

Governments must not lose sight of urgent need for a quota sharing agreement for North East Atlantic pelagic fish stocks

- Important pelagic fish stocks in the North East Atlantic - mackerel, Atlanto-Scandian herring and blue whiting - continue to be overexploited due to governments' inaction to reach quota sharing agreements for these species.
- Over the past six years, total catches have exceeded sustainable levels by almost five million tonnes¹.
- The states fishing these stocks are some of the wealthiest in the world and have access to rich stock data, giving them a responsibility to follow scientific advice and ensure long-term sustainability.
- Governments failed again to reach a quota sharing agreement at the Coastal States meetings in October 2021, as well as meetings in February and March 2022.

Europe's largest fish stocks under threat

Mackerel, Atlanto-Scandian herring and blue whiting in the North East Atlantic make up one of the largest fish populations in Europe. But due to a lack of proper multinational management, these stocks are being overexploited and are put at risk of future collapse.

In recent years, the populations of these stocks have shown an overall downwards trend². The declining population of Atlanto-Scandian herring is particularly concerning, having fallen 36% over the past decade³.

This stock collapsed in the late 1960s due to overfishing, and only recovered following 20 years of restricted catches⁴. The loss of these stocks would cause huge harm to marine ecosystems in the region, where they are an important source of food for other species.

Consumers would see popular products vanishing from supermarket shelves and menus across Europe and Japan, and fish farms may face disruption to feed supply, as blue whiting is commonly used to produce fishmeal.



JON BILBROUGH

¹ Between 2015 and 2020, actual catch totals exceeded scientifically recommended catch levels recommended by ICES by 4,781,470 tonnes - made up of 988,875 tonnes for herring, 1,584,574 for mackerel, and 2,208,021 for blue whiting (MSC calculation based on six years (2015 – 2020) of advised catch and actual catch data from ICES)

² ICES Advice on fishing opportunities, catch, and effort Ecoregions in the

Northeast Atlantic and the Arctic Ocean (2021): Atlanto-Scandian herring, Mackerel, Blue whiting

³ ICES Advice on fishing opportunities, catch, and effort Ecoregions in the Northeast Atlantic and the Arctic Ocean – Atlanto-Scandian herring (2021)

⁴ Sigurdsson, Thorir. (2006). The Collapse of the Atlanto-Scandian Herring Fishery: Effects on the Icelandic Economy

Combined catch exceeding scientific advice

States are consistently setting quotas which, in sum, exceed scientific advice for mackerel, Atlanto-Scandian herring and blue whiting.

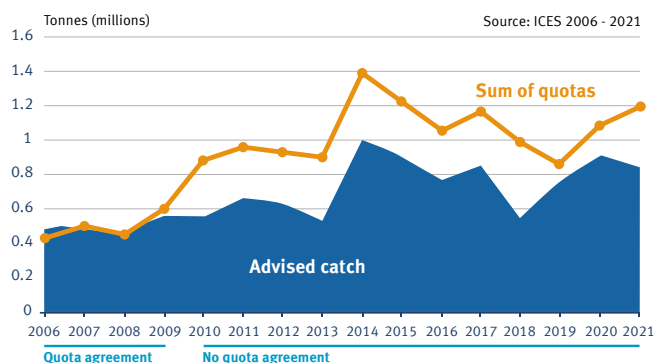
While states agree that a Total Allowable Catch aligning with scientific advice from ICES is needed, they are repeatedly failing to agree how to share this catch between them. As a consequence, each state is setting its individual quota instead - and the sum of these individual quotas is consistently higher than the sustainable catch amount advised by ICES.

Over the past six years alone, the total catch of mackerel, Atlanto-Scandian herring and blue whiting has exceeded the advised limit by **almost five million tonnes**.

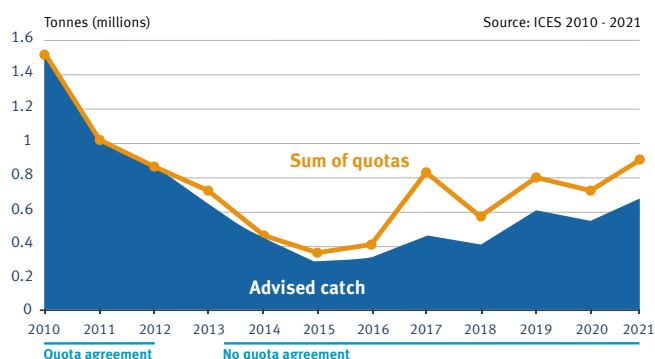
In 2021, the combined individual quotas for mackerel, Atlanto-Scandian herring and blue whiting exceeded ICES advice by 41%, 35% and 25% respectively.

