

Long-term effects of increasing catch limit for the Celtic, English Channel, North Sea Sea Bass stock

ICES Advice 2026

Sea bass (*Dicentrarchus labrax*) 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).

ICES advice on fishing opportunities

ICES advises that when the maximum sustainable yield (MSY) approach is applied, total removals in 2026 should be no more than 5 180 tonnes. This applies to the sum of the commercial and recreational catches (accounting for survival of released fish).

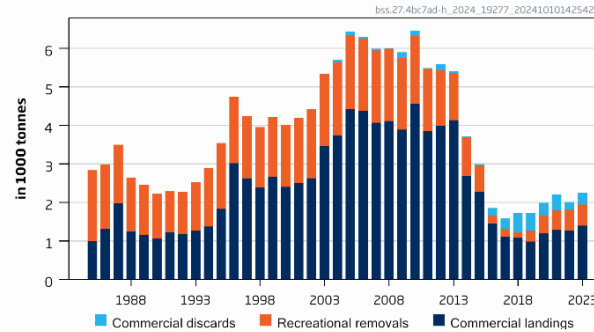
ICES notes the existence of a precautionary management plan, developed and adopted by one of the relevant management authorities for this stock.

A proportion of the catch of the neighbouring Bay of Biscay sea bass stock is caught in divisions 4.b–c and 7.a.d–h. This should be taken into account when defining management actions to avoid exceeding the advice for either of the stocks.

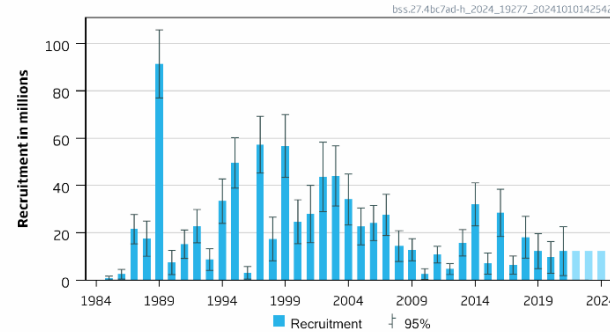
Temporal evolution of the stock

Advice for 2025

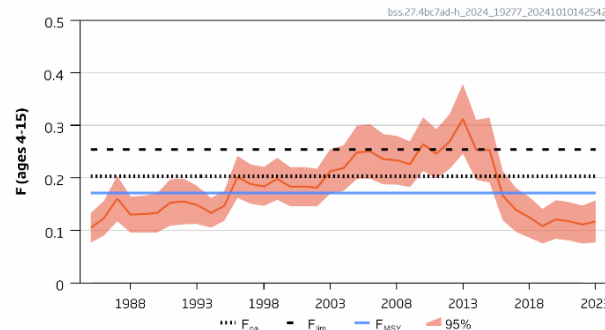
Catches



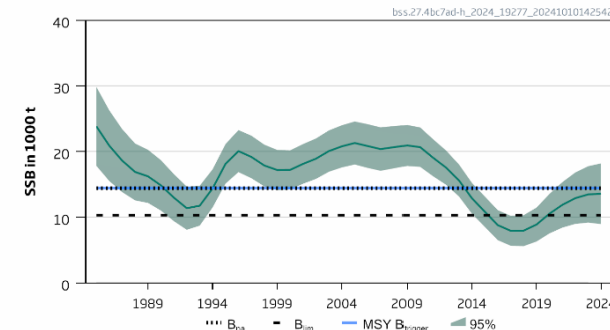
Recruitment (age 0)



