



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR MARITIME AFFAIRS AND FISHERIES

The Director-General

Brussels,
MARE.C5/AR/vr

Subject: Preparations of the benchmark on Northeast Atlantic Mackerel

Dear Mr Jensen,

Thank you for your continued efforts in delivering high-quality advice to support fisheries management, and for sharing your report on preparations for the ICES benchmark on Northeast Atlantic mackerel.

We appreciate the invitation extended to DG MARE colleagues to attend the meeting on 12 September 2024 where benchmark-related issues were presented and discussed among PELAC members. This ongoing engagement ensures that the Commission remains well-informed about your activities.

We share your view on the importance of maintaining high-quality ICES advice for mackerel and agree on the need to further examine stock assessment approaches and their underlying assumptions. As you rightly pointed out, there are various uncertainties and biases in the input data for the assessment model that require attention. These include issues related to catches, recruitment indices, survey data, and other factors. We hope the benchmark process will effectively evaluate how such uncertainties are addressed in the SAM model (as well as any other models that might be run at benchmark), including aspects such as model configuration, data input filtering, age-reading errors, and data weighting. Like you, we believe that minimizing biases and uncertainties, while ensuring robust data quality (including catch statistics), is essential throughout this process.

While the benchmark exercise will focus on resolving these issues, this work will not conclude there. We are sure that continuous improvements will take place in other forums, such as survey planning groups and stock assessment groups. In this vein, the Commission attended, from 9 to 13 December, the WKBMACNSSH_data Group “Benchmark Workshop on Norwegian Spring Spawning Herring and Mackerel”

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organised by ICES in preparation of the benchmark to screen and try to address the data issues ahead of the benchmark itself. Moreover, the Commission is collaborating with Member State authorities to ensure that survey coverage is not reduced, thereby safeguarding the integrity of scientific results, and avoiding disruptions to survey data series.

The Commission also acknowledges the potential impacts of climate change on fish stocks, particularly mackerel. However, fishing patterns may not always reflect these changes, as they are often more directly influenced by regulatory frameworks - such as closed seasons and access arrangements negotiated by coastal states. Multispecies and ecosystem-level considerations, including those related to climate change, are being explored by ICES' Working Group on Integrated Assessments of the Norwegian Sea (WGINOR). The Terms of Reference (ToRs) for this group are currently under revision, and we encourage PELAC to provide input to enhance collaboration between stakeholders and ICES in the stock assessment process.

Additionally, the Commission would welcome PELAC's recommendations on mackerel management measures for ICES evaluation, particularly in light of its recent advice to move away from the stock component structure. Your recommendations will also be welcome ahead of the MSE or LTMS discussions after the benchmark exercise.

We are eager to see the outcomes of the benchmark, especially ICES' approach to addressing key issues such as the estimation of spawning stock biomass, which still relies on the notion of stock components, and the fixed natural mortality rates currently applied across all ages and years. Improved understanding of the tagging data and its impact on assessments will also be crucial.

Thank you once again for your dedication and efforts. I am looking forward to our continued fruitful cooperation. Should you have any further questions on this reply, please contact Ms Julia Rubeck, our Advisory Councils coordinator, via the functional mailbox MARE-AC@ec.europa.eu, as well as Ms Jessica Demblon via Jessica.Demblon@ec.europa.eu.

Yours sincerely,

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