



NWWAC ADVICE

On the Communication from the Commission
“Sustainable fishing in the EU: state of play and orientations for 2025”
COM(2024) 235 final and on the ICES advice published on June 28th, 2024

20 August 2024

1. Background

The North Western Waters Advisory Council (NWWAC) exchanged views with reference to the ICES presentation of scientific advice for fish stocks in the North Western Waters (NWW) for 2025 and the Communication COM(2024) 235 from DG MARE at the meetings of the NWWAC Working Groups and Executive Committee in Ghent on 1-3 July 2024.

Having collected the main inputs from these discussions, the NWWAC Focus Group Landing Obligation addressed in more detail the content of COM(2024) 235. The implications for the fishing opportunities for each NWW stock for 2025 following the scientific advice, article 2(2) of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) and the negotiations with the UK were discussed.

This resulted in the development of this advice which represents the NWWAC's main contribution to the Commission for their work towards proposing the fishing opportunities in the North Western Waters for 2025 to the Council.

Given that ICES will issue advice for several stocks in the autumn, the NWWAC will consider options on how to provide recommendations on the remaining stocks.

2. Progress in achieving sustainable fishing in the EU

The NWWAC recognises and welcomes the long-term progress made towards more sustainable EU fisheries as reflected in the Commission's Communication COM(2024) 235. This is especially true in the Northeast Atlantic waters, where overall fishing mortality has progressively fallen to reach 42% below F_{MSY} in 2022. We are especially pleased to hear that the Commission reports that on average the stocks this AC deals with are now within the fishing mortality range set out in the CFP.

However, the NWWAC would like to point out that the positive communication from the Commission on the status of the stocks in the NWW is not adequately reflected in the ICES catch advice for 2025. The AC understands that for many stocks a retrospective analysis was applied to the advice which downgraded their current status relative to F_{MSY} , and this is often in contrast to what fishermen experience on the ground. Specific examples will be provided under paragraph 8 of this document. **Overall, the NWWAC continues to highlight the critical need for quality assurance across all stocks assessed by ICES.** We greatly appreciate the effort ICES has made in addressing this issue, including



the adoption of a new Advisory Plan in 2019¹. We also note that, as part of their quality assurance system, ICES has established the Transparency Assessment Framework (TAF). However, the AC believes that **more effort is needed to achieve the full implementation of the ICES quality assurance system as some of the advice provided remains overly precautionary and out of line on what fishermen see on the fishing grounds. Moreover, the fact remains that a substantial part of the ICES advice is based on limited data.**

3. State of the EU fleet

Referring to the EU fleet capacity and its balance with fishing opportunities, the Communication COM(2024) 235 reports that the Commission has continued concerns on:

- (1) the accuracy and reliability of engine power declarations by Member States;
- (2) the data underpinning the national reports and
- (3) the existence or effectiveness of Member States Action Plans required under article 22 of the CFP Regulation.

When considering the implementation of article 22 of the CFP, the AC questions the relevance of the basis used to set vessel capacity ceilings (gross tonnage (GT)) and engine power (kW). The AC would also point out that the basis for many of assertions made by the Commission emanate from the STECF Balance/Capacity report. This report consistently identifies many fleet segments to be out of balance. However, this is based on data that is two years old and does not reflect the current state of the EU fleet. When fleet segments are not in balance, Member States must put in place an Action Plan to address the imbalances but in many cases such imbalances no longer exist as actions have already been taken.

The AC suggests that going forward, to adjust fishing capacity to fishing opportunities, the focus should not be on vessels size, but on whether the different fleet segments have enough potential to use their fishing opportunities to ensure the supply to the EU food production value chain and to remain economically viable. This potential has been impacted by the UK's departure from the EU, resulting in EU fleet segments which were in line with article 22 prior to Brexit now having to re-adjust. This has led to the implementation of decommissioning schemes in several EU fleets, which has reduced the supply of raw material and ultimately hampered EU food security. Fishing capacity rules should be adapted to reflect the reality of the sector. They should provide flexibility to facilitate decarbonising the fleet as well as improving safety, working conditions and environmental sustainability. This is also highlighted in the NWWAC advice on the Commission's Communication on the Energy Transition of

¹ ICES. 2019. Advisory Plan. <http://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.5468>



the EU Fisheries and Aquaculture sector (COM(2023) 100)², as it is a shared opinion among the EU fishing industry that restrictions on vessel capacity hinder energy transition, especially concerning modifications to vessels and the installation of technologies that minimise the sector's environmental footprint.