F

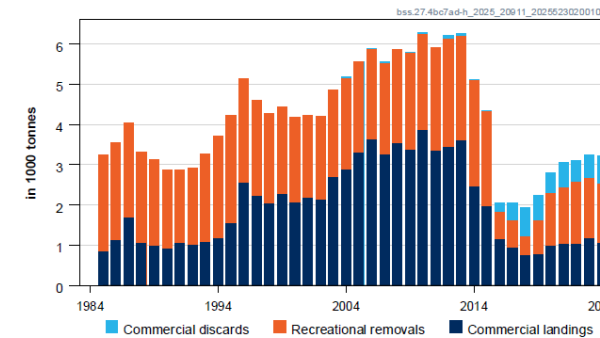


SSB

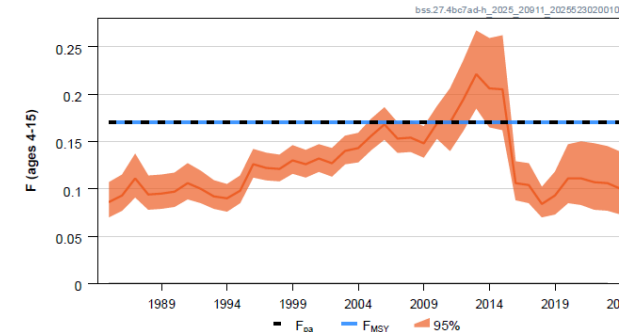


Advice for 2026

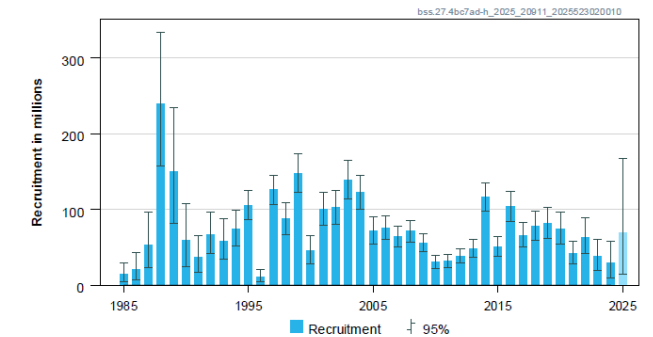
Catches



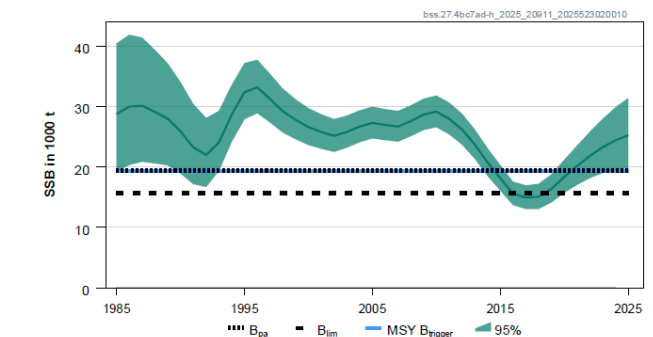
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Recruitment (age 0)



SSB



ICES benchmark : The revision of the assessment model and reference points has changed the perception of the sea bass stock in the Celtic Sea, English Channel, North Sea

Sharp increase in ICES advice for 2026



Annual catch scenarios for 2026

Table 2 Sea bass in divisions 4.b–c, 7.a, and 7.d–h. Annual catch scenarios. Weights are in tonnes.

Basis	Bss.27.4bc7ad-h sea bass stock												All sea bass caught in Bss.27.4bc7ad-h stock area##					
	Total removals (2026)*	Commercial landings** (2026)	Recreational kept** (2026)	Commercial discards** (2026)	Recreational dead released** (2026)	Survival recreational released** (2026)	F _{ages 4–15} total removals (2026)*	F _{ages 4–15} commercial catch (2026)	F _{ages 4–15} recreational removals (2026)	Spawning-stock biomass (SSB; 2027)	% SSB change^	% advice change^^	Total removals (2026) *	Commercial landings (2026)	Recreational kept (2026)	Commercial discards (2026)	Recreational dead released (2026)	Survival recreational released (2026)
ICES advice basis																		
