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Pelagic Advisory Council MIRIA preparatory meeting statement

Introduction

The PELAC welcomes the work carried out by ICES in 2025 as a provider of scientific expertise and advice. In 2025, benchmarks for mackerel and Norwegian Sea Spring Spawning herring were completed, along with the publication of the Management Strategy Evaluation on North Sea Autumn Spawning herring, the ICES report on Workshop to compile evidence on the impacts of offshore renewable energy on fisheries and marine ecosystems, the launch of WGENGAGE on stakeholder engagement and the first ever ICES-EFARO workshops on Aquatic Animal Welfare, and the Working Group on Balancing Environmental Social Economic Objective. This work was carried out on top of the recurrent advice on PelAC stocks: mackerel, blue whiting, Atlanto-Scandian herring, North Sea herring, boarfish etc….

Regarding the work with the Commission, we welcome the MIRIA preparatory meeting as well as the MIRIA debrief meetings that are organised around the meetings with ICES.

Issues relating to 2026 ICES advice process

Our main concern this year was on the 2026 mackerel catch advice process. We are aware of conflicting recommendations from the Working Group on Widely Distributed Stocks in comparison to the Advice Drafting Group on Widely Distributed Stocks. We understand this followed from the the updating of the ICES single stock advice guidelines for stocks below Blim.

The new ICES guidelines state that the most plausible low productivity scenario should be considered when providing advice for catch opportunities. The mackerel benchmark report and the WGWIDE report suggest the 2014-2024 recruitment assumptions meet this requirement, following the change in productivity identified in 2014 by the benchmark. However, the ADG requested that the 2017-2024 recruitment assumptions be used in the short-term forecast for mackerel. This change in recruitment assumptions led to a reduction of the catch advice from 299 010 tonnes to 174 357 tonnes. It is important to note that the PelAC has no issue with ICES's final catch recommendation. The issue is that the ADG contradicted the recommendation of WGWIDE as well as the earlier mackerel benchmark. This is regrettable as it seems to somewhat undermine the WGs. Additionally, the process leading to the final recommendations lacked transparency, which undermines confidence in ICES.

Since the benchmark meetings concluded, several groups could have flagged these issues related to the use of the new ICES guidelines:

- The Benchmark Oversight Group could have flagged the new ICES guidelines for ACOM before approving the benchmark report
- The Expert Working Group after discussing the ICES guidelines decided that the 2014-2024 recruitment assumptions met the new ICES guidelines.

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- The Advice Drafting Group should have sought the expertise of the Expert Working Group and used their expertise to decide whether the current Recruitment assumptions are in line with the guidelines or not.

In the end, the issue is linked to the process around ICES advice, WGIWDE's conclusions gave advice for 2026 using the 2014-2024 assumptions, and the ADG decided that the 2017-2024 assumptions were more in line with the guidelines. The PelAC is of the opinion that scientific matters should be led by the Expert Working Group and not by the ADG.

Priorities for 2026

- **Development of Long-Term Management Strategies (LTMS) for Mackerel, Atlanto-Scandian Herring, and Boarfish**

The Pelagic Advisory Council (PelAC) will draft Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) requests to develop robust Long-Term Management Strategies (LTMS) for mackerel, Atlanto-Scandian herring, and boarfish. These future MSEs should, where appropriate, incorporate:

  - climate considerations,
  - the role of the species in the marine food chain, and
  - potential implementation errors.

In addition, PelAC recommends that future LTMS include provisions for exceptional circumstances, allowing for adaptive management in cases where stock dynamics fall outside the scenarios tested by the MSE.

To advance these objectives, PelAC will organize a dedicated workshop on the use of Management Strategy Evaluation to support the implementation of Ecosystem-Based Fisheries Management (EBFM) in EU small pelagic fisheries. This workshop is scheduled for 10 February 2026 in Brussels.

Source: PelAC 2026 fishing opportunities advice

- **Better understand mixing issues through genetic work, mainly between Irish Sea and Celtic Sea herring, and between North Sea herring components, specifically with the Down component.**

The PelAC had supported an application to the EMFAF Call for project on Fisheries Scientific Advice aimed at developing an Atlantic Herring Population data repository. 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. This repository would have provided key data on mixing issues in the Irish Sea and in the Celtic Sea. Unfortunately, the project was not funded, further delaying the collection of key data. Considering the state of Irish Sea herring and the uncertainties in the advice, a key priority for the PelAC remains to address the mixing issues for this stock, considering Celtic Sea herring has not recovered despite more than ten years of zero catch advice and low levels of fishing mortality.

- **Follow up on the implementation of the Horse mackerel research plan**

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In 2024, ICES published the report of the WKBHMB, benchmark report for the three horse mackerel stocks. As highlighted in the benchmark report, ICES's current process is *"deemed to be reactive to the degrading quality of the update assessments rather than proactive"*. To ensure continued development and that progress is made in advance of future benchmarks, ICES developