

Maritime Usage Licensing and Planning Advisory Directorate			
Maritime Usage Licence Assessment Report			
To:	John Evans, Director	From:	Dr. Alison McCarthy Senior Marine Advisor
Date:	28/04/2026	Maritime Usage Licence Application No:	MUL260002
Applicant:	University College Cork, MaREI Centre, Sustainability Institute, Beaufort Building, Ringaskiddy, Cork, P43C573		
Licence application received:	12/01/2026		
Types of maritime usage activities in accordance with Schedule 7 of the Maritime Area Planning Act 2021:	<i>Schedule 7(2). Marine environmental surveys for the purposes of scientific discovery or research</i>		
Location of proposed maritime usages:	Cork Harbour		
Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Screening	EIA not required (EIA Screening Form dated 24/04/2026)		
Request for additional information (RAI) issued:	none	Response to RAI received	n/a
Notice requesting Natura Impact Statement (NIS) issued:	n/a	NIS received:	n/a
Public body consultation:	06/03/2026– 08/04/2026	Observations from public bodies received:	Eight
Public consultation:	n/a	Submissions from the public received:	n/a

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1. Background

University College Cork (the applicant) has applied to the Maritime Area Regulatory Authority (MARA) for a Maritime Usage Licence (MUL) to undertake marine environmental surveys for the purposes of scientific discovery or research, falling under Schedule 7(2) of the Maritime Area Planning Act 2021 (the MAP Act). The proposed maritime usage will enable the UCC research project titled CABLES: Capturing eAsmobranch Behaviour in eLEctromagnetic fieldS. The project will investigate the effect of an electromagnetic field (EMF) from an existing buried high voltage cable on a sensitive elasmobranch species; the lesser spotted catshark (*Scyliorhinus canicula*).

2. Location and Description of the Proposed Maritime Usage

A description of the proposed maritime usage is shown on Table 1.

Table 1: Description of proposed maritime usage

Details of the enclosure	Research activity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 No. nylon mesh enclosures each 50 m x 15 m x 5 m (40 mm mesh size). • Mooring system composed of 4 x 200 kg of scrape chain with 12 mm polysteel rope. • Four lighted navigation buoys. • 6 No. acoustic receivers (hydrophones) moored on plastic pole embedded in an ~80 kg concrete block outside the perimeter of the enclosure. • Total MUL area is 52,400 m². 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Movement and behaviour of lesser spotted catshark will be tracked within the monitored enclosure under EMF exposed (i.e., treatment) and non-EMF exposed (i.e., control) conditions. • EMF exposed enclosure will lie on top of an existing buried high voltage AC cable, and the control enclosure will be removed from the cable and EMF. • Catshark tagged with acoustic transmitter (180 kHz) and fish transmitters and receiver sync tags emit coded pulses at 143 decibels. • 7 metre rigid inflatable boat will be used to monitor the enclosure daily.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A charter vessel with a HIAB crane and hauler will be used for all deployment and recovery activity* • Structure and moorings will be completely removed after the study* 	<p>Proposed MUL duration is 2 years:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 months to deploy enclosures • 12 months to carry out tracking experiments • 9 months contingency in case of weather and/or other challenges • 1-2 days for removal

*The purpose of the application is marine environmental surveys for the purposes of research. The deposit and removal of the enclosure are ancillary usages, though their potential impacts are considered as part of this assessment.

2.1 Brief description of site characteristics

The proposed MUL area is in the northeast portion of Cork Harbour (Figure 1), within the Water Framework Directive Cork Harbour coastal waterbody. The seabed of the proposed MUL area is composed of coarse soft sediments with a depth range of 2.5–6 m, depending on the tidal cycle.



Figure 1: Proposed MUL area, shown in red (applicant’s map)

3. Assessment

In assessing a MUL application, MARA must have regard to Section 6(8) of the Marine Planning Policy Statement (MPPS) and the legislation and policy set out in Section 121(2) of the MAP Act, as discussed in this section.

3.1 National Marine Planning Framework (NMPF)

The MPPS outlines the government's overarching vision, policies, and principles for managing the country's maritime area. MARA must have regard to the NMPF, which sets the framework for implementing the forward planning component of our marine planning system as set out in the MPPS. The applicant notes that this research application aligns with the Environment – Ocean Health policies of the NMPF relating to biodiversity, seafloor and water column integrity. In line with the Energy – Offshore Renewable policies of the NMPF, an enhanced knowledge of electromagnetic field (EMF) effects will further robust and evidence-based decision making to the plan-led approach to Offshore Renewable Energy (ORE).

Underwater Cultural Heritage.

The NMPF includes a policy on Heritage Assets, which supports the conservation of the historic environment and heritage assets both along the coast and in the underwater environment. The policy notes that proposals not specifically contributing to enhancing cultural heritage assets must demonstrate that they avoid, minimise or mitigate against harm to heritage assets. The applicant notes that there are no historical wrecks or archaeological features in the proposed MUL area. Nonetheless, it is recommended that the holder of the licence, if granted, should consult with the National Monuments Service prior to the commencement of the maritime usage and to comply with any requirements they may have (see recommended condition in the Proposed Licence).

3.2 Environmental Impact Assessment Directive (2014/52/EU) (EIA Directive)

MARA carried out a screening for EIA of the proposed maritime usage considering Schedules 5 and 7 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001. An EIA Screening Form was issued by MARA on 24/04/2026 and it was concluded that the proposed activities do not fall within the scope of the EIA Directive and therefore an EIA is not required.

3.3 National Biodiversity Action Plan (NBAP)

Ireland's 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan sets the national biodiversity agenda for the period 2023–2030. The objectives of the NBAP focus on the conservation and restoration of biodiversity. Objective 2 of the NBAP is to meet urgent conservation and restoration needs. Part of its focus is to elevate efforts to tackle invasive alien species. A condition is recommended in the Proposed Licence (PL) to address the potential risks from invasive alien species as a result of the proposed activities. About 30 individual lesser spotted catfish (*Scyliorhinus canicula*) will be required over the duration of the proposed maritime usage. This species is not listed as a threatened species in Ireland. It is common in Irish coastal waters and was listed as a species of least concern on Ireland's 2016 Red List No. 11 for Cartilaginous fish (sharks, skates, rays and chimaeras).

3.4 Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, as amended

Section 15(1) of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, as amended (the 'Climate Act') requires relevant bodies, including MARA, to perform their functions in so far as practicable in a manner consistent with the governance framework set out therein. No significant increases in carbon emissions are expected to be produced as a result of the proposed maritime usage.

3.5 Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC)

The Water Framework Directive (WFD) requires EU member states to protect and improve water quality in all waters to achieve at least good ecological status in inland surface waters, transitional waters, coastal waters and groundwater by 2027, at the latest. The ecological status of coastal waterbodies is based on the assessment of biological quality elements

(phytoplankton, benthic invertebrates, macroalgae, angiosperms) as well as supporting chemical (specific pollutants), physico-chemical (e.g. temperature, salinity, nutrients) and hydromorphological quality elements. The proposed MUL area is within the WFD Cork Harbour coastal waterbody (IE_SW_060_0000) which is classed as of ‘good’ ecological status but ‘at risk’ of not maintaining this status. The significant pressures identified on this waterbody are from nutrient and organic enrichment from urban run-off and urban waste water. Due to the scale and nature of the proposed maritime usage there will not be an impact on the biological quality elements or other supporting quality elements in the Cork Harbour waterbody. Any sediment, benthic invertebrate or fish disturbance will be minor in nature and the proposed enclosure will not cause hydromorphological changes. To ensure water quality is not impacted from vessels, a condition is recommended in the licence, if granted, to ensure vessels conform to Irish Certification Standards, as required by the Marine Survey Office.