Maximum sustainable yield (MSY) approach: F = F _{MSY}	5180	1821	2302	781	276	5524	0.170	0.086	0.085	23154	-8.6	98	6590	2496	3033	781	280	5604
Other scenarios																		
F = 0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	27544	8.7	-100	_###	_###	_###	_###	_###	_###
EU MAP#: F _{MSY}	5180	1821	2302	781	276	5524	0.170	0.086	0.085	23154	-8.6	98	6590	2496	3033	781	280	5604
EU MAP#: F _{MSY} lower	4472	1573	1988	672	239	4772	0.145	0.073	0.072	23751	-6.2	71	5882	2248	2719	672	243	4852
EU MAP#: F _{MSY} upper	5180	1821	2302	781	276	5524	0.170	0.086	0.085	23154	-8.6	98	6590	2496	3033	781	280	5604
F = F _{PA}	5180	1821	2302	781	276	5524	0.170	0.086	0.085	23154	-8.6	98	6590	2496	3033	781	280	5604
SSB ₂₀₂₇ = B _{lim}	14250	4956	6288	2252	755	15090	0.56	0.28	0.28	15666	-38	440	15660	5631	7019	2252	759	15170
SSB ₂₀₂₇ = MSY B _{trigger} = B _{pa}	9757	3413	4321	1504	519	10371	0.35	0.176	0.173	19339	-24	270	11167	4088	5052	1504	523	10451
SSB ₂₀₂₇ = SSB ₂₀₂₆	2603	917	1159	388	139	2781	0.082	0.041	0.041	25330	0	-0.66	4013	1592	1890	388	143	2861
F = F ₂₀₂₅	3271	1152	1455	489	175	3493	0.104	0.053	0.052	24764	-2.2	25	4681	1827	2186	489	179	3573
Total removals advice (2026) = total removals advice (2025)	2620	923	1166	391	140	2799	0.082	0.041	0.041	25317	-0.054	-0.038	4030	1598	1897	391	144	2879

