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Urgent government action needed to protect vital pelagic fish stocks in the North-East Atlantic

New scientific advice shows AS herring, blue whiting and mackerel stocks over-exploited in 2021

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) is calling for urgent action as ecologically and economically vital pelagic fish stocks in the North East Atlantic continues to be overexploited due to years of failure by governments to agree catch quotas in a way which safeguards their future.

The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea ([ICES](#)), which provides scientific advice on sustainable catch levels, has published new advice which shows that the catch of mackerel, Atlanto-Scandian herring, and blue whiting in 2021 again exceeded scientifically advised limits by 27%, 31% and 23% respectively (1). These limits are recommended to ensure the long-term viability of these stocks and consistently overshooting them puts the health of the ocean, economies and livelihoods at risk.

MSC analysis of the data shows that in the last six years alone, total combined catches of mackerel, Atlanto-Scandian herring and blue whiting equate to more than 4.5 million tonnes of fish which, if the scientific advice had been followed, should have been left in the sea (2).

While ICES advice for blue whiting has increased significantly, there is no room for complacency because without an internationally agreed management framework, the future health of these stocks are put in jeopardy (3). Atlanto-Scandian herring in particular has declined in stock size by 32% over the last decade (4).

These North-East Atlantic pelagic stocks represent one of the largest fish populations in Europe and are fished by some of the richest nations in the world. But these shared natural resources are being fished according to quotas that are set unilaterally by individual nations, resulting in ongoing overexploitation.

The MSC is calling on policy makers from the fishing nations of the North East Atlantic to reach a shared agreement in line with the new scientific advice. The upcoming Coastal States meeting from 14th October 2022, will be a critical meeting to progress negotiations and seek a quota share agreement in line with scientific advice (6).

Erin Priddle, Regional Director, North Europe said: “The science is clear: sustainable, well managed fisheries, provide long-term economic certainty for the nations that rely on their health for future prosperity. We therefore urge fishing nations to set aside national interests and commit to securing a long-term science-based agreement for the North East Atlantic pelagic stocks at the upcoming Coastal States meeting. Global challenges – like climate change and political instability - may make reaching an agreement more challenging. However, they also highlight the urgent need for long-term management agreements, so nations can sustainably manage fish stocks for now, and for the future.”

– ENDS –

Notes to editors

Mackerel, blue whiting and Atlanto-Scandian herring stocks in the North-East-Atlantic are shared by the European Union (EU), Norway, Iceland, Russia, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and most recently the United Kingdom (UK), which claimed independent Coastal State status in 2020. These states form the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC) contracting parties.

References:

1. Calculated based on new data released by ICES 30 September 2022 for:

- [Mackerel](#)
- [Atlanto-Scandian herring](#)
- [Blue whiting](#)

2. Between 2016 and 2021, actual catch totals have exceeded sustainable catch levels recommended by ICES by 4.527 million tonnes - made up of 1.144 million tonnes of herring, 1.517 million tonnes of mackerel, and 1.866 million tonnes of blue whiting (MSC calculation based on six years (2016 – 2021) of advised catch and actual catch data from ICES).

3. Researchgate: [The Collapse of the Atlanto-Scandian Herring Fishery: Effects on the Icelandic Economy](#)

4. ICES. 2022. Herring (*Clupea harengus*) in subareas 1, 2, 5 and divisions 4.a and 14.a, Norwegian spring-spawning herring (the Northeast Atlantic and Arctic Ocean), published 30 September 2022. <https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.advice.19772380>: Herring spawning stock biomass in 2022 (3.867 million tonnes) is only 68% of what it used to be in 2012 (5.673 million tonnes). This is a decline by 32% in ten years.

5. [The European Commission \(05/11/2020\)](#)

6. [North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission Coastal States meetings](#)



ⁱ Advice showed that Blue Whiting stock increased by 81%,