4. Socio-Economic Performance

The Communication mentions that after the peak in fuel price reached in summer 2022, prices have gradually fallen to €0.8-0.9 per litre in the first quarter of 2024. As pointed out in last year's advice, the NWWAC continues to note a substantial change in the value of the break-even point for fuel to 1.17 € per litre of fuel as estimated in last year's STECF Annual Economic Report – a very steep increase from 0.60 € per litre previously used as the standard within the EU. Therefore, the AC urgently requires an explanation for such change as it makes a significant difference on the profitability of the fleet.

The NWWAC repeatedly highlighted the urgent need for alignment of the report on the state of the EU fleet (STECF Annual Economic Report) with the scientific advice on Fishing Opportunities, as the former provides information two years behind in comparison to the year for which scientific advice is given. The advice emanating from STECF should be forward looking rather than primarily retrospective. We acknowledge that our concerns have been taken on board, as STECF experts have been working on a nowcasting exercise for 2023. However, **the NWWAC believes that a permanent change is needed** to ensure that the information on the economic performance of the fleet is better aligned with the catch advice.

5. Landing Obligation

The NWWAC highlights that avoiding choke issues remains one of the biggest challenges in implementing the landing obligation in mixed NWW fisheries. The AC acknowledges that improving selectivity is key to reducing unwanted catches and continues to work actively on putting forward suggestions to achieving this objective. However, even with improvements in selectivity the most recent ICES advice creates serious issues in implementing the landing obligation in 2025.

The **zero-catch advice for cod 7a, cod 7e-k, whiting 7bc and 7e-k, and pollack 6-7**, as well as the **significant decrease in the advice for several stocks in the NWW** (for example lemon sole 7d, plaice 7e, sole 7d, haddock 6a, haddock 7b-k, hake 6-7 and plaice 7fg) pose significant challenges to the avoidance of choke situations. Additionally, stocks assessed as category 5 and 6 (e.g. Rockall cod), where only very limited landings data is used in the assessment, lead to highly precautionary advice

² <https://www.nwwac.ie/publications/nwwac-advice-on-the-communication-from-the-commission-%e2%80%9con-the-energy-transition-of-the-eu-fisheries-and-aquaculture-sector%e2%80%9d-com2023-100-final.4470.html>



resulting in low quotas regardless of the state of the stocks. Such advice is not fit for purpose and ICES need to reconsider the utility of providing such advice, given the choke issues it creates.

Whilst the NWWAC appreciates the management principle used in preceding years, it is acknowledged that setting bycatch TACs for zero catch advice stocks is not addressing the MSY objective. The NWWAC fully accepts that directed fishery on stocks with repetitive zero-catch advice remains prohibited, but to address the choke risk of prematurely closing fisheries the NWWAC sees no other solution than setting a bycatch TAC. Bycatch TACs remain the only option to address choking by zero-catch advice stocks in 2025.

In addition, **the NWWAC approves of the quota-exchange pool as mentioned in the Fishing Opportunities Regulations since 2019 to cover unavoidable bycatches by Member States that have no quota for such stocks.** This both covers stocks in mixed fisheries for which certain Member States have no quota and stocks with zero catch advice for which – as described above – catch provisions must be considered to avoid premature closures of mixed fisheries. The NWWAC suggests considering using this measure in other situations where it may be applicable.

In June 2023, **the AC developed advice³ identifying scenarios where the implementation of the LO is impracticable** and where alternative approaches are needed. We note that the Commission is launching a study supporting an evaluation of the landing obligation to better inform policymakers on the effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, relevance and added value of the measures in place in the EU. The NWWAC stands ready to contribute to this exercise and looks forward to further dialogue on this important matter although points out that there have already been many such evaluations. Therefore, we question of how much value this latest evaluation will be.

Ultimately, the NWWAC recognises that if the choke issues are to be resolved in the long-term, all stocks need to be fished sustainably. Addressing data gaps and ensuring proper monitoring are important in this regard.

The AC plans on further updating the Choke Identification Tool⁴ and evaluating the mitigation measures included in the new Discard Plan for the 2024-2027 period⁵ to assess whether these recommendations to resolve choke issues in the NWW should be the subject of future advice. This topic will be examined separately if an NWWAC advice to the Commission on “Addressing choke risk in the NWW after exemptions” is required.

³ [NWWAC letter to DG MARE on difficulties with the landing obligation](#)

⁴ The NWWAC, in co-operation with the NWW Member States Group (MSG), has developed a comprehensive tool (Choke Identification Tool), which serves to identify the choke risks at fishery level.

