

EU pelagic industry position paper on the Report of the Coastal States Working Group on the distribution of Northeast Atlantic Mackerel and on the continuation of Coastal States consultations on this stock

At the Coastal States meeting of 27 October 2021, the delegations agreed to continue consulting on a comprehensive and inclusive quota-sharing agreement as early as possible in 2022, with the best endeavours to reach a swift conclusion. They also agreed to establish a Working Group to collect and collate information on the geographical distribution of the mackerel stock in the North-East Atlantic, based on internationally recognised data collection methods and on the distribution of catches from this stock. At a Coastal States meeting on 14 March 2022, the report by this Working Group was presented.

With regard to the report, the EU pelagic industry notes the following.

- The report describes a great number of caveats, limitations and uncertainties in relation to the methodology and the outcome, the main ones being:
 - Currently no single methodology or survey strategy is capable of providing data on all life stages, over a complete annual cycle and the entire spatial distribution of the stock.
 - The surveys do not, and mostly probably never will, encompass the whole distributional area of a particular stage in the life history.
 - The available survey data is currently not able to provide information on at least two ages in the life history (age 1 and 2) nor the spatial distribution of the stock during the winter period.
 - The data indicate that the distribution of the mackerel stock is dynamic with change occurring at short (inter-annual) and longer-term (decadal) temporal scales; the drivers of the change are largely not fully understood.
 - All the distributions from survey data are not easily lined up within the framework of either a monthly or a quarterly distribution.
 - Since the catch data held by ICES did not identify the zone but the ICES rectangle, there was potential for bias from the allocation methodology used, with 19.7% of the catches occurring in rectangles covering two or three zones.
- At face value, and while acknowledging abovementioned uncertainties, the main outcomes paint very different pictures. The IESSNS survey on feeding stock biomass (which includes coverage of the North Sea only since 2018) indicates a primarily northward expansion, with the highest percentages in Norwegian and international waters and numbers approaching zero in Icelandic and Greenlandic waters. The MEGS egg surveys show a concentration of abundance in UK and EU waters (West and South of the British Isles) and UK, Norwegian and EU waters (North Sea) respectively. The IBTS juveniles survey shows a concentration in UK and EU waters. Finally, catch data indicates a trend of catches increasingly taking place in UK and international waters, with both zones also topping the list in terms of proportions, followed by the EU. With regard to catches, it needs pointing out that these are largely driven by specific fleet preferences and access arrangements.

The EU pelagic industry concludes that the data presented in the report, while in itself the best of endeavours by the Coastal States scientific community, does not provide a basis for taking a zonal attachment approach to the quota-sharing arrangement for this stock. Therefore it calls on the European Commission and the EU Member States to set a strong EU negotiating mandate that requires the Commission to

- continue to seek a quota-sharing arrangement on the basis of those in place prior to 2014;
- seek a constructive cooperation with the UK in this matter, reflecting the ties between the EU and the UK through their Trade and Cooperation Agreement;
- consider every means available to deter other Coastal States from setting autonomous quotas that would drive the sum of all quotas above the agreed TAC, including the possibility of raising the EU quota.