* Includes commercial landings, recreational kept, commercial discards, and recreational dead released computed assuming 5% post-release mortality.

** Assumed projections based on recent proportions (2022–2024) of partial F of commercial and recreational removals.

^ SSB 2027 relative to SSB 2026.

^^ Advice value for 2026 relative to the advice value for 2025 for sea bass in divisions 4.b–c, 7.a, and 7.d–h stock (2 620 tonnes).

^^^ Percentage change not shown as no advice was issued for all sea bass caught in 4.b–c, 7.a, and 7.d–h in 2024.

EU multiannual plan (MAP ; EU, 2019).

All catch options for sea bass caught in divisions 4.b–c, 7.a, and 7.d–h assume that total removals for sea bass in divisions 8.a–b follow the MSY approach.

ICES cannot advise on measures to achieve non-zero catches in the area with F = 0 for the stock.

Objective

Define a precautionary approach to support decision-making on the 2026 fishing quotas by assessing the long-term effects of increasing catch limit for the sea bass stock in the Celtic Sea, English Channel, North Sea and maintaining them constant over multiple years.

Methods

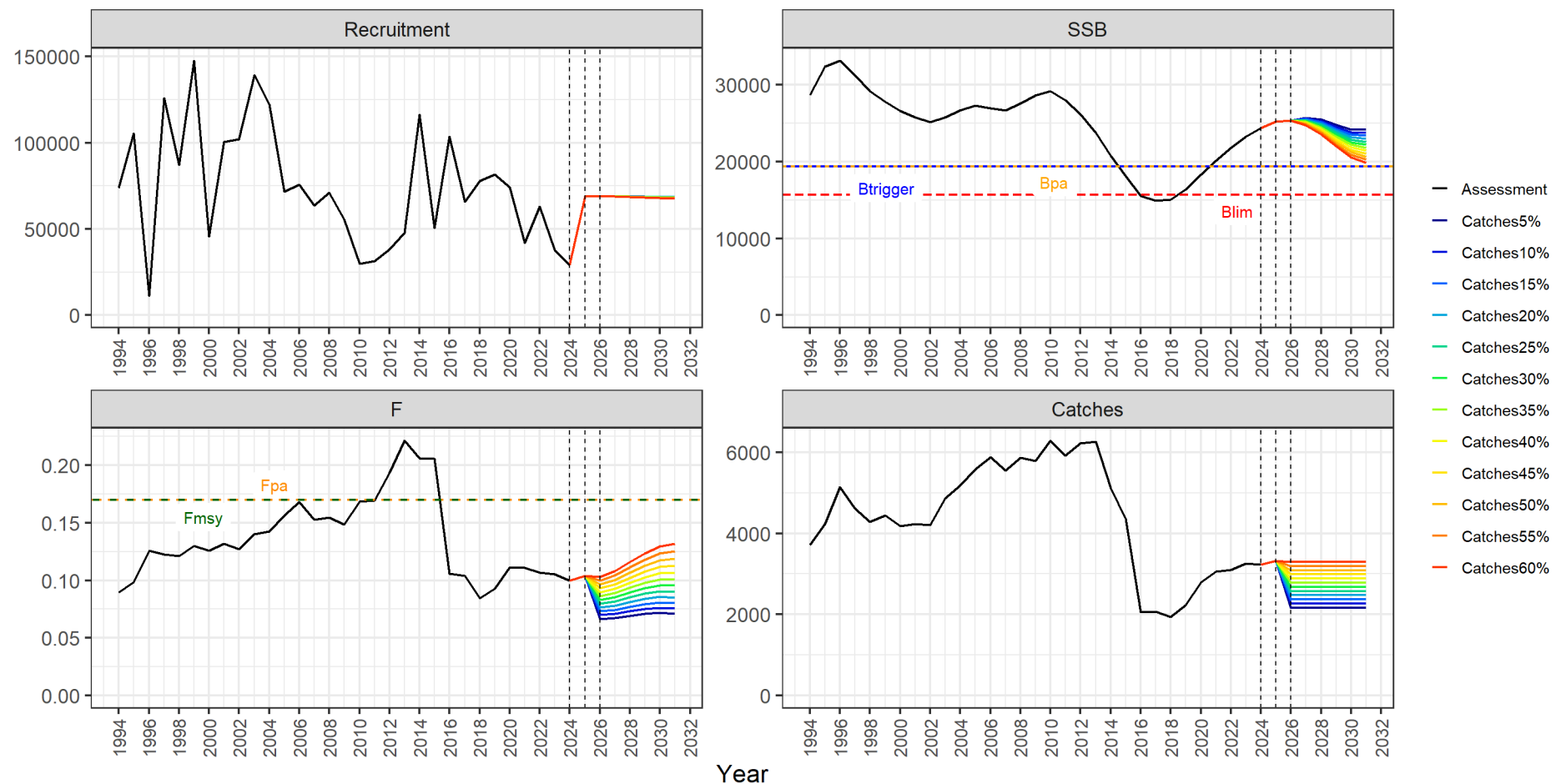
- The idea is to simulate different scenarios of increasing the catch limit (from 5% to 60%), and to assess their long-term effects while maintaining them at this level
- The increase in catches is calculated from the 2025 advice (ie. 2620 tonnes) and relates to catches made in divisions 4.b-c and 7.a.d-h.
- Different recruitment values will be explored to assess the sensitivity of simulations of increased catch limit to this hypothesis.
- To calculate the removals made in divisions 4.b-c and 7.a.d-h, we considered that the increase in removals for the sea bass stock in the Celtic Sea, English Channel and North Sea was the same as those for the sea bass stock in the Bay of Biscay.

Simulation 1

The assumptions for the first year (i.e. the ICES interim year) are unchanged

Recruitments are determined by the stock-recruitment relationship of the assessment model as used in the ICES advice

All scenarios of increasing catch limits allow us to stay above Btrigger until 2031