3.6 Marine Strategy Framework Directive (2008/56/EC)

The Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) sets the framework for European marine environmental policy. It aims to achieve Good Environmental Status (GES) for all marine waters in Europe and protect the resource base for marine related economic and social activities. Ireland’s 2024 assessment¹ under Article 8 of the MSFD sets out the status of the 11 qualitative descriptors that describe the state of the marine environment. Table 4 sets out the status of the relevant descriptors and assesses the potential impacts of the proposed activities.

Table 2: Assessment of impact of proposed activities on MSFD descriptors

MFSD Descriptor	Good Environmental Status achieved	Assessment
Biological diversity	Partially achieved	<p>The proposed maritime usage will not negatively affect biological diversity. The research project aims to improve the understanding of impacts on marine biodiversity from electromagnetic fields.</p> <p>MARA has undertaken a screening for Appropriate Assessment in respect to the proposed maritime usage (see Section AA Screening Report and Determination) and concluded that stage 2 AA was not required. About 30 individual lesser spotted catfish (<i>Scyliorhinus canicula</i>) will be required over the duration of the proposed maritime usage. This species is common in Irish coastal waters and was listed as a species of least concern on Ireland’s Red</p>

¹ [Ireland’s Marine Strategy Part 1: Article 8, 9 and 10 report 2024.](#)

		List No. 11 for Cartilaginous fish (sharks, skates, rays and chimaeras). The enclosure is composed of thick nylon mesh, sized to trap cat sharks and not to entangle other marine species.
Non-indigenous species	Yes	To ensure that the proposed activities will not result in the unintended introduction of non-indigenous species, a condition is recommended in the licence, if granted, relating to the control of invasive species.
Population of commercial fish/shellfish	Partially achieved	<p>This assessment of GES is based on whether stocks are being fished at or below the maximum sustainable yield (MSY) and whether spawning stock biomass is above the level that can produce MSY.</p> <p>In terms of commercial fisheries, the proposed MUL area is within extensive cod, herring, horse mackerel and mackerel nursery grounds and whiting spawning and nursery grounds. Commercial fisheries for crustaceans occur in the vicinity of the proposed MUL area with year-round pot fishing for crab and lobster and shrimp potting occurring primarily during August to October. The proposed MUL area overlaps a Fisheries Order area (T05-002OFO) for blue mussel and is approximately 2.5 km west of a licensed aquaculture site for blue mussels and a designated Shellfish Area at Rostellan.</p> <p>Fish spawning and nursery grounds have the potential to be impacted by changes in habitat conditions. Contaminants, litter, non-indigenous species, pathogens can all impact on fish and shellfish fisheries. The nature of the proposed maritime usage means it is unlikely to affect spawning stock biomass of commercial fisheries or aquaculture sites. The enclosure will result in only minor and localised habitat disturbance. Contaminants or pathogens will not be introduced by the proposed maritime usage. Conditions are recommended in the licence, if granted relating to non-indigenous fish. Marine litter is discussed below.</p>
Marine food webs	Unclear	The balance and diversity in marine food webs is not expected be impacted as a result of the proposed maritime usage.
Eutrophication	Yes	The proposed maritime usage will not involve the addition of nutrients to the marine environment and as such will not impact this descriptor achieving GES.
Sea-floor integrity	Partially achieved	The seabed habitat in the proposed MUL area will experience only minor disturbance due to the

