

# NWWAC advice on management measures for “Northern” seabass for 2025

21st of November 2024

The NWWAC Focus Group on Seabass met on 7 and 28 October 2024 to discuss the preparation of advice to the COM on potential measures to be taken in 2025 in both commercial and recreational fisheries to support the recovery of “Northern” seabass stocks. The advice presented below was approved by written procedure by the NWWAC Executive Committee on xx.

## 1. Background – ICES Advice

The 2024 ICES assessment for the northern seabass stock in Divisions 4.b–c, 7.a, and 7.d–h (central and southern North Sea, Irish Sea, English Channel, Bristol Channel, and Celtic Sea) was originally published in June, then updated on the 14<sup>th</sup> of October. The latest version advises that **total removals should be no more than 2620 tonnes in 2025 when the MSY approach is applied**. This represents an increase of 7.7% on its advice for 2023. The advice estimates fishing mortality (F) is below the sustainability threshold ( $F_{MSY}$ ). The level of spawning stock biomass (SSB) is between  $B_{lim}$  and  $MSY B_{trigger}$ . The SSB growth rate has declined since 2019 and has stalled in 2023 and 2024.

## 2. Background – Management

Since 2015, to support a stock recovery, fishing restrictions have been introduced in the northern zone to reduce exploitation by prohibiting landings of seabass in February and March and prohibiting directed fishing for seabass, except by hook and line fishers, with certain derogations for unavoidable by-catch<sup>1</sup> (Council Regulation (EU) 2024/257). Recreational fisheries are restricted by a daily bag limit. The management measures introduced for seabass have resulted in changes in fishing behaviour to avoid catches of seabass: ICES reports that since 2017, most catches have been unavoidable bycatches. These measures produced a **dramatic decrease in fishing mortality**, while **SSB has recovered from below  $B_{lim}$  and just under  $MSY B_{trigger}$** .

Still, the stock remains vulnerable, the growth rate has stalled, and a cautious management approach continues to be necessary. Several years of good or strong recruitment are needed to rebuild the stock to safe levels and **relaxing the moratorium would be premature**.

## 3. Recommendations on seabass management

It is still too early to change in depth the management principles both for commercial fishing and for recreational fishing. The AC recommends that **total removals in 2025 should be in line with the ICES advice** (2620 tonnes). Consequently, the AC proposes to abide by the following principles: no targeted commercial fishing, except for hooks and lines; bycatch of sea bass

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<sup>1</sup> In the UK : the derogation is for “bycatch” regardless of whether it is avoidable

should be actively avoided; transform parts of the unavoidable discards into landings to enhance the acceptability of the regime and avoid socio-economic waste.

### 3.1 Management measures for commercial fisheries

According to data from the French Direction Générale des Affaires Maritimes de la Pêche et de l’Aquaculture (DGAMPA) on seabass catches from 2023<sup>2</sup>, **bottom trawls and seine metiers generate the majority of seabass discards**. They make up 95% of discards declared by all French vessels, primarily during the winter months, including the **closed season** (see Fig. 1).

For discards outside the closed season, it appears that they almost systematically exceed the **5% catch ceiling**. This rule is therefore probably the cause of a large number of discards,

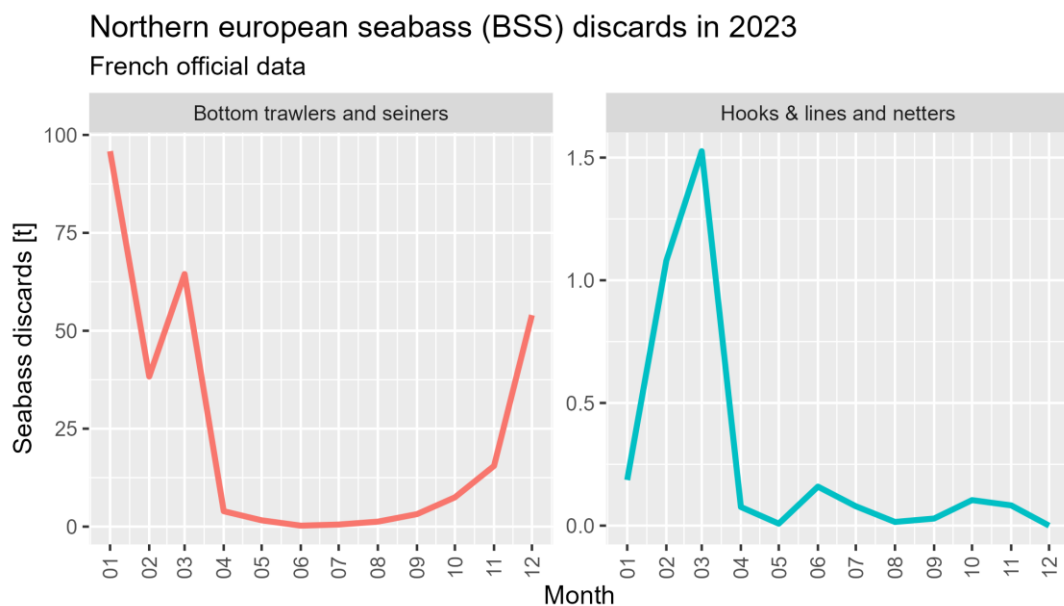


Fig. 1. European seabass discards in 2023 in the northern Zone for the French fleet.

although it is impossible to be absolutely certain without knowing the size structure. Overall, according to this data, **total quantities discarded by bottom trawlers and seiners are greater than their total landings**. For other metiers, total declarations of discards are much lower than declarations of landings.