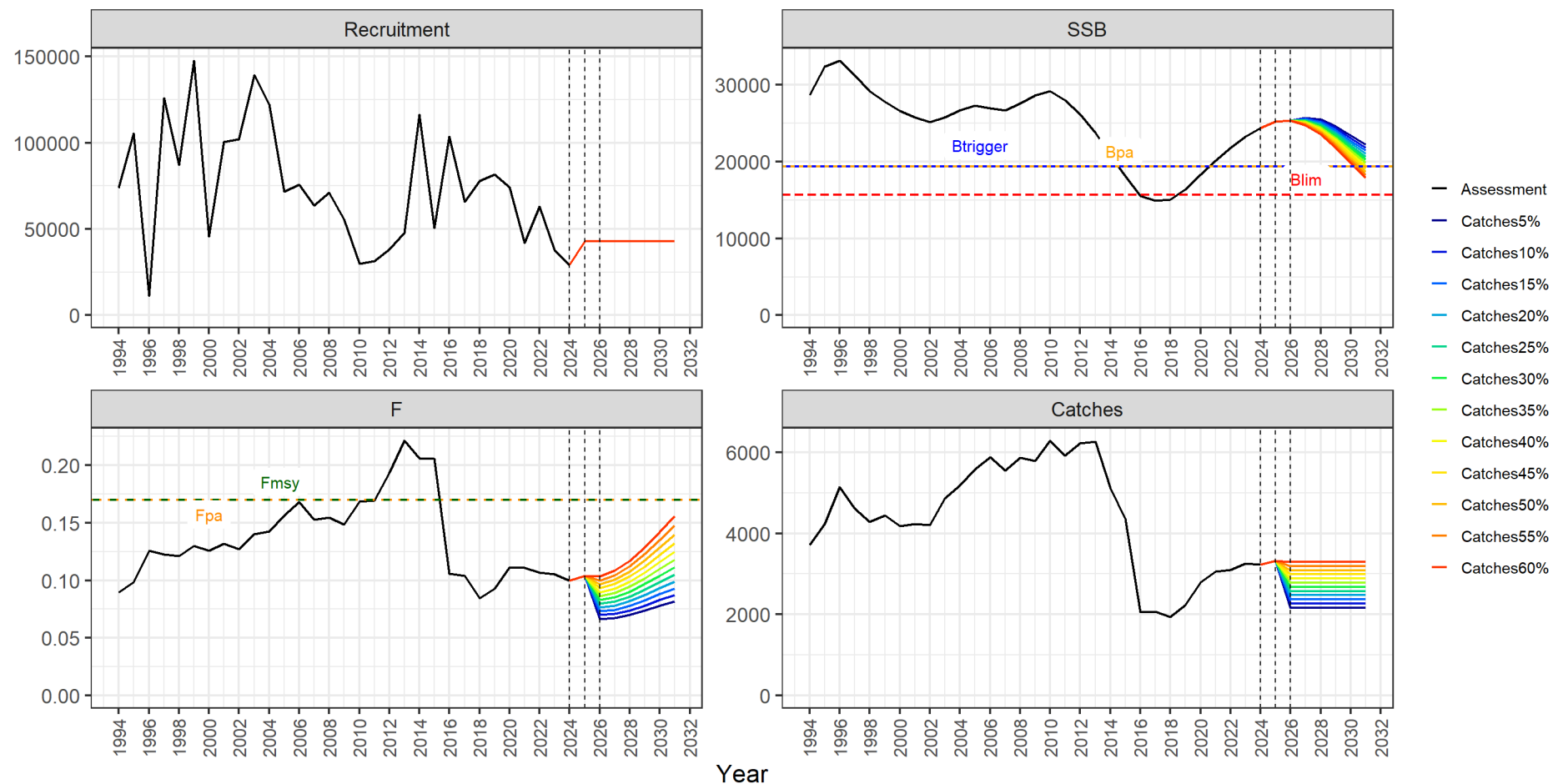


Simulation 2

The assumptions for the first year (i.e. the ICES interim year) are unchanged, except for recruitments

Recruitments are set at the arithmetic average of the most recent values ($R_{\text{mean}} = \text{average of } R \text{ 2021-2024} = 43029 \text{ thousand individuals}$)

Only scenarios of increasing catches from 5 to 35% allow us to remain above Btrigger until 2031.