		placement of the enclosure and associated moorings. It is not expected that the proposed activities will negatively impact on the GES status of this descriptor.
Alteration of hydrographical conditions	Yes	The proposed activities will not alter the hydrographical conditions (e.g. changes in wave action, currents, salinity, temperature) in the proposed MUL area. There will be no impact on the GES status of this descriptor.
Concentrations of contaminants	Yes	GES has been largely achieved for concentrations of most contaminants in seawater, sediments and biota in Irish coastal and marine waters. Although it is unlikely that there would be any accidental pollution from the vessels associated with the proposed maritime usage, it is recommended to include a condition in the licence, if granted, relating to Irish Certification Standards for vessels, as required by the Marine Survey Office.
Contaminants in fish/seafood for human consumption	Yes	As above, the proposed maritime usage will not involve the addition of contaminants to the marine environment and as such will not impact this descriptor achieving GES.
Marine Litter	No	The Proposed Licence, if granted, includes general condition requiring the holder to remove all plant and equipment associated with the proposed activities and to restore the MUL area to its original condition. Therefore, the proposed maritime usage will not result in the introduction of marine litter to the marine environment and thus will not impact on the achievement of GES status of this descriptor.
Introduction of energy including underwater noise	Yes	The fish transmitter (180 kHz) will emit a coded pulse every 2 seconds. The receivers emit coded pulses every 25-330 seconds at 143 dB. The sound produced is above the hearing range of diving birds as well as fish, invertebrates and most marine mammals. Harbour porpoise are capable of hearing the sound but it is at the highest end of their hearing range and the intensity is below that which would induce threshold shifts. Thus, the introduction of energy including underwater noise from the proposed maritime usage will not impact on this descriptor.

3.7 Annex IV species

Articles 12 and 13 of the Habitats Directive (92/43/EC) impose obligations on Member States to establish a system of strict protection for animal and plant species listed on Annex IV of the Directive. The applicant submitted an Annex IV Risk Assessment in support of the application. Potential impacts on Annex IV species were identified to include vessel presence, sound production and entanglement from the enclosure netting.

The proposed maritime usage will involve very minimal vessel increases in relation to the background environment of Cork Harbour and vessel movements will be slow. The sound produced by the acoustic receivers will be 180 kHz at 143 dB. This is above the hearing range of most marine mammals. Harbour porpoise are capable of hearing the sound, but it is at the highest end of their hearing range and the intensity is below that which would induce threshold shifts. It is unlikely that marine mammals would be attracted to the enclosure in search of prey, as there will be only one catshark in the enclosure at a time. As noted by the applicant, the enclosure netting is static and under horizontal tension, and the mooring system will restrict enclosure movement, thereby further mitigating the risk of entanglement.

The applicant states that a derogation licence from the National Parks and Wildlife Service under Regulation 54 of the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011, as amended is not required.

3.8 Appropriate Assessment Screening

The Habitats Directive (92/43/EC) and the Birds Directive (2009/147/EC) are transposed into Irish law by the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011, as amended (the Regulations) and by Part XAB of the Planning and Development Act 2000. The application was subject to screening for appropriate assessment (AA) by MARA in accordance with the Regulations. MARA made an Appropriate Assessment (AA) Screening Determination on 24/04/2026 which concluded that the proposed maritime usage will not require Stage 2 AA as it could be excluded, on the basis of objective scientific information, that the proposed project, either individually or in-combination with other plans or projects, will have a significant effect on European sites.

4. Consideration of other maritime users

MARA has had regard to the rights of other users as set out in Section 3 (3)(b) of the MAP Act. Commercial fisheries may occur in the area including pot fishing for crab, lobster and shrimp. The proposed MUL area overlaps a Fisheries Order area (T05-002OFO) for blue mussel and is approximately 2.5 km west of a licensed aquaculture site. The proposed MUL area is outside of the main navigation channel in Cork Harbour, though recreational activities are likely to

occur in the area. The proposed MUL area is approximately 3 km east of the Haulbowline Naval Base.

To ensure minimal disruption to other users, conditions are recommended to be included in the licence, if granted. These include consulting with the Port of Cork Company prior to the commencement of the proposed activities and the publication of a Marine Notice in advance of the maritime usage, in consultation with the Marine Safety Policy Division of the Department of Transport. A condition is recommended to ensure there is no damage or interference with third party property while undertaking the proposed activities. The onus is on the holder of any licence granted to ensure that all other statutory obligations or requirements under any other Law are obtained prior to the commencement of the maritime usage. This includes any Statutory Consents required by the Commissioner for Irish Lights for marking or lighting moored buoys or Aids to Navigation.

5. Site visit

No site visit was undertaken, though site visits for other MUL applications in the vicinity of the proposed MUL area were undertaken and have informed this assessment.

