significant bycatch in pelagic longline fisheries. In that context, although those CMMs may have been effective at reducing seabird bycatch, they have not resulted in the recovery of such populations. This is partly because any reduction in overall seabird bycatch rate has not necessarily resulted in sufficient reduction of the bycatch of species of concern. ERSWG believes that the focused effort of monitoring and reducing bycatch in the high-risk areas identified with SEFRA, using available methods that are well understood, practical, and have minimal impact on target species catch, would be more effective and that improvements over time can be tracked using periodic SEFRA analyses estimating catchability and risk over different time blocks.

Action 1F: Establish a robust definition of high-risk areas that takes into account the precautionary approach by:

a. Establishing a definition of high-risk areas.
b. Identifying areas that meet the definition.
c. Characterising the nature of the risk in each area.
d. Developing tailored measures aimed at reducing those risks.

ERSWG16 Outcome

a) ERSWG agreed that high risk areas could be robustly established by identifying the 5x5 degree squares that contained 50, 60 or 70% of the total risk posed to priority species by contributing CCSBT member pelagic longline fisheries.

b) Such areas can readily be mapped using outputs from the 2025 SEFRA and appear in the Tasman Sea (where Gibson's albatross are caught), Indian Ocean (Amsterdam albatross) and South Atlantic (Tristan and sooty albatross).

2.1 Management advice on seabirds

The ERSWG agreed in 2026 that its previous advice (from ERSWG15 in 2024) on seabirds remains relevant but it builds on that advice this year following the EC's adoption of the 2025 SEFRA. Key advice points from ERSWG15 and ERSWG16 are repeated here.

2.1.1. ERSWG15 advice on seabirds

- The level of interaction between seabirds and SBT fisheries remains a significant concern.
- The ERSWG noted that the most recent version of the SEFRA indicates that Wandering and Royal Albatross species groups are at high-risk. Species in these groups are of high conservation concern and ACAP indicated that some populations are in sharp decline.
- The SEFRA indicates areas with higher risk in some parts of the Tasman Sea (especially), Southern Atlantic, and Southern Indian Ocean. These areas account for a large proportion of the modelled risk to seabirds from SBT surface longline fisheries, but contain a very small proportion of SBT surface longline fishing effort.
- Based on the best scientific information available, the ERSWG recommends that CCSBT Members consider taking further actions that would ensure robust seabird mitigation measures and effective monitoring of implementation of the mitigation measures, whilst minimising impacts on SBT surface longline fisheries effort.

2.1.2. ERSWG16 advice on seabirds

The ERSWG recommends that the EC:

1. Decide seabird priority species and high-risk areas on seabird bycatch within CCSBT fisheries based on the recommendations and advice from ERSWG (see Attachment 4 of ERSWG16's report);
2. Adopt additional measures to address high-risk areas of seabird bycatch using the toolbox specified in paragraph 65 [1] of [ERSWG16's meeting report] to better understand and reduce risk to seabirds in identified high-risk areas;
3. Support a phasing in approach over time and over areas (accounting for risk level in each area) and progress from better understanding risk to reducing risk over time and ideally aligning timeframes across Members;
4. Establish a process to annually notify Member commitment to a seabird bycatch mitigation plan in identified high-risk areas to the Secretariat starting reporting in 2027, including timeframes for implementation;
5. Add a standing Agenda Item for future CC and ERSWG meetings from 2027 on Members' seabird bycatch mitigation plan in high-risk areas;
7. Confirm resources to lead the review of the Multi-Year Seabird Strategy, which is due at the next meeting of the ERSWG;
8. Hold [an] ERS Tech meeting in March 2027 focusing on the review of the Multi-Year Seabird Strategy as an online meeting, unless the EC raises issues with the ERSWG's recommendations on seabirds, in which case an in-person or hybrid meeting may be required;

[1] ERSWG16's advice to the EC (para 129 of its report) refers to "*the toolbox in para 64 of this report*" but the suggested toolbox of management options is actually specified in para 65. The three broad options in the toolbox for high-risk areas are: improving monitoring requirements; reducing effort; and/or enhancing mitigation measures. Details can be found in para 65 of ERSWG16's report.

9. Discuss the persistent non-compliance issue of Members with seabird mitigation measures in the context of the recommendations of the ERSWG regarding the need to reduce seabird bycatch.

2.1.3 Implementation of seabird mitigation measures

In the context of the above management advice on seabirds, especially point 9, and the need to reduce bycatch, it is disappointing to note the continued non-compliance of some Members with mandatory seabird mitigation measures required by the Resolution to align CCSBT's Ecologically Related Species measures with those of other tuna RFMOs. Between 2014 and 2022, averaged across all Members' fishing, 14% of effort deployed only a single or no mitigation measure, compared with the two mandated. This will undoubtedly have increased the risk of seabird bycatch compared with what would have been possible for a fully-compliant fleet.

2.2 Management advice on other ERS

No papers on sharks were considered by ERSWG16 and no specific or additional concerns about shark bycatch were raised. Members agreed that other tuna RFMOs are best-placed to progress future shark stock or risk assessments.

No papers on sea turtles were considered but CCSBT currently implements sea turtle mitigation through alignment with ERS measures of other tuna RFMOs and determining the adequacy of these measures depends on the outcomes of risk assessments. Previous data-limited assessments by IOTC and ICCAT highlighted gaps in interaction data that still persist.

Reporting interactions with marine mammals via the ERS data exchange is not mandatory so the level of interactions with marine mammals is currently not well documented. Members agreed to add marine mammals to the requirements of the ERS data exchange (point 6 of the ERSWG16's recommendation to the EC).

2.3 Work program, including agenda for ERS-Tech in 2027

Based on its discussions and agreements, ERSWG16 developed a work program which is shown in para 124 of its report.

Two key items, from my perspective, are the format, timing and agenda for the next ERS Tech meeting, and ensuring resources and leadership for the review of the Multi-Year Seabird Strategy.

3. Request to the EC from the ERSWG Chair

The ERSWG Chair notes that the EC asked the ERSWG (para 131 of CCSBT32's report) to consider the outcomes of the 2025 SEFRA assessment and potential management actions. This work has now been completed and is summarised in the recommendations from ERSWG16 (supported by substantial detail in Attachment 4 to ERSWG16's report). The ERSWG Chair now requests that the EC considers those recommendations, the key points being:

- Decide seabird priority species and high-risk areas for seabird bycatch within CCSBT fisheries;
- Adopt additional measures to address high-risk areas of seabird bycatch using the toolbox specified in paragraph 65 of ERSWG16's meeting report;
- Adopt a phasing-in approach over time and over areas to progress from better understanding risk to reducing risk, ideally aligning timeframes across Members;
- Establish a process to annually notify Member commitment to a seabird bycatch mitigation plan in identified high-risk areas to the Secretariat, starting reporting in 2027 including timeframes for implementation and at least one of the three management options; this could include a new section of the annual report reviewed by ERSWG and the Compliance Committee (CC) as appropriate, and added as new agenda items in ERSWG and CC meetings.

The ERSWG Chair also requests that the EC considers the proposed work program for ERSWG, including especially:

- resources to lead the review of the Multi-Year Seabird Strategy, which is due at the next meeting of the ERSWG in 2028;
- an online meeting[2] of ERS Tech in March 2027 focusing on the review of the Multi-Year Seabird Strategy.

Prepared by ERSWG Chair

[2] An online meeting of ERS-Tech should be sufficient unless the EC raises issues with ERSWG16's recommendations on seabirds, in which case an in-person or hybrid meeting may be required