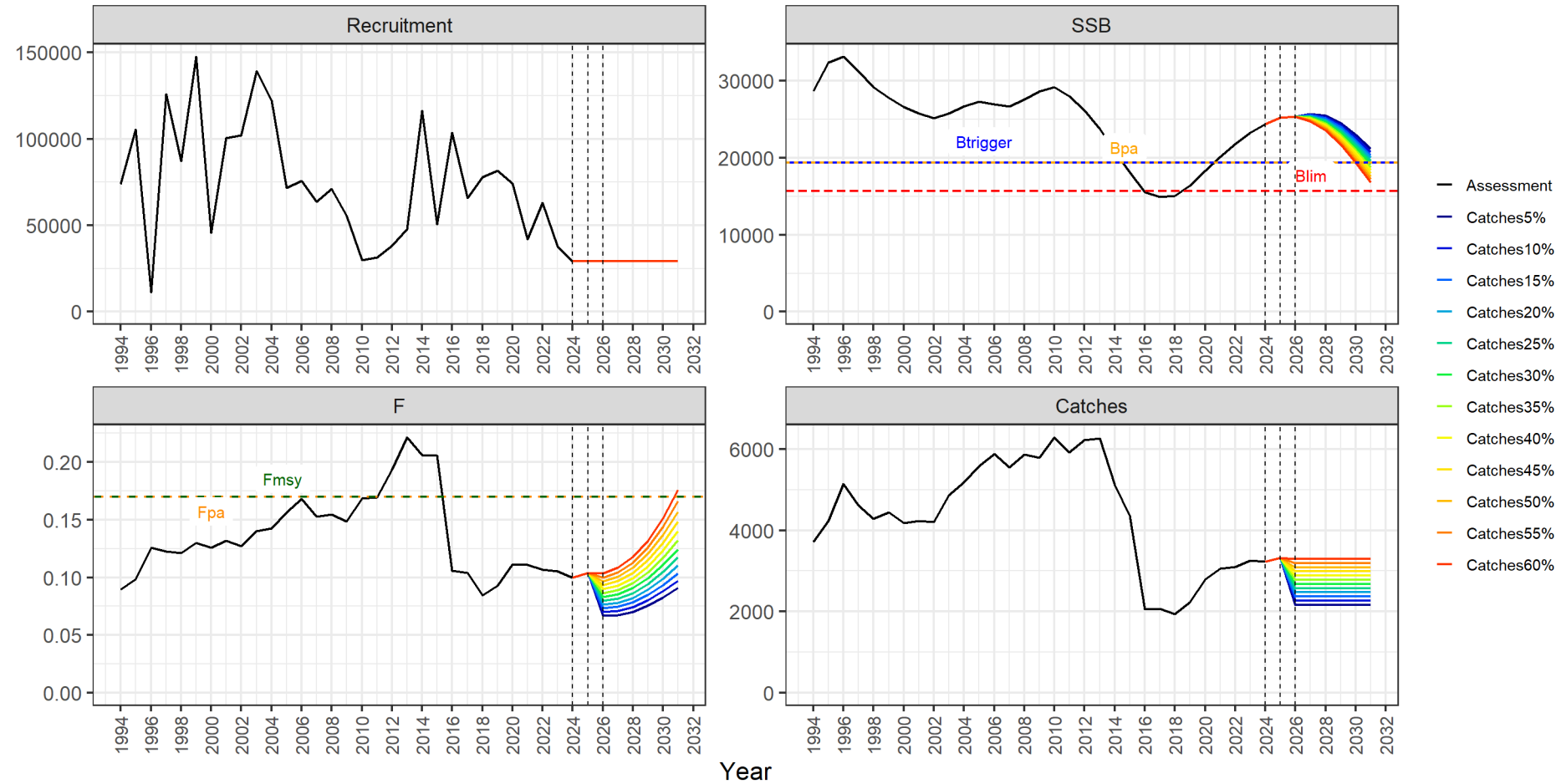


Simulation 3

The assumptions for the first year (i.e. the ICES interim year) are unchanged, except for recruitments

Recruitments are set at the lowest value of the last 10 years ($R_{min} = R_{2024} = 29117$ thousand individuals)

Only scenarios of increasing catches from 5 to 25% allow us to remain above $B_{trigger}$ until 2031.