⁵ In 2024, the NWWAC has already provided advice to the NWW Member States to amend the Discard Plan 2024-2027 with new exemptions for lemon sole and spurdog.



6. Main messages and orientations for 2025 fishing opportunities proposals in preparation for EU-UK bilateral consultations

As a consequence of Brexit, the bilateral consultations with the UK have become a key step towards setting Fishing Opportunities for 75 shared fish stocks, the majority of which are in NWW. **The NWWAC wishes to emphasise the vital importance of strengthening stakeholder participation in management and governance structures in negotiations with the UK on setting fishing opportunities as well as on other joint management measures.** The NWWAC acknowledges that in line with the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), the Specialised Committee for Fisheries (SCF) addresses issues including quota swaps, non-quota species and technical measures, through Technical Working Groups that report directly to the SCF. The AC finds that stakeholders' involvement in such Working Groups or at least the opportunity for stakeholders to give input on the items on the agenda can be very useful

There are several elements to be addressed in the context of the SCF that have implications for NWW stocks, including:

- The **management of non-quota stocks**. In particular, the NWWAC is already involved⁶ in work to contribute to the development of a joint management strategy for scallop in the Channel;
- The harmonisation of **technical measures**, especially in the Celtic Sea, Irish Sea and West of Scotland.

The NWWAC stands ready to continue the good cooperation with the Commission and the other ACs through the "Inter-AC Brexit Forum"⁷. However, the ACs are keen to strengthen stakeholder engagement in the context of the execution of the TCA, particularly the work of the SCF and of the Technical Working Groups on these topics. Currently the process lacks transparency.

One of the main messages that the AC considers fundamental to deliver to the Commission in preparation to negotiations with the UK relates to the use of the Western Waters Multi-Annual Plan (MAP), as scientific advice based on the MAP is available for several stocks. In this respect **the AC recommends to also consider the MAP F_{MSY} ranges to accurately reflect the balance with F as established via the scientific models.** The AC understands that ICES also has other advice requestors than the EU who do not use MAPs. Most of the NWW stocks are shared between the EU and the UK, and therefore **the NWWAC recommends that the EU in the bilateral consultation convinces the UK to look beyond the headlines of the ICES advice for each shared stock.** We appreciate the dialogue with DG MARE, where note was taken of this recommendation by the AC and it was confirmed that

⁶ The NWWAC organised a webinar on scallop management in the Channel on 19 June following DG MARE's request.

⁷ In February 2022, the NWWAC joint forces with the Pelagic, Long Distance, North Sea and Market Advisory Councils on the topic of Brexit and established the "Inter-AC Brexit Forum", a platform for AC-Commission communications related to the EU and UK discussions in the SCF.



the Commission will look into the content of the whole ICES advice when preparing the negotiating strategy.

The NWWAC also acknowledges that for stocks shared with the UK, both parties agreed catch limits in line with MSY for most stocks where this advice was available and within the deadline set by the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA). **The NWWAC recommends continuing to pursue a level playing field between the EU and UK industries when aiming for high standards to ensure sustainable exploitation of resources.** In this regard, the NWWAC would appreciate receiving clarification regarding the adoption of the top down approach, i.e. the Commission subtracts a priori the quantity of the TAC negotiated with the UK. However, it is not clear whether the UK follows the same method. It is important to maintain a level playing field between EU and UK industries and not put the EU industry at a disadvantage.

Overall, we trust that the present advice, as well as the elements put forward in our dialogue with DG MARE will be taken on board for the forthcoming bilateral negotiations with the UK.

7. NWWAC comments to the ICES advice for 2025

The NWWAC acknowledges and thanks ICES for presenting the scientific advice for 2025 at the NWWAC meeting in July and for providing a detailed elaboration on the relevant advice and assessments.

Last year's NWWAC advice on fishing opportunities put forward recommendations such as the consideration of the whole ICES advice beyond the headline advice, the aim for more stability in the ICES advice, for example by expanding the use of the stability clause, and the need to avoid being excessively precautionary in the advice. We appreciate that ICES has taken note of these items, which were also raised at MIAC in January 2024, and urge that action is taken towards their accomplishment.

7.1 As already mentioned in paragraph 5 of this advice document, the NWWAC notes that advice based on the Multi-Annual Plans' (MAP) F_{MSY} ranges is available in the ICES advice sheets. As stipulated earlier, **the NWWAC recommends that the Commission does not only look at the headline advice but takes into account the whole advice sheet as this provides more potential to consider socio-economic implications of the TAC-setting** and experiences of fishers at sea.