Since 1996 there have only been four years where quota sharing agreements have been in place for all three stocks.

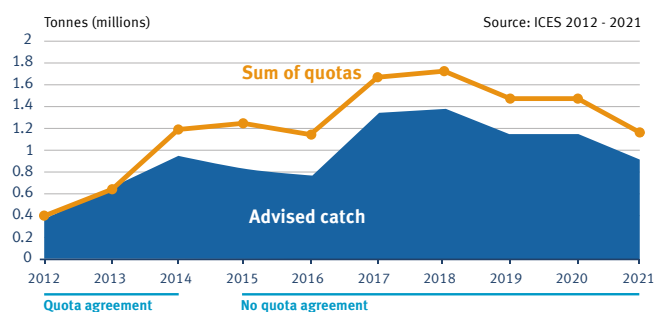
Mackerel



Atlanto-Scandian herring



Blue whiting





The three key pelagic fish stocks are shared by the European Union (EU), Norway, Iceland, Russia, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and the United Kingdom (UK). These states form the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC) contracting parties.

Those states are responsible for setting a Total Allowable Catch in line with scientific advice from the International Council on Exploration of the Seas (ICES). Crucially, the states must agree on quotas to share the Total Allowable Catch between them.

International agreement urgently needed

The health and availability of these important natural resources are under threat. Only by following scientific advice and agreeing quotas that do not exceed sustainable limits can we protect the stocks for current and future generations.

The annual Coastal States meetings in October 2021 failed to deliver a quota sharing agreement for the 2022 season. However, in February 2022 states jointly announced their ambition to agree long-term quota sharing arrangements on each stock in the course of 2022, with follow-up negotiations announced for mid-May⁵.

Action is urgently needed. The distribution of these stocks is shifting, likely accelerated by the impacts of climate change, making the need for adaptive and resilient fisheries management even more crucial.

The states catching these stocks are some of the wealthiest worldwide and have access to rich stock data and scientific expertise. They are also highly sophisticated in terms of fishing technology, controls and enforcement⁶. It is their responsibility to manage these natural resources sustainably for the good of the industry, society and our planet.

The states must find solutions to the stock sharing dilemma and, over the course of the coming weeks and months, reach a sharing agreement that will ensure the long-term sustainability of these economically and ecologically important stocks.

Unsustainable fishery management

Robust stock management, science-based catch quotas and cooperation between all states are important components of an effective and sustainable

fisheries management framework. They are also key requirements of the [MSC Fisheries Standard](#), which is based on the [United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation's \(FAO\) Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries](#).

The lack of quota sharing agreements has resulted in all MSC certified mackerel, Atlanto-Scandian herring, and blue whiting fisheries in the North East Atlantic losing MSC certification⁷.

Despite the best efforts of fishers, their practices cannot be certified sustainable without effective regional fisheries management in place. Until governments put quota sharing agreements in place that ensure the long-term health of these stocks, independent assessors cannot reinstate MSC certificates for the Atlanto-Scandian herring, mackerel or blue whiting fisheries.

Supply chain action

Retailers and brands can choose sustainable alternatives for the suspended fisheries, such as Chilean jack mackerel fishery, which is MSC-certified and is being used as an alternative to North East Atlantic mackerel across some EU supply chains. Certified North Sea herring remains a sustainable alternative to Atlanto-Scandian herring.

The [North East Atlantic Pelagic Advisory \(NAPA\) Group](#) continue to work with brands and retailers globally through their policy Fisheries Improvement Project (FIP) for Atlanto-Scandian herring and mackerel, and [Marin Trust Improver Programme](#) (IP) for blue whiting. They recently released an allocation paper⁸ that includes recommendations for Coastal States to improve sustainable management of pelagic stocks in the North East Atlantic.

The MSC is calling on Governments to reach a quota sharing agreement during upcoming negotiations, which will be held between 11 – 13 May 2022 to ensure future catches are within scientifically advised limits.

⁵ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (2022). Chairs' joint report of the February 2022 consultations

⁶ Report of the Performance Review Panel (2014). North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC)

⁷ Atlanto-Scandian herring and blue whiting fisheries to be suspended (Dec 2020)

⁸ Pickerell, T (2022). NAPA Position Paper: The collective voice of the market is calling for change: will Coastal States listen?

The MSC uses the ecolabel and fishery certification program to contribute to the health of the world's oceans by recognising and rewarding sustainable fishing. It is the only wild-capture fisheries certification and ecolabelling program that meets best practice requirements set by both the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UNFAO) and ISEAL, the global membership association for sustainability standards.