



SUSTAINABILITY OF PELAGIC STOCKS IN THE NORTH EAST ATLANTIC

1 DECEMBER
2020

Three major stocks in the North East Atlantic (NEA) are being fished above scientifically advised limits, because governments have failed to reach quota sharing agreements for each stock.

As a result, Atlanto-Scandian herring and blue whiting fisheries face suspension of their MSC certificates by 30 December 2020. All NEA mackerel certificates were suspended in 2019 for the same reason.

NATIONS FISHING ATLANTO-SCANDIAN HERRING, MACKEREL, AND BLUE WHITING

These three key pelagic fish stocks 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.

INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENT URGENTLY NEEDED

Fish do not respect national borders, with species often distributed across large migratory areas. States that share large or migratory fish stocks are required by the United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement² to work together to ensure long-term sustainability of shared stocks.

To effectively manage stocks and prevent overfishing, states should:

- **Set a total allowable catch for each stock, in line with scientific advice.** Provided by intergovernmental organisations such as ICES.
- **Agree how the total allowable catch will be shared between states by allocating quotas.** They should also review how quotas are shared when the distribution of fish stocks across national boundaries changes.

NORTH EAST ATLANTIC PELAGIC STOCKS IN DECLINE

- The spawning populations of the region's three key pelagic stocks, Atlanto-Scandian herring, mackerel, and blue whiting, are in decline¹.
- If populations fall below the threshold set by the [International Council for the Exploration of the Sea \(ICES\)](#), then the species' ability to reproduce may be impaired.
- To date, these stocks remain above the ICES threshold, but without careful management, they are at risk of overfishing: Atlanto-Scandian herring collapsed in the 1960s due to poor management and took 20 years to recover.
- Pelagic stocks fluctuate naturally as a result of environmental factors such as climate change, food scarcity, disease, and predation, but overfishing causes longer term reductions.

REQUIREMENTS OF THE MSC FISHERIES STANDARD

The MSC Fisheries Standard sets out requirements to ensure stocks remain healthy, minimise environmental impacts and ensure fisheries are managed effectively.

The Standard enables fisheries to make improvements: independent assessors may apply conditions of certification which must be resolved within the five-year period of certification.

If conditions are not met, fisheries risk losing their certificates. The NEA pelagic fisheries were set conditions to ensure a robust management framework was in place in order to protect the future health of stocks.

¹ ICES advice on fishing opportunities, catch and effort – Mackerel (2020). ICES advice on fishing opportunities, catch and effort Atlanto-Scandian herring (2020). ICES advice on fishing opportunities, catch and effort – blue whiting (2020)

² United Nations Conference on straddling fish stocks and highly migratory fish stocks (1995)

MACKEREL

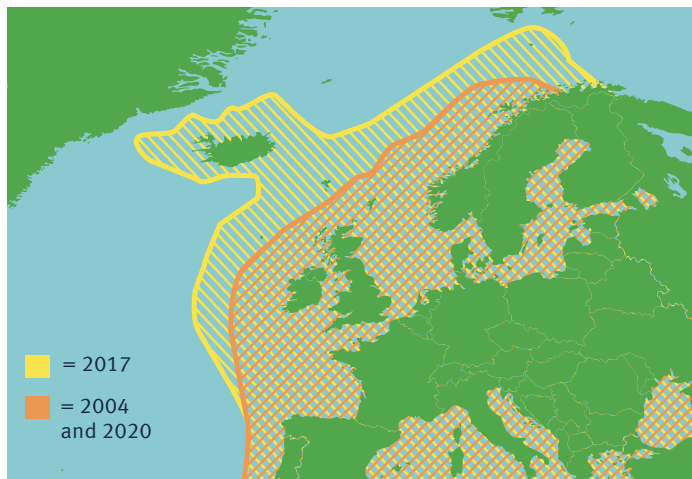
Mackerel is an important and popular consumer product:

- Nearly 54,800 tonnes of MSC labelled mackerel was sold in 2019 - 2020, with 59% of sales in the UK, France and Japan.
- Over 1000 different MSC labelled mackerel products were available to consumers worldwide.

THE SHIFTING DISTRIBUTION OF MACKEREL

- Before 2004, mackerel stock was not found in Icelandic or Greenlandic waters, but subsequently moved west into this region.
- In more recent years, the distribution has changed: in 2020, mackerel were again distributed in the north east of the region, rather than the west³.

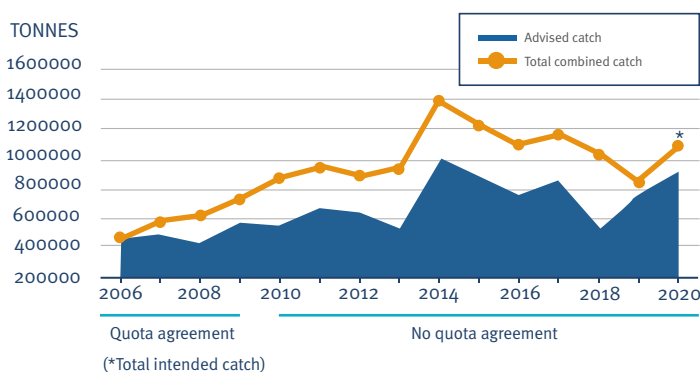
Estimated distribution of mackerel in the Northeast Atlantic



OVERFISHING OF NORTH EAST ATLANTIC STOCK

There has been no quota sharing agreement for mackerel since 2009 and the combined catch from each state has exceeded the limit recommended by ICES since 2006.

Combined total mackerel catch compared to scientific advice



Source: ICES (2006 - 2020)

In 2018, ICES warned that mackerel stock size had fallen below the 'red alert' threshold⁴, but revised their estimates in May 2019. Following improvements in how stocks were modelled, estimates were raised back above the threshold⁵. However, the stock continued to be fished above scientifically advised levels.

During October 2020 Coastal States negotiations, states did not reach a quota sharing agreement for mackerel.

SUSPENSION OF MSC CERTIFICATES

Until 2019, there were four mackerel fisheries responsible for all MSC certified mackerel catch from the North East Atlantic:

- Mackerel Industry Northern Sustainability Alliance (MINSAs)
- ISF Iceland
- Northern Ireland Pelagic Sustainability Group (NIPSG)
- Faroese Pelagic Organisation

In 2016, independent assessors identified a risk to future stock health and set conditions of certification for all mackerel fisheries in the North East Atlantic. This required the relevant states to reach a quota-sharing agreement by November 2021.

In March 2019, independent assessors suspended the MSC certificates of all mackerel fisheries in the North East Atlantic⁶, over two years before the deadline for resolving conditions. The suspension was triggered by an ICES stock estimate which found stocks to be below the threshold for sustainable reproduction.

Although a revised estimate by ICES means stock levels are still currently above the threshold, independent assessors have not reinstated the fisheries' MSC certification. This is because they require a quota sharing agreement to certify the long-term sustainability of fisheries.

³ [Cruise report from the International Ecosystem Summer Survey in the Nordic Seas \(IESSNS\) 2020](#)

⁴ [ICES advice 2018](#)

⁵ [ICES Special Request Advice, Ecoregions in the Northeast Atlantic and Arctic Ocean, \(May 2019\)](#)

⁶ [MSC certificates suspended for all North East Atlantic mackerel fisheries \(March 2019\)](#)

ATLANTO-SCANDIAN HERRING AND BLUE WHITING

Herring is an important and popular consumer product:

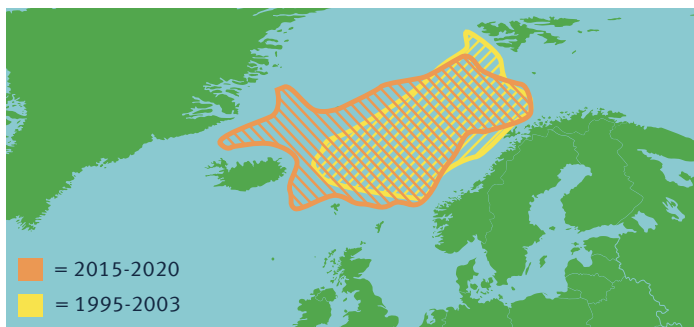
- In 2019/20, consumers bought over 164,000 tonnes of MSC labelled herring, with over 3,100 MSC labelled products available.
- One third of all MSC-certified herring products are sold in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.
- Around 50% of all MSC certified herring catch is Atlanto-Scandian herring⁷.

Blue whiting is predominantly used to produce fishmeal for farmed salmon.

- A small quantity of MSC labelled blue whiting is sold as surimi to consumers in Japan, Australia and France.
- Blue whiting is also sold as a frozen product to consumers in Africa and China.

DISTRIBUTION OF STOCKS

Estimated distribution of Atlanto-Scandian herring in the Northeast Atlantic



Adapted from International ecosystem surveys in the Nordic Seas (1995 - 2020)

- In 1994, Atlanto-Scandian herring stock summer distribution began to shift west towards Iceland. This change in distribution became more pronounced from 2015, and a greater abundance of stock is now found in northern Icelandic waters.

Estimated distribution of blue whiting in the Northeast Atlantic



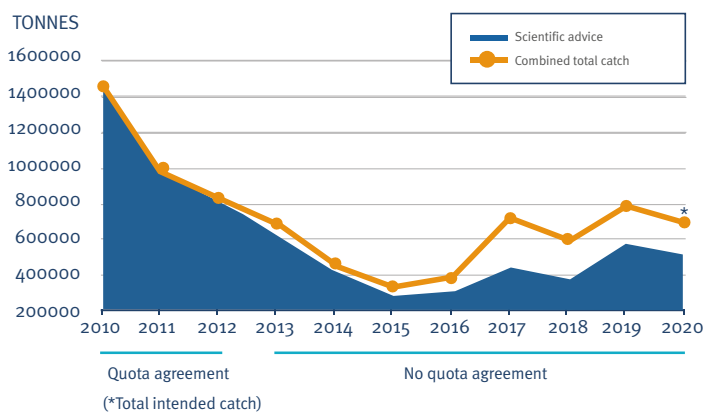
Ref: Institute of Marine Research (2013)

- Blue whiting stock is widely distributed throughout the North East Atlantic.

OVERFISHING OF NORTH EAST ATLANTIC STOCKS

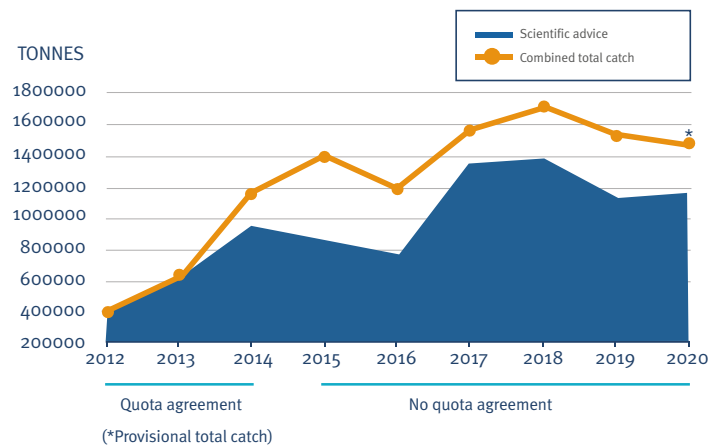
There has been no quota sharing agreement for Atlanto-Scandian herring since 2012, or for blue whiting since 2014. Instead, each state sets its individual quota for the year. When combined, the catch from all states consistently exceeds ICES advice.

Combined total Atlanto-Scandian herring catch compared to scientific advice



Source: ICES (2010 - 2020)

Combined total blue whiting catch compared to scientific advice



Source: ICES (2012 - 2020)

During October 2020 Coastal States negotiations, states agreed a total allowable catch for each stock⁸, but again failed to reach a quota sharing agreement.

⁷ There are several MSC certified herring fisheries. Only the four Atlanto-Scandian herring fisheries are facing suspension of MSC certification

⁸ [The European Commission \(05/11/2020\)](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip20_1920)

SUSPENSION OF MSC CERTIFICATES FOR HERRING AND BLUE WHITING

There are four MSC certified Atlanto-Scandian herring fisheries and four blue whiting fisheries:

Atlanto-Scandian herring fisheries

- Iceland Sustainable Fisheries (ISF) Norwegian and Icelandic Herring Trawl and Seine
- Faroese Pelagic Organisation Atlanto-Scandian herring
- Norway Spring Spawning Herring
- Combined fleets from across the EU and UK: SPSG, DPPO, PFA, SPFPPO & KFO Atlanto-Scandian Purse Seine and Pelagic Trawl Herring

Blue whiting fisheries

- ISF Iceland North East Atlantic blue whiting throughout the North East Atlantic.
- Faroese Pelagic Organization North East Atlantic blue whiting
- Norway North East Atlantic blue whiting
- Combined fleets from across the EU and UK: PFA, DPPO, KFO, SPSG & Compagnie des Pêches St Malo North East Atlantic blue whiting Pelagic Trawl

Independent assessors identified the risk to future stock health and set conditions against their certification in 2015, requiring states to reach a quota-sharing agreement by November 2020. Without a quota sharing agreement, these fisheries will lose their MSC certificates by 30 December 2020.

CAN MSC CERTIFICATION BE REINSTATED?

Fisheries have 90 days from the notice of suspension to submit a corrective action plan to assessors. This must set out how the fishery will address the causes of suspension. If the plan is approved, their MSC certificate can be reinstated in the future, but only after the necessary improvements have been made and successfully audited. In this case the fisheries need to show there is a quota sharing agreement between all fishing nations in place.

If the fishery does not achieve the improvements required before the deadline set in the action plan, the fishery is withdrawn from the MSC program. Fisheries can begin a new assessment to re-join the MSC program later – but only when the conditions of previous certifications have been met.

The NEAFC states have agreed to meet in January 2021 to renegotiate quotas for Atlanto-Scandian herring. The MSC is not aware of any renegotiations planned for blue whiting or mackerel.



SOURCING ALTERNATIVE PRODUCTS

There are several other MSC certified herring fisheries from which products can be sourced. This includes North Sea herring, which has an annual catch of 500,000 tonnes, Central Baltic herring, Iceland summer spawning herring and Irish Sea herring.



There are no direct alternatives for mackerel that are certified. However, alternate species such as Chilean Jack mackerel have been used for similar canned MSC products in the past year.

A list of alternative MSC certified fisheries can be found at: [fisheries.msc.org](https://www.fisheries.msc.org)

Consumers are encouraged to continue to only buy MSC certified products and look for the blue ecolabel when purchasing seafood. If no MSC certified Atlanto-Scandian herring, blue whiting or mackerel products are available, we advise consumers to look for alternative MSC certified seafood.

THE IMPACT OF SUSPENSION ON BUYERS AND RETAILERS



If a fishery's certificate is suspended, fish caught on or after the date of suspension cannot be traded as MSC certified or carry the MSC ecolabel.

MSC certified fish caught before the date of suspension can still be stocked and sold with the MSC label after the suspension has come into force.

Fish caught before suspension but landed afterwards can only be sold as MSC certified if the fishery can show the fish were separated on board according to date of capture.