7.2 The NWWAC sees that certain stocks do not seem to be recovering despite fishers' efforts at sea in not overfishing and in implementing technical measures. On several occasions, assessment models do not reflect the reality seen on the ground by fishers. Moreover, the lack of data for certain stocks is negatively impacting stock assessments. The ICES Advisory Plan also recognises this as a quality assurance issue. In this regard, **it is essential to consider partnerships between scientists and fishers as one of the main tools to boost data availability and quality.** Industry surveys and non-quantifiable information are an important part of this process. The NWWAC is willing to continue its collaboration with ICES in this remit,



and specifically following the progress of the outcomes of the 2023 Implementation of Stakeholder Engagement Strategy (WKSTIMP) and other ICES working groups reflecting on stakeholder engagement.

7.3 The NWWAC reiterates the **issues relating to stock identification**. Uncertainty around the degree at which two or more stocks of the same species are mixed, may frustrate the stock assessment process. Mixing can also lead to problems with the setting of reference points and to issues around management decisions due to a mismatch between stock and TAC management areas. **The NWWAC on several occasions highlighted the gadoids management area boundaries between areas 7a & 7fg, as well as the scientific work on stock identification of sole in area 7hjk.** In light of this, the NWWAC would like to make the following recommendations:

- Managers should **ensure that the implementation of the Data Collection Framework is completed** in order to improve data collection to inform science as a robust basis for sustainable fisheries management in line with the CFP.
- Genetic research should be used as a tool for informing fisheries managers in relation to stock structure and mixed-stock fisheries and for addressing management issues brought about by the mismatch between stock and TAC management areas. **The NWWAC strongly reiterates its recommendation that the collection of genetic data is integrated into the Data Collection Framework⁸.**
- **The gathered information should be used quickly**, without waiting for five years data, to improve the assessments.
- Category 5 and 6 assessments are not fit for purpose and should not be considered as a basis for setting fishing opportunities. ICES should be encouraged to move category 5 and 6 stocks in a stepwise process to category 3 and ultimately category 1 and 2.

The NWWAC would also like to propose that the stability clause used for some category 3 stocks is applied to other categories to mitigate large fluctuations in the advice year-on year. We appreciate that ICES is instituting an early warning system starting this year with benchmark stocks. The use of a stability clause for category 1 stocks was discussed at meetings between ICES and advice requesters but will likely need to be tested. The AC appreciates that this is being considered but reiterates that action on this matter is imperative as large changes in the advice can cause severe difficulties for both industry and management as well as market disruption.

8. NWWAC main messages and orientations for 2024 fishing opportunities proposals

⁸ [NWWAC letter to the COM requesting for genetic studies to be integrated into the Data Collection Framework, February 2020](#)



8.1. Ecosystem Based Fisheries Management

The NWWAC recognises that there are many pressures on the marine environment, for example climate change, pollution and other consequences of human activities. Collectively, they pose a synergistic threat to marine ecosystems and their ability to deliver services such as food production and climate impact mitigation. Ensuring sustainable fisheries, including the setting of TACs in line with best available scientific advice and considering ecosystem dynamics, is essential to maintain and restore healthy and productive ecosystems which are resilient to other stressors such as climate change.

The NWWAC advises that the Commission makes use of all available scientific information on ecosystem-based management when preparing for a mandate for the bilateral consultation with the UK and when proposing TACs for 2025 to the Council. DG MARE should consider the definitions of ecosystem-based management provided by ICES and by the Food and Agriculture Organisation, which consider the human, socio-economic dimension of this approach and involves strong stakeholder participation.

The NWWAC highlights the significant advances made throughout the WKIrish process. More specifically, **the NWWAC recommends that ecosystem-based fishing mortality reference points (F_{Eco}) are incorporated as an option in the catch option table for key stocks.**

Finally, the AC wishes to confirm a specific point on climate change, advising that **the setting of fishing opportunities should consider possible changes in catch composition due to stock migration and new species arriving in the NWW.**

8.2. Skates and Rays

Taking note that the ICES advice for these species will be released in the autumn, we would like to highlight that the NWWAC has been working jointly with the North Sea AC on skates & rays for several years. Following the joint NWWAC/NSAC workshop on skates & rays management organised in February 2023 and the resulting joint advice submitted in May 2023, the ACs were pleased to note the harmonisation of TAC setting between the EU and the UK. This resulted in the method developed by the UK being applied in setting the 2024 TAC.