<sup>2</sup> The DGAMPA data provide information for each fishing trip in the North zone (4b, 4c, 7a, 7d, 7e, 7f, 7g and 7h):

- Ship registration ;
- Year and month ;
- Commercial catches of European seabass (BSS) ;
- Commercial catches of other species, excluding seabass ;
- European bar releases (BSS) ;
- Discards of other species, excluding seabass.

Only fishing trips for which commercial catches and/or discards of seabass have been declared are included in the data.

Discards of commercial size constitute a socio-economic waste and are dead and lost for the rebuilding of the stock. In order to alleviate this waste and to enhance the acceptability of the management regime, the NWWAC proposes to **carefully relax some of the management measures** to reduce these discards in favour of landings, **without increasing the overall mortality rate** associated with commercial fishing. This objective should also make it possible to reduce the uncertainty surrounding the estimates of releases from existing models and help to make the ICES diagnosis more reliable.

The NWWAC would also like to highlight that **Irish vessels are forbidden to land any seabass** according to national legislation. This ban causes **great difficulties** for fishers as seabass catches are unavoidable and likely to increase as the stock recovers.

### 3.2 Proposal for recreational fisheries

According to recent ICES guidance, more comprehensive data on recreational removals across all countries is essential for providing accurate stock estimates. The AC acknowledges the ongoing and planned improvements in monitoring recreational withdrawals, though implementation levels vary across Member States. The NWWAC emphasises that this data is vital for enhancing stock assessments of species such as seabass, with recreational fishing estimated to account for 24% of the total catch—545 tons out of 2,258 tons in 2023. For these reasons and in light of the advice, the NWWAC recommends the 2024 measures concerning recreational fishing be renewed for 2025.

### 3.3 EU-UK seabass management

The NWWAC wishes to reiterate the importance of a **harmonised management** of the seabass stock between the EU and the UK. The importance of this subject is especially related to the difficulties fishers encounter due to different management measures between EU and UK. The NWWAC appreciates that this topic has been on the agenda of the Specialised Committee on Fisheries and continues following up on any developments through the Inter-AC Brexit Forum, to provide input where necessary. At a recent meeting on the 18<sup>th</sup> of September 2024, DEFRA<sup>3</sup> representatives provided an update on the implementation of the UK Fisheries Management Plans, including the FMP on seabass. The NWWAC became aware that a domestic Seabass Management Group is being established to bring different sectors together. Having AC representatives observing the meetings of this Group could be beneficial **to increase collaboration between stakeholders**. The NWWAC hopes that such liaison is possible.

Furthermore, the AC would like to highlight an ongoing management issue. More than 3 years have passed since the EU and the UK agreed that they would introduce catch reporting for shore netters and allow shore netters to land bass bycatch<sup>4</sup>. Yet it does not appear that Wales has started work on reporting, despite the issue being raised repeatedly by the EU in the Specialised Committee on Fisheries. The NWWAC urges the Commission to ensure that this issue is addressed and to continue monitoring its progress.

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<sup>3</sup> UK's Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs

<sup>4</sup> Point 13 f) ii) of the "Written record of fisheries consultations between the United Kingdom and the European Union for 2021"



#### 4. Minority opinion of IFSUA and EAA

The SSB is currently below the  $B_{\text{trigger}}$  threshold so, by virtue of Article 8 of Regulation (EU) 2019/472, “*all appropriate remedial measures shall be adopted to ensure rapid return of the stock or functional unit concerned to levels above those capable of producing MSY*”. Carl O’Brien, Chief Advisor Marine Fisheries at Cefas (and previously ACOM Vice-Chair), has advised that the ICES headline advice issued on 14 October 2024 is not aimed at rebuilding the sea bass stock. ICES estimates that following this headline advice would lead to a 7.2% reduction in the SSB. Therefore, the EAA and IFSUA recommend that fisheries managers should not follow the ICES headline advice and instead should consider alternatives to the ICES headline advice and aim for Total Removals that would either increase or, at the very least, maintain the SSB in 2025. Recognising the significant challenge of reducing fishing pressure enough to achieve stock growth within the year, we recommend that fisheries managers target a Total Removals level of 1,469 tonnes in 2025, a 26% reduction from the estimated 2024 removals of 1,990 tonnes.

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