
Changes to fishing opportunities framework in 2025

1 Purpose

To update MIRIA on the ACOM discussion and conclusion around the feasibility of introducing transition rules when there are large changes in advice.

To inform MIRIA about some technical changes the Advice Rules for category 2 and 3 stocks that will be introduced in 2025.

To reiterate that ACOM will discuss the “Advice Rule” for stocks below B_{lim} in March and this may lead to a change in approach impacting on fishing opportunities advice for 2026.

2 Background on transition rules

In recent years there have been a number of stocks for which a significant change in advice has been made following a benchmark. This may also occur, for example, when natural mortality assumptions are updated, when errors to the data and/or models are detected and fixed, when stock categories or reference points are changed. This issue has been raised by ACOM members, ICES Council, MIRIA and MIACO, who have all flagged that the lack of consistency in ICES advice greatly impacts on the credibility of ICES advice.

Comparison are sometimes made with category 3 stocks where ICES uses a stability clause in the advice rule (e.g. maximum advice change of -30% to +20%). The situation with category 1 & 2 stocks and category 3 is often quite different. Category 3 assessments are based on limited data which requires more precaution and the stability clauses are included as part of the Harvest Control Rules (HCRs) which have been tested for precaution. Category 1 and 2 assessments are data rich and should be of sufficient quality to track stock dynamics and forecast stock development more accurately.

At its September 2024 meeting, ACOM was asked whether there should be transition rules or constraints for advice when there are major changes and how these should be communicated. A subgroup was established to discuss the issue and reported back to ACOM at its December 2024 meeting, where ACOM discussed the topic again.

The difficulties that such changes cause for managers and stakeholders was recognized by ACOM, as was the impact on the perception of ICES credibility. However, all changes made to the stock assessment during a benchmark or other process are peer reviewed and are considered by ICES as the best available science. A transition rule that limits the amount of change is a constraint on the deviation of the advice from the old model. This suggests that ICES is not confident in the new/revised assessment, and it is considered as a violation of our principle to use the best available science.

Further, there are many possible transition rules, the choice of which, is a management decision involving trade-offs. Rules proposed by requesters (e.g.

TAC constraints) could be tested by management strategy evaluation (MSE) but ACOM does not consider it the purview of ICES to set these rules if those are not part of the HCR and not tested by an MSE.

3 ACOM conclusions on transition rules

Following its discussion ACOM agreed that it would not adopt transition rules for category 1 and 2 stocks.

ACOM further agreed that it is important to improve communications around large changes in advice.

- The recent move to give an ‘early warning’ to requesters of potential large changes in advice will continue.
- Efforts to make requesters and stakeholders more aware of upcoming and ongoing benchmarks will also be continued.
- Advice sheets already contain a section on the reason for change in advice in the catch scenarios section. ICES will continue to improve and expand this section in cases where the advice change is large giving more detail on the reasons for the change. Including these details in the advice sheet will aid ICES in its dialogue with requesters and stakeholders.

4 Technical changes to Advice Rules for category 2 & 3 stocks

The rules for category 2 and 3 stocks are regularly evaluated by WKLIFE and updated if necessary. ICES will shortly publish Version 3 of the Guidance for harvest control rules and stock assessments for stocks in categories 2 and 3 ([ICES, 2024](#)).

Changes are being made to the application of F_{msy} in SPiCT in some cases and to advice when biomass indices are very low.

For most stocks using SPiCT the 35th percentile of the probability distribution of F_{msy} is used in the provision of advice. For stocks of species that are more vulnerable to fishing pressure, for example characterized by slow growth and late maturation (e.g. elasmobranchs and many deep-sea species), a more precautionary rule with a lower percentile of the catch distribution, the 15th percentile, will be used to be robust to the high risk.

For CHR, rb and rfb rules: these rules cannot technically produce zero catch advice. If the biomass index is very low, below any reasonable B_{lim} , then zero catch advice should be given and this possibility has now been included in the guidelines.

For the rb and rfb rules the average of recent catches can be used as the basis of advice in the first year of non-zero advice when zero advice has been given previously and the biomass index has shown a clear increasing trend, particularly if it has increased above $I_{trigger}$.

5 Advice rule for stocks under B_{lim}

Currently, if there is a fishing mortality that short term forecast show will allow a stock to be above B_{lim} at the end of the advice year with at least a 50% probability then non-zero advice is given. In practice when the stock is at low biomass there is a tendency for the forecast to be overly optimistic. This, along with results from the process examining possible rebuilding strategies, has led to concern about the adequacy of ICES current approach. Therefore, ACOM will consider the possibility of introducing a more precautionary version of the advice rule that is consistent with the current framework. This would be to provide zero catch advice whenever a stock is below B_{lim} in the assessment year. This will be discussed at the March 2025 ACOM meeting.