In 2024, members of the joint **NWWAC/NSAC Focus Group have focused their attention on the difficulties related to the group TAC setting approach** covering multiple commercially important species in the North Western Waters and the North Sea. Recommendations on this topic have been collected and submitted to DG MARE in a letter of 3 April 2024⁹. Members expressed their **concern about the application of the same rule to arrive at management for various stocks as life histories between elasmobranch species can differ greatly making a one-size-fits-all approach unsuitable.** Attention must be paid to **potential unintended consequences when investigating the removal of**

⁹ <https://www.nwwac.ie/publications/nwwacnsac-letter-on-tac-setting-for-skates-rays.4651.html>



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individual species from the group TAC to avoid an increase in choke situations linked to the setting of individual TACs for such species.



8.3. West of Scotland

<u>Cod 4, 6a and 7d</u>	Regarding ICES advice for the Northern Shelf cod northwestern sub-stock, the NWWAC notes the result of significant work on the identification of the different sub-stocks. However, the current ICES advice for cod 6a would actually result in a much lower TAC than the bycatch TAC set when the advice was for zero catch. This is rather perverse given for the northwestern stock the advised F is below F_{MSY} and that stock biomass is increasing. ICES explains that this is due to the poor state of the southern sub-stock and the possibility of mixing of this sub-stock with the northwestern one. The NWWAC highlights that explaining this to fishermen operating in 6a would be challenging, given an improved stock state results in lower fishing opportunities. A low TAC level is likely to create choke situations in mixed fisheries.
<u>Whiting 6a</u>	Regarding whiting 6a, we note that the whiting stock in the adjacent area 4,7d is doing very well. The boundary between 6a and the North Sea for consideration of the stock status has been amalgamated for other stocks including the gadoids. Given the huge inexplicable difference in stock status in these areas, the NWWAC recommends that also for whiting West of Scotland and North Sea the stock area is reviewed.
<u>Cod 6b</u>	Cod in 6b is currently assessed as a category 6 stock. Because landings are very much restricted by the quotas (generally set at low levels) the catch advice rarely changes as the assessment is based on landings data. In recent years signs of increasing abundance is creating issues for fishers operating in the area given the low level of the TAC currently (Union TAC for 2024 is 20 tonnes). As this stock has been at very low levels for many years, Member States have not diverted any resources to improving the quality of the data feeding into the assessment. This means the stock continues to be assessed as being data poor and ICES applies the precautionary approach, therefore even though abundance increases the TAC does not. Without any additional information there is no possibility of moving the stock to a category 3 assessment. To avoid this stock becoming a choke species, the NWWAC recommends that ICES reviews the usefulness of continuing to apply advice for category 6 stocks in situations where the advice does not reflect the reality being seen on the fishing grounds. Alternative management approaches should be considered in the context of the EU/UK negotiations for this and other stocks in a similar position.



8.4. Celtic Sea

<u>Cod 7e-k</u>	<p>Regarding cod 7e-k, we would like to refer to the recent webinar organised by the AC on climate change impacts on cod in the Celtic Sea. Relevant research was discussed, specifically on how water temperature can influence reproduction, embryonic development and larvae survival. This can have serious implications on the survivability of young cod. Without recruitment the continued viability of the fishery is in danger. The AC highlights the importance of these aspects and recommends that they are considered in TAC setting. The NWWAC appreciates that ICES is working towards a more solid understanding of climate change impacts on fish populations and towards incorporating such effects into the assessment. The AC urges that such efforts continue and are supported by DG MARE.</p>
<u>Pollock 6 and 7</u>	<p>As already pointed out last year, the NWWAC remains concerned about the zero-catch advice for pollack in subareas 6 and 7. The zero-catch advice creates a severe choke situation for all stocks caught in the mixed demersal fisheries in the Celtic Sea, Channel, Irish Sea and West of Scotland as well as some pelagic fisheries where pollack can be a bycatch. We acknowledge that a benchmark was carried out for this stock in 2023 (WKWEST), resulting in a revised perception of the stock. However, we note that, as part of the advice, ICES recommends further work to be carried out to improve the assessment. Indeed, the advice sheet mentions that <i>“The surveys used to calculate the biomass index do not target preferred pollack habitat, and the index is based on few samples”</i>. The NWWAC questions the quality of the data used in the assessment, which are based on very few samples, a lack of information on the population structure and the contribution of recreational fisheries to the overall catches. We appreciate that the stock is to be benchmarked again in 2025, as per the ICES calendar¹⁰, but we emphasise that the use of available historic data could be helpful to improve the advice. At the same time, if new data should become available on this stock, they should be immediately considered in the assessment. The NWWAC also wishes to reiterate a previously raised concern on the assessment of this stock, namely the vastness of the entire areas 6 and 7 which is likely to create issues</p>