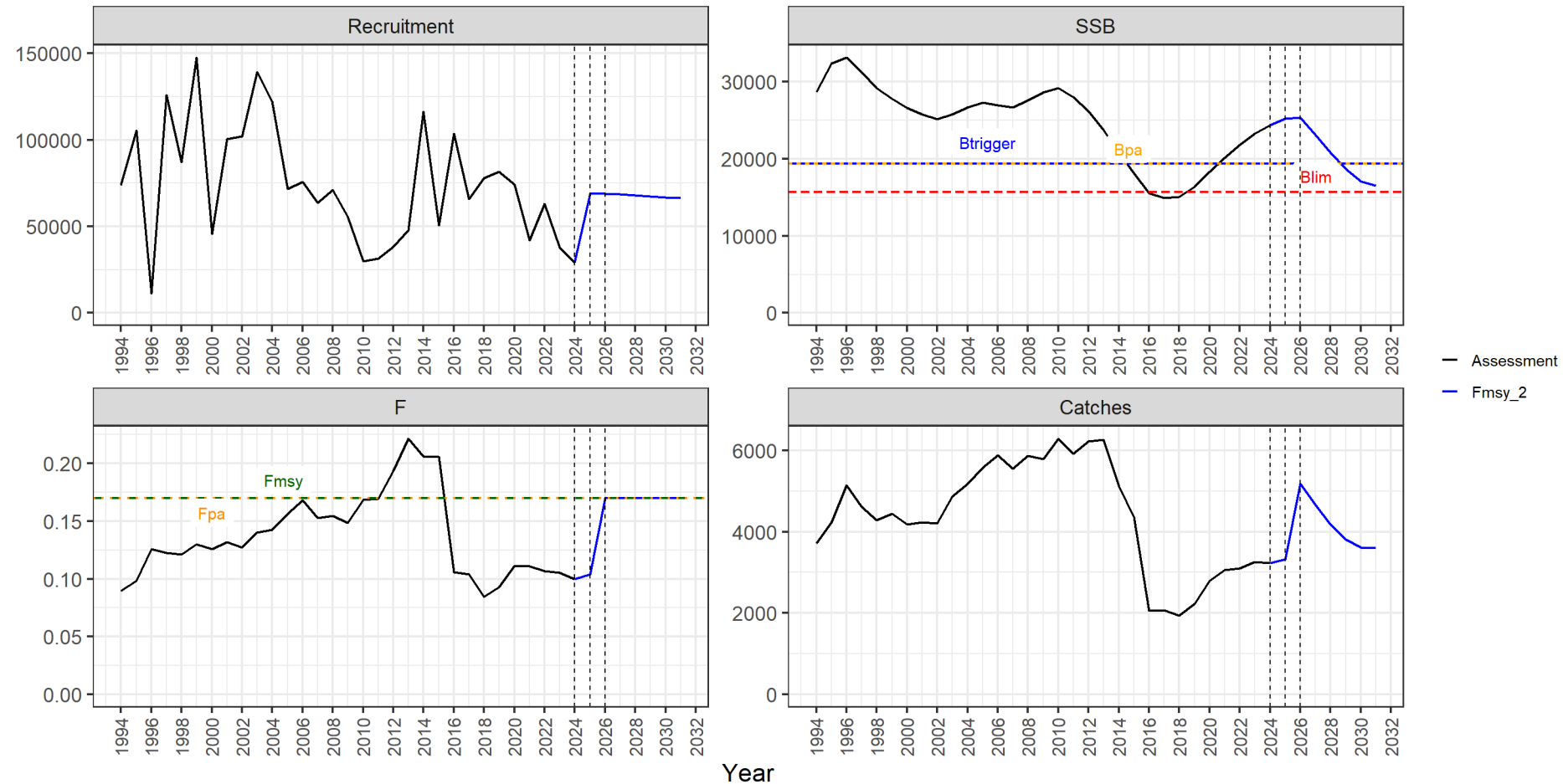


Simulation 4

The assumptions for the first year (i.e. the ICES interim year) are unchanged

Recruitments are determined by the stock-recruitment relationship of the assessment model as used in the ICES advice

Constant Fmsy scenario shows a sharp decrease in catches and goes below Btrigger in 2029



