



EUROPEAN COMMISSION  
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR MARITIME AFFAIRS AND FISHERIES

Fisheries Policy Atlantic, North Sea, Baltic and Outermost Regions  
The Director

Brussels  
MARE.C.1/IV/ms/

**Subject: Fishing opportunities for EU stock in the South Western Waters for 2024**

Dear Mr Sverdrup-Jensen,

Thank you for your letter of 20 November from the South Western waters working group on the fishing opportunities for 2024.

On 12 December, the Council of Ministers decided on fishing opportunities for 2024, with increases in TACs for stocks on the Cantabrian Sea and Atlantic Iberian waters and significant reductions in TACs for stocks in the Bay of Biscay, in line with the latest ICES advice.

As an overall outcome, for the stocks managed by the European Union, the Council adopted 14 stocks based on MSY advice, as proposed by the Commission.

However, I do share your concern about the state of the stocks in the Bay of Biscay and I can confirm that the Council's decisions have been particularly difficult to take for this area. On a positive note, we expect the next ICES benchmarks on sole and Southern seabass in the Bay of Biscay to take place in early 2024.

Of the 9 TACs proposed for a multiannual period, 8 were established for 2 years or more to ensure stability and predictability, including key stocks you mention in your letter as whiting and pollack in the Bay of Biscay and Atlantic Iberian waters. However, please note that for the latter a provisional TAC of six months has been agreed for the stock component of POL/8ABDE.

In that regard, I read your comments on the "rfb rule" implemented by ICES as of 2022. The "rfb rule" is one of the advice rule ICES applies to provide advice for data-limited stocks in line with its technical guidance for stocks in categories 2 and 3. ICES has worked to continuously advance and test these methods and to develop the advisory framework for data-limited stocks.

As you are very aware of, the Commission cannot interfere with the ICES advice process at any stage. However, I do invite you to discuss with your national administration and eventually with ICES on how you could possibly contribute to improve data quality and availability for the stocks of whiting and pollack in the Bay of Biscay.

The Commission appreciates that when the MSY advice is properly implemented fisheries turn profitable as we have seen with hake, megrim and anglerfish in the South Western Waters and we commend the fishing industry for their engagement in managing these stock sustainably.

To continue driving the sustainable management of stocks in the Bay of Biscay, we would like to invite stakeholders to discuss and agree on introducing technical measures that contribute to improving the stocks in this sea basin, especially when it comes to pollack in the Bay of Biscay. This should be done under regionalisation.

Our common aim for the Bay of Biscay and for all other stocks of interest to our fishing industry is to keep them above safe levels as this is the best way to avoid fluctuations between the years. Therefore, I invite you to consider measures that contribute to keeping all stocks in the South Western Waters above MSY  $B_{\text{trigger}}$ .

Let me now say something on sole in the Bay of Biscay. Indeed, fishing opportunities can be set in the  $F_{\text{MSY}}$  upper range under specific circumstances being: i) the biomass of the stock concerned is above MSY  $B_{\text{trigger}}$ , ii) the stock is mentioned as a limiting species by ICES. The latter condition has not been met for this sole stock and thus the fishing opportunity for that stock has been set at  $F_{\text{MSY}}$  point value.

Importantly, I would like to recall that fishing opportunities have to be based on the rules set in the multiannual plans adopted by the co-legislators and recommendations that go beyond those rules cannot be implemented.

Finally, please let me thank you for your valuable inputs and collaboration on the fishing opportunities as well as on a series of other relevant files. The Commission very much values your inputs and I encourage you to continue on this line also in the next years.

Finally, I would like to wish you, the members of your organisation and their families a nice and peaceful winter break and I send you my best wishes for the New Year 2024.

Yours faithfully,

Fabrizio DONATELLA