¹⁰ <https://www.ices.dk/advice/Advice-activities/Lists/Posts/Post.aspx?ID=14>



	<p>following the combination of all the possible pollack stocks in the area. A final concern regards the impact of recreational catches, which is likely to be a large component of the total catch but is not included in the assessment.</p>
<p><u>Hake 6 and 7</u></p>	<p>The NWWAC has concern over the significant reduction (-28%) in catch advice for hake in areas 6 and 7. According to the assessment, this is mainly due to a decreasing trend in both spawning stock biomass and lower recruitment. However, the ICES advice sheet also mentions that <i>“to a lesser extent, the decrease in catch advice is also due to stock size has been revised downwards compared to last year’s assessment and short-term forecast and observed recruitment in 2023 is considerably lower than the recruitment value assumed in last year’s short-term forecast”</i>. This is another stock for which the assessment does not match the reality seen on the ground by fishers. As already mentioned by members during the NWWAC webinar on the hake northern stock held in June 2023¹¹, recruitment is likely to be lower also due to changes in technical measures with vessels employing larger mesh sizes and targeting larger fish, which leads to lack of viewing of recruitment in the assessment. The NWWAC points out the importance of including information from fishers in the assessment as it could help having less fluctuations in the scientific advice. Moreover, we note that the assessment area is wide, comprising also the North Sea and the northern Bay of Biscay, which brings complexities to setting separate TACs in those areas.</p>
<p><u>Haddock 7b-k</u></p>	<p>The NWWAC would also like to underline the importance of addressing the issue related to the assessment and advice for haddock 7b–k, including rectangles 33E2 and 33E3 in division 7a. This should be considered when setting TACs, as a consistent portion of the 7a catch is considered to be part of the division 7b–k stock, and efforts to examine stock’s genetics should be prioritised to solve this issue. Members are also concerned about the large decrease in advice (-44%) for this stock and highlight a mismatch between the available quota and the fish on the ground as observed by fishers. Similarly to hake, new technical measures introduced for this stock, with more selective gears, impacted the recruitment value in the assessment. The management of this stock is very complex, as this species is characterised by large recruitment pulses. Since this is scientifically accepted, the NWWAC recommends the use of the stability clause for this stock. Moreover, it is caught in many mixed fisheries in the Celtic Sea and the large decrease in the catch advice will potentially create choke issues in these fisheries.</p>

¹¹ <https://www.nwwac.org/listing/nwwac-workshop-on-the-management-of-the-hake-northern-stock.4222.html>



<p><u>Whiting 7bc and 7e-k</u></p>	<p>Regarding whiting in 7bc and 7e-k, the NWWAC recommends that further work is carried out to better understand stock status in the Celtic Sea, as a result of climate change. The NWWAC reiterates the possible stock identity issues, between the Celtic Sea stock (7bc and 7e-k) and the North Sea stock that includes 7d. ICES currently considers that these whiting stocks are separated by the boundary between 7d and 7e. Even if the distinction between the two stocks seems well documented, migrations between these stocks and the local dynamics should be studied, particularly given the significant differences in current stock perception. It is difficult to understand how such a precise boundary exists so that the Celtic Sea stock has a zero-catch advice with SSB below Blim while the North Sea stock is assessed as being increasing with a high SSB and high recruitment.</p>
<p><u>Plaice 7fg</u></p>	<p>For plaice 7fg the scientific advice for 2025 is for a 72% reduction in catches. The ICES framework for category 3 stocks was applied and since 2022 the advice is based on the rfb rule. This led to significant decreases in the scientific advice. However, the NWWAC points out that the necessary data justifying such a high precautionary approach are lacking. Fishers report seeing an abundance of this stock in the northern part of 7fg whilst the 100 km results for the biomass index (r) trend appear to be recorded by a single survey in the southern part. The NWWAC recommends again to apply the stability clause to avoid significant fluctuations in the TAC year-on-year, even if the condition based on poorly available data is not fulfilled, as it remains unacceptable to disregard the unavoidable catches of this stock in mixed fisheries.</p>
<p><u>Sole 7fg</u></p>	<p>For sole 7fg the advice change is -9.3% mainly based on a downward revision in stock size. This is an example where a WW MAP consideration would much better reflect the abundance noted by fishers at sea. Considering an $F_{MSY\ upper}$ advice change of +52% the NWWAC recommends that the Commission in the bilateral with the UK discusses a higher TAC 2025 for this stock than the one in 2024.</p>
<p><u>Sole 7hjk</u></p>	<p>For sole 7hjk there is no new advice for 2025. Considering that for this data poor stock a bi-annual precautionary approach is the only option, the NWWAC advises that the Commission requests ICES to start using the results of Fisheries-Science Projects on stock assessments and DNA analysis for subsequent advice.</p>