6. Public body consultation

Observations on the MUL application were invited from relevant public bodies to ensure that MARA takes account of all other relevant maritime usages and interests in the proposed MUL area. Eight responses were received. The following tables summarise the observations from public bodies with a response given below each submission summary. The MARA website should be consulted to view the full details of the observations received.

<p>1. Observations summary – National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) of Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage</p>
<p>The NPWS submitted observations on 08/04/2026 noting the Supporting Information for Screening for Appropriate Assessment report submitted by the applicant. The NPWS concurred that the project does not require Stage 2 Appropriate Assessment.</p>

MARA Response:

The observations of the NPWS are noted. MARA issued an Appropriate Assessment Screening Report and Determination on 24/04/2026 and concluded that Stage 2 AA was not required.

<p>2. Observations summary – Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM)</p>
<p>Observations were received on 23/03/2026 from BIM, noting that the proposed MUL area overlaps with a blue mussel fishery order area (T05-002OFO) and is approximately 2 km from an active aquaculture site (T05-522B) which is located in Rostellen shellfish waters. BIM note</p>

that the proposed MUL area and proposed activities will be small and there is likely to be no significant impact on aquaculture and fisheries activity, but that notification to aquaculture producers and fishers should occur using the Irish Fleet Register.

MARA response:

MARA notes the observations of BIM. Conditions are recommended in the licence, if granted, regarding consultation with the Port of Cork Company regarding scheduling and planning of the proposed activities and consulting with the Marine Survey Office of the Department of Transport regarding a Marine Notice, prior to the commencement of the maritime usage.

3. Observations summary – Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI)

Inland Fisheries Ireland responded on 26/03/2026 that they had no comment on the application.

MARA response:

MARA notes the observation from IFI.

4. Observations summary – Marine Institute (MI)

Observations were received on 16/03/2026 from the MI, noting the following;

- The size of the proposal relative to the scale of Cork Harbour means it is unlikely to affect any fish populations, spawning or nursery grounds. The enclosure is not located on any known herring spawning areas,
- Some commercial fisheries for small pelagic species such as herring and sprat take place within Cork Harbour however the shallow depth at which the enclosure will be placed makes it unlikely that fishing would occur in this location,
- Inshore pot fishing for crab and lobster occurs in Cork Harbour, as well as recreational angling, however given the relatively small size of the structure it is unlikely to interfere with these activities,
- The proposed MUL area is within a Fisheries Order area for oysters and there are aquaculture licenses on the east side of Cork Harbour for mussel farming.

MARA response:

MARA notes the observations from the MI and that the proposed maritime usage is unlikely to impact on commercial fisheries and that it overlaps with a Fisheries Order area for oysters. Impacts on aquaculture and fisheries are discussed in Section 3.6 of this report and consideration of other users are discussed in Section 4.

5. Observations summary – Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and the Marine (DAFM)

Observations were received on 07/04/2026 from the Marine Divisions of DAFM. The DAFM response attached the BIM response of 23/03/2026 and the MI response of 16/03/2026 to their submission and those observations have already been discussed in this section.

DAFM noted the following:

- The importance of sea fishing and aquaculture as reflected in Government’s Food Vision 2030 policy and BIM’s Business of Seafood 2024 report,
- The evaluation of potential impacts of the proposal on commercial fisheries needs to be considered in the context of the MAP Act and the NMPF. The NMPF principles of avoiding, minimising or mitigating impacts should be followed to maximize co-existence with other users,
- Pot fishing can occur in the vicinity of the proposed works and Vessel Monitoring Data may not be available for smaller vessels (<12 m in length),
- Local fishing organisations should be included in the provision of any Notices to Mariners.

MARA response:

MARA notes the observations from the Marine Divisions of DAFM. Section 3.1 of this report discusses the NMPF. Impacts on aquaculture and fisheries are discussed in Section 3.6 of this report and consideration of other users are discussed in Section 4. Conditions to the avoid disruption of other users are recommended in the licence, if granted, including publication of a Marine Notice and consultation with the Port of Cork Company.

