

Ms Charlina Vitcheva

Director General

Directorate General Maritime Affairs and Fisheries

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BELGIUM

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PelAC reference: 2425PAC81

Subject: Herring advice

Dear Ms. Charlina Vitcheva,

The Pelagic Advisory Council (PelAC) appreciates the opportunity to provide recommendations on Total Allowable Catches (TACs) for 2026 for 6a North Autumn spawning herring, 6a South 7bc herring, Irish Sea herring, Celtic Sea herring and North Sea Autumn Spawning herring.

In line with ICES advice on non-fisheries conservation consideration, the PelAC encourage ICES and the Member States to follow up on reducing the impact of non-fisheries activities on herring spawning habitats.

We hope you can take the matter into consideration.

Kind regards,



Esben Sverdrup-Jensen

Chair of the Pelagic Advisory Council



6.a North Autumn Spawning Herring

The PelAC recommends following the ICES MSY-advice and setting the TAC in 2026 at 1,501 tonnes.

The PelAC notes that the 2024 catches were dominated by spring spawning herring, from either the 6.aN or 6.aS, 7.b-c stocks, which were taken as a non-target bycatch in the quarter 1 mackerel fishery. These catches were included in the assessment, despite the assessment being specifically focussed on the autumn spawning herring. In contrast spring spawning herring are excluded from the genetically split biomass index used in the assessment. Spring spawning herring are typically larger-at-age than autumn spawners and their inclusion in the catch data may affect the length-based indicator. The PelAC would like to highlight the apparent contradiction in the inclusion of different data sources and question whether this is appropriate. There is also a need to better understand the dynamics of spring spawning herring in 6.a.

For the fourth consecutive year, ICES advised that the autumn-spawning herring in 6.a North are genetically the same population as the North Sea autumn-spawning stock and that further work should be carried out to evaluate the current view that these stocks should continue to be assessed separately. The PelAC questions why this evaluation has not been conducted yet and whether it is scientifically appropriate to continue assessing these stocks separately.

6.a South, 7.b-c Herring

The PelAC recommends following the ICES MSY-advice and setting the TAC in 2026 at 3,269 tonnes.

The 6.aS, 7.b-c herring stock has seen a decreasing trend in its biomass index, similar to the 6.aN Autumn spawning herring stock. However, the index remains above the trigger point, leading to a 20% increase in the advised catch compared to 2025. The 2026 increase is limited to 20% due to the stability clause. However there is a discrepancy between the harvest rate calculated by the constant harvest rate (CHR) (7,105 tons) and the current advice (3,269 tons), which is due to the initial advice level set after the benchmark in 2022. This was based on the monitoring TAC which was based on the incorrect assumption that the 6.aS, 7.b-c was the minority stock in 6.a. PELAC would ask ICES to re-evaluate the initial advice level used after the benchmark.

The current Category 3 assessment does not capture the dynamics of the stock and excludes spring spawning herring biomass in 6.aS, 7.b-c, despite the fishery concurrently targeting both winter and spring spawning herring. There is an urgent need to develop a full analytical assessment. The Irish Marine Institute is working towards this and the PelAC supports such efforts. Sufficient resources should be made available to enable this work concluding and a new benchmark conducted. Moreover the further development of the genetic methods to discriminate the spring spawning herring in division 6.a with a view to improving the assessments





Celtic Sea Herring

The PelAC notes that ICES advises a 0 catch for 2026 advice following the MSY approach. However, as in previous years to facilitate continued data collection, a monitoring TAC of 869 tonnes, as advised by ICES, should be set. PelAC supports this.

Celtic Sea herring SSB has increased from approximately 10,000 tons in 2018 to about 20,000 tons currently. Fishing pressure has been very low over the recent years. Despite this, recruitment has remained low, with no sign of recovery.

The 2024 Celtic Sea Herring Acoustic Survey (CSHAS) conducted by the Irish Marine Institute extended into the southern part of the Irish Sea for the first time. This survey only observed juvenile fish, with no mature fish detected. However, the monitoring fishery conducted both before and after the CSHAS did catch mature fish in the same area, suggesting potential issues with the survey's ability to detect mature fish acoustically. In light of these issues, the PelAC supports the development of a synoptic survey regrouping the CSHAS, the Irish Sea acoustic Survey and the CEFAS PELTIC surveys. It also further highlights the value the monitoring fishery for contributing towards the scientific basis of the assessment.

The PelAC supports the improvement of knowledge around mixing of Celtic Sea herring with Irish Sea herring, in line with the ATHERE project referred to previously.

Irish Sea Herring

The PelAC recommends following the ICES MSY-advice and setting the TAC in 2026 at 2,935 tonnes.

We acknowledge ICES has taken on board the PelAC suggestion to remove the ambiguous dual headline advice in 2024 that gave a precautionary approach of zero catch and an MSY TAC of 5,223 tonnes for 2025. The update of the mixed stocks guidelines for catches of the same species are also welcomed, clarifying the need to avoid catches of Celtic Sea herring due to the mixing of both stocks. However, how this advice will be translated into effective management is unclear.

During HAWG 2025 further issues were identified with the Irish Sea herring assessment model, despite the external review that was conducted in 2025. The model was again reconfigured and subsequently underwent external review prior to producing the 2026 catch advice. Errors were detected in the assessment data used for producing the 2025 catch advice. Correction of these errors led to a retrospective change in the perception of the stock, resulting in a decrease in the advice for 2025 from 5,223 to 3,206 tonnes. Following the identification of these errors in the data, the reference points were also recalculated, resulting in the SSB falling below MSY $B_{trigger}$.

The stock assessment remains a category one assessment, with significant issues having been identified repeatedly. The 2026 catch advice recommends setting the TAC at 2,935 tons, if the 2025 TAC is not changed following the reissued advice. For a second consecutive year the advice has been reissued with significant changes in advised catch in the current year. It remains to be seen if the Commission and the UK will revise the 2025 TAC, though there is no evidence this will be the case. The retention of excessively high and incorrectly calculated TACs is not sustainable and is contrary to good fisheries management. The PelAC advises that the 2025 TAC is revised in line with the reissued advice.





Similarly to the Celtic Sea herring advice, the PelAC supports the development of a synoptic survey regrouping the CSHAS, the Irish Sea acoustic Survey and the CEFAS PELTIC surveys for the Irish Sea.

The issue of the mixing between Irish Sea and Celtic Sea herring also needs to be addressed. PelAC supported an EMFAF-2025-PIA-FisheriesScientificAdvice proposal on Atlantic herring population data repository (ATHERE) that directly related to the mixing issue. This project aimed at improving knowledge on the mixing of North Sea herring with Western Baltic Herring and on mixing between Irish Sea and Celtic Sea herring. However, the Commission chose not to fund this proposal, despite the importance of better understanding the genetics of these herring stocks, along with other herring stocks including the important North Sea stock.

Given there are continuing concerns about the data underpinning the assessment, re-issued advice in two successive years and new reference points, the PELAC suggests an urgent benchmark of this stock.

North Sea Autumn Spawning Herring

The PelAC recommends following ICES-MSY advice and setting the 2026 TAC at 287,772 tonnes. The PelAC would like to point out the weak 2022 year class that will become mature in 2025 leading to a decrease of SSB. This decrease of SSB will continue in 2027 leading the stock to fall under Bpa. This decrease could be expected to further decrease considering the 2024 cohort is expected to be very small as confirmed by HERAS, IBTS-Q1 and IBTS-Q3

The PelAC notes that the reduction in productivity observed for North Sea herring would benefit from further research to establish the causes of this decreased productivity. The PelAC notes that the ATHERE project, that aimed at improving knowledge on the mixing of herring populations within the North Sea herring stock, would have enabled better understanding of the composition of survey data in terms of autumn and winter spawners and hence productivity. Given the importance of this stock to many Member States, PelAC requests the Commission to explore other avenues to funding the work in the proposal.

Part of the North Sea herring stock includes winter spawners that are not currently part of the recruitment index used in the assessment. The PelAC welcomes the work done by the scientific institutes to create a comprehensive survey index of recruits that would include autumn spawners and winter spawners. The ATHERE project also addressed part of the mixing issues between Western Baltic herring and North Sea Autumn Spawning herring and should be supported. Furthermore, the stock productivity issues must be better understood. New projects such as C3P-Eaux, aimed at better understanding the future productivity trajectories of small pelagics in relation to global change should be supported and disseminated. C3P-Eaux will particularly aim to shed light on the contribution of the Downs herring component to overall NSASH recruitment and on the survival of this component early life stages.

The PelAC welcomes the result of the Management Strategy Evaluation carried out and published by ICES in April. This MSE has led to a change in reference points with FMSY decreasing from 0.34 to 0.23 in line with historic values.

As a further step PelAC recommends the managers to work together with the stakeholders to adopt a robust and effective ecosystem-based LTMS for North Sea autumn spawning herring. To achieve this the following steps are recommended: finalization and clarification on the operational





Management Objectives for the LTMS; decision on the F-target and B-trigger combination for the HCR; decision on whether to include the TAC change constraints in the HCR; decision on whether to include the 10% banking and borrowing in the HCR; consider the need for measures to minimize risks to juvenile fish or spawning areas. Furthermore PelAC recommends the managers to consider asking ICES to help develop an exceptional circumstances protocol in the first year of application of the LTMS, that would trigger a review of the management strategy if exceptional circumstances are detected by ICES.

In previous advice, the PelAC underlined the importance of investing into human resources dedicated to modelling, the importance of having multiple stock assessors to ensure continuity. The person in charge of modelling the data for North Sea Herring was unfortunately ill and unreachable during HAWG making it challenging to compile the catches for North Sea herring. Such issues could be avoided by having multiple stock assessors and data compilers.

Finally, special management measures have been established in 3a to minimize Western Baltic Spring Spawning herring bycatch. The PelAC would welcome an ICES evaluation to be carried out to measure the effects of these measures. Moreover, an ICES overview of temporal/spatial measures for directed fishing in North Sea and 3A with unavoidable WBSS herring bycatches allowing the exploitation of North Sea herring, sprat and Norway pout would also be welcomed.