8.5. English Channel

<p><u>Whiting 7d</u></p>	<p>Regarding whiting 7d, the NWWAC is doubtful regarding the seemingly sharp stock boundary between this stock and the Celtic Sea whiting stock, which has been given a zero-catch advice in area 7bc, e-k for the last two years in opposition to large increases in the advice for whiting North Sea and 7d.</p>
<p><u>Lemon sole 4, 3a and 7d</u></p>	<p>While it is acknowledged that the 30% decrease in the assessment for lemon sole in subarea 4 and divisions 3a and 7d is linked to a decreasing pattern in the biomass index, this is in contradiction with what is experienced at sea by fishers. This stock is an example of where more and better consideration of fishers' experience would lead to an assessment that is closer to reality.</p>
<p><u>Plaice 7e</u></p>	<p>Similar to lemon sole, the NWWAC expresses concern regarding the decrease in the advice for plaice 7e, as the rfb rule applied to the assessment is leading to a -24% reduction. This is based on very limited data and contradicts with experience on the ground by professionals. The advice sheet mentions that <i>“mature individuals from the plaice stock in Division 7.e and the stock in Subarea 4 and Subdivision 20 migrate to Division 7.d in the first quarter. Thus, a proportion of catch of these two stocks occurs in Division 7.d”</i>, which is also why the catch advice for plaice 7e was decreased. It seems more appropriate that this aspect is handled in management considerations, for example in inter-area flexibility between 7d and e. Finally, the NWWAC would like to highlight that the increase in discards recorded in the advice sheet brings a negative perception on fishers' activity, in contrast with their effort to return alive fish at sea through the survivability exemption. This is also true for other stocks for which a high discard rate is reported on the advice sheet.</p>
<p><u>Sole 7d</u></p>	<p>For sole 7d, the top line advice is based on F_{MSY} corrected for the SSB status resulting in a -19.6% advice change. If such correction would not be applied the F_{MSY} principle would result in a +12.8% advice change. Given the discrepancy between the ICES advice and the fishers experience at sea and taking into consideration the socio-economic impact on the target sole fisheries in all the Western Waters over the last couple of years, the NWWAC recommends negotiating with the UK to deviate from the top line advice and to follow the F_{MSY} principle.</p>
<p><u>Sole 7e</u></p>	<p>For sole 7e, F and SSB are in a positive state compared to the reference values which results in a +8.9% advice change. However, because last year the managers agreed to not to follow completely the top line advice, ICES now publishes that the TAC change</p>



	should be -2.8%. Taking into account the positive status, the NWWAC recommends considering the FMSY upper option and agree between managers to set a TAC closer to the corresponding +11.4% TAC change.
<u>Seabass 4b–c, 7a and 7d–h</u>	Regarding seabass , the NWWAC expresses concern regarding the SSB reference points decided during a 2019 benchmark, which recommended using the 2018 biomass level. It is very strange to choose such a recent year, as the absolute biomass level will vary by including new data assessment after assessment regarding several cohorts forming the 2018 SSB. There is now a quite important difference between the 2018 SSB as it was estimated in 2019, compared to the same year SSB as it is now estimated by ICES. Therefore, the NWWAC wonders whether the Biomass reference points should be modified to take into account the latest estimate of 2018 biomass. In light of this, the AC believes it is necessary to consider whether it is appropriate to update the absolute B_{LIM} value. The NWWAC will address this stock in more detail through a dedicated Focus Group Seabass, which is to meet in the first half of September. We welcome DG MARE’s attendance at that meeting and overall interest in the work of the Focus Group.