6. Observations summary – Commissioners of Irish Lights (CIL)

Observations were received on 09/04/2026 from CIL, as follows:

- The dimensions of the proposed enclosure were noted as well as the proposed moorings.
- At low tide the enclosure would be visible by day and would not pose a hazard to navigation but at higher tides and during darkness it could present a hazard to navigation.
- Although the proposed enclosure is outside of the main navigational channel, the available water depth would allow for surface navigation and thus the structure and moorings will require marking with IALA standard Special Mark buoys, with lights to mark the site during darkness.
- A Statutory Consent will be required under the Merchant Shipping Act in advance of the works. It is recommended that Eirgrid (who installed the power cable) would act as the Local Lighthouse Authority (LLA) for submission of the statutory consent application to CIL.

MARA response:

MARA notes the observations of CIL in relation to a Statutory Consent. The Holder of the licence, if granted, must ensure that all other statutory obligations or requirements under any

other Law are obtained prior to the commencement of the maritime usage. This includes any Statutory Consents required by CIL.

7. Observations summary – Marine Survey Office (MSO), Department of Transport
<p>Observations were received on 24/03/2026 from the MSO, with no objection to the proposed application noting the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Local Marine Notice will be required via the Port of Cork; • Any hazards to safe navigation shall be easily identifiable to all maritime users in the area; • Consultation with CIL and the MSO is required for the marking and lighting of moored instruments, which also must be compliant with the International Association of Aids to Navigation (IALA) requirements; • All vessels must conform to Irish Certification Standards and must be manned by suitably qualified personnel. Contact should be made with the MSO in this regard, and • The UK Hydrographic Office should be informed of the proposed activities in advance, and any bathymetry data should be submitted to them and INFOMAR so that charts can be updated.

MARA response:

MARA notes the observations of the MSO. Conditions are recommended to be included in the licence, if granted, regarding consultation with the Port of Cork Company and also with the MSO regarding Marine Notices. The onus is on the Holder of any licence granted to ensure that all Statutory Consents are in place from CIL prior to the commencement of the maritime usage. The proposed maritime usage does not involve the collection of bathymetry data.

8. Observations summary – Geological Survey of Ireland (GSI)
<p>Observations were received on 24/04/2026 from the GSI which recommended the use of numerous GSI datasets when conducting EIAR, SEA, planning and scoping processes for developments, plans and policies. The GSI also noted the availability of INFOMAR data such as bathymetry, backscatter, sediment classification, shipwrecks and survey metadata which can be downloaded free of charge. The GSI also noted that data from the ObSERVE Programme is also available with information on aerial and acoustic surveys on marine megafauna, including cetaceans, seabirds and other protected species.</p>

MARA response:

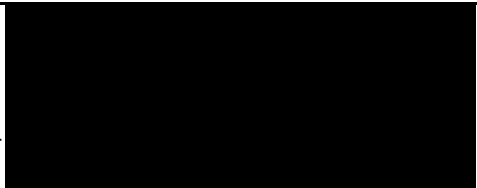
MARA notes the observations from the GIS regarding the availability of datasets.

7. Public consultation

Public consultation was not required under section 117(6) of the MAP Act as part of this application.

8. Recommendation

Having considered the information submitted in support of the application, I recommend that a Maritime Usage Licence in accordance with Section 119 of the Maritime Area Planning Act, 2021, as amended, be granted to University College Cork, MaREI Centre, Sustainability Institute, Beaufort Building, Ringaskiddy, Cork, P43C573, for the purposes of *Marine environmental surveys for the purposes of scientific discovery or research* (Schedule 7(2)), subject to the conditions in the Proposed Licence and for a two year period.

Signed:	
Prepared by:	Senior Marine Advisor
Date:	28/04/2026

9. Approval

Having considered this report, the documents submitted by the applicant and the observations received on foot of the public body consultation on the application, I approve and concur with the recommendations set out in this report.

Signed:	
Approved by:	John Evans Director of Maritime Usage Licensing
Date:	29/04/2026