2026 capture scenarios

Stock bss.27.4bc7adh

Basis	Rem_2026	C_2026	L_2026	D_2026	RR_2026	F_2026	FL_2026	FD_2026	FRR_2026	SSB_2027	SSB_change	advice_change	P(SSB<Blim)
Catches5%	2162	1140	726	415	1022	0.067	0.0200	0.020	0.027	25715	1.52	-17.5	0.00
Catches10%	2265	1195	760	434	1071	0.070	0.021	0.021	0.028	25628	1.17	-13.5	0.00
Catches15%	2368	1249	795	454	1119	0.073	0.022	0.022	0.029	25541	0.83	-9.6	0.00
Catches20%	2471	1303	829	474	1168	0.076	0.023	0.023	0.030	25454	0.49	-5.7	0.00
Catches25%	2574	1358	864	494	1217	0.080	0.024	0.024	0.032	25367	0.145	-1.75	0.00
Catches30%	2677	1412	898	513	1265	0.083	0.025	0.025	0.033	25280	-0.197	2.2	0.00
Catches35%	2780	1466	933	533	1314	0.086	0.026	0.026	0.034	25194	-0.54	6.1	0.00
Catches40%	2883	1520	967	553	1363	0.090	0.027	0.027	0.036	25107	-0.88	10.0	0.100
Catches45%	2986	1575	1002	573	1411	0.093	0.028	0.028	0.037	25020	-1.22	14.0	0.100
Catches50%	3089	1629	1037	593	1460	0.096	0.029	0.029	0.038	24934	-1.57	17.9	0.100
Catches55%	3192	1683	1071	612	1509	0.100	0.030	0.030	0.040	24847	-1.91	22	0.100
Catches60%	3295	1738	1106	632	1557	0.103	0.031	0.031	0.041	24760	-2.3	26	0.100

The results of simulations 1, 2 and 3 are identical for the year 2026, except for the spawning biomass (within a few tonnes), because recruitment will only gradually modify the forecasts of spawning biomass and fishing mortality in the following years.

2026 capture scenarios

Tous les bars pêchés dans la zone du stock bss.27.4bc7adh

Basis	Rem_4bc7adh_2026	L_4bc7adh_2026	D_4bc7adh_2026	RR_4bc7adh_2026	advice_change_4bc7adh
Catches5%	2755	1000	415	1342	5
Catches10%	2886	1047	434	1406	10
Catches15%	3019	1095	454	1470	15
Catches20%	3149	1142	474	1533	20
Catches25%	3282	1190	494	1598	25
Catches30%	3413	1237	513	1661	30
Catches35%	3544	1285	533	1725	35
Catches40%	3674	1332	553	1789	40
Catches45%	3807	1381	573	1853	45
Catches50%	3937	1429	593	1917	50
Catches55%	4069	1476	612	1981	55
Catches60%	4200	1524	632	2044	60

To calculate the removals carried out in divisions 4.b-c and 7.a.d-h, we considered that the increase in the catch limits for the sea bass stock in the Celtic Sea, English Channel and North Sea was the same as those for the sea bass stock in the Bay of Biscay (i.e. the proportions of increase could have been different between the 2 stocks).

Conclusions

For total removals in divisions 4.b-c and 7.a.d-h.

Scenario	Assumed Recruitment	Increase	Total removals	Com. Landings	Com. Discards	Rec. removals
Strong precaution	Minimum value	25%	3282 tonnes	1190 tonnes	494 tonnes	1598 tonnes
Intermediate precaution	Average value of the last 4 years	35%	3544 tonnes	1285 tonnes	533 tonnes	1725 tonnes
Low precaution	Determined by the SR relationship	60%	4200 tonnes	1524 tonnes	632 tonnes	2044 tonnes

However, part of the catch of the Bay of Biscay sea bass stock is made in divisions 4.b-c and 7.ad-h, where it mixes with the sea bass stock of the Celtic Sea, English Channel, North Sea during summer time.

This should be taken into account when defining the total removals limits for the sea bass stock in the Celtic Sea, the English Channel and the North Sea, but especially for the total removals of divisions 4.b-c and 7.a.d-h.

References

Seisin for the French State

Woillez Mathieu, Macher Claire, Merzereaud Mathieu, Le Grand Christelle (2025). **Effets de l'augmentation des plafonds de captures sur les stocks de bar nord et sud** . Réponse à une demande d'expertise. DG 2025-1977 / P9 25-076 - Saisine DGAMPA du 27/10/2025 .
<https://archimer.ifremer.fr/doc/01007/111841/>

Similar work made for the Bay of Biscay stock with a complementary study on the bio-economic impacts of different sea bass catch limit options for the Bay of Biscay sea bass fishery.

Bio-economic model not implemented in the Celtic Sea, English Channel, North Sea.

In the Bay of Biscay, it highlights an important issue related to the joint catches of sea bass and sole. Given the worrying state of the sole stock, the species appears to be a "choke" species. By extension, pollack is also in the same case in the northern zone.



Thank you for your
attention