8.6. Irish Sea

<u>Haddock 7a</u>	The NWWAC would like to reiterate its concerns regarding several stock identity issues, between certain Celtic Sea and Irish Sea stocks. This was highlighted in the NWWAC advice on Fishing Opportunities 2020 ¹² in the Irish Sea and in a letter sent to the Commission in October 2020 ¹³ . This may have a relevant influence on the validity of the stock boundaries for cod, whiting and haddock and therefore, according to the NWWAC and as frequently recommended, it is vital to address this through stocks’ genetics.
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¹² [NWWAC Response to the Consultation on Fishing Opportunities for 2020, September 2019](#)

¹³ [NWWAC letter to the Commission regarding TAC setting for cod, haddock and whiting in Irish Sea statistical rectangles, 33E2 and 33E3, October 2020](#)



	<p>The NWWAC specifically notes the case of 7a haddock, which accounts for 71% of the reported landings in the statistical rectangles 33E2 and 33E3 traditionally included in the Celtic Sea management area. This should be considered when setting TACs for haddock in 7a and 7b–k, since changes in the TAC for the 7a stock may have implications for the fishing pressure on haddock in divisions 7b–k. This is a clear example of a stock where a genetic study is warranted.</p>
<u>Whiting 7a</u>	<p>In relation to Irish Sea whiting, the NWWAC highlights the significant efforts from the sector regarding implementation of avoidance measures for whiting caught in the <i>Nephrops</i> fishery. The SSB for this stock continues to be extremely low, with very low recruitment. Fishing pressure is also very low since this is not a targeted fishery. However, the advice shows constant amounts of this fish being caught as bycatch every year. With the stock biomass and recruitment being estimated so low, an explanation is needed on how this is possible. The AC highlights the need to consider the technical measures introduced in 2019 for the <i>Nephrops</i> fishery and to evaluate their efficiency in reducing whiting bycatch. However, it is also relevant to point out that recent Irish trials aiming to reduce whiting bycatch have resulted in reasonably large socio-economic impacts on the <i>Nephrops</i> fishery, which were deemed not to be practical. This questions the possibility to progress with technical measures to further reduce unwanted catches in this fishery. The NWWAC is also aware that ICES is planning to work on rebuilding plans for a few stocks including whiting 7a and encourages these efforts to consider whether rebuilding the stock is realistic or whether reference points need to be added or changed.</p>
<u>Sole 7a</u>	<p>Regarding sole in 7a, the NWWAC appreciates that ICES carried out a benchmark in 2024 introducing a new stock assessment model (SAM) revised data and updated reference points. This led to a more robust estimation of the stock, which better reflects what fishers experience at sea. It is also appreciated that managers beforehand agreed to apply an interannual amendment to the TAC and that the advice for 2025 is based on the benchmarked advice and the resulting TAC.</p>
<u>Plaice 7a</u>	<p>The NWWAC considers that plaice in the Irish Sea is an example where fishers report a different scenario at sea that does not relate to the 21% reduction seen in the advice for 2025. The data introduction results in F below F_{MSY} and SSB below trigger. As it is perceived that a TAC reduction will only lead to increased discarding and plaice 7a in many cases is a bycatch in other fisheries, the NWWAC recommends considering other than headline advice and negotiate a TAC closer to the $F_{MSY\ upper}$ outcome.</p>



8.7. Joint-Recommendation NWWAC-PelAC on Greater silver smelt in areas 6 and 7

ICES published advice on 7 June 2024, advising a **MSY approach** to be followed for Greater Silver Smelt in the areas 5b and 6a, with catches in 2025 to be **no more than 18 966 tonnes**.

Following the newly established [Gentlemen's Agreement between the NWW and Pelagic ACs](#) agreed on March 31 2022, both ACs acknowledge that any recommendation on **Greater silver smelt in areas 6 and 7** is under the direct competence of the NWWAC in accordance with Annex III of the CFP.

The NWWAC proposes the following recommendation for this stock, which is endorsed by the Pelagic AC and the result of a joint exercise, whereby the NWWAC advises on bycatch issues and the PelAC advises on the directed fishery.

The NWWAC and PelAC recommend following ICES MSY advice (18 966 tons).

The two ACs would like to point out that since 2016, unilateral quota are set by the Faroe Islands and EU/UK separately, and the sum exceeds the recommended catches. NWWAC/PelAC underline the vulnerability of greater silver smelt as a deep-sea, slow-growing species, and call on the EU Commission and the Council to prevent overfishing of the stock and reach an agreement on this shared stock.

In addition, in the context of improved management of the directed fishery, the PelAC will be examining the possibility of developing a management strategy for area 5b and 6a, associated with developing measures to improve the reference data issue of the stock in the area 6b and 7. Given the key role that the stock has in the NWW ecosystem, for example as a forage fish for many predatory species, the ACs believe it would be important to incorporate ecosystem-based considerations in its management and assessment, and therefore encourage all concerned parties to develop a roadmap for this purpose.

Therefore, the NWWAC and PelAC underline the need for genetic analyses to be undertaken in order to ensure better identification of the stocks and of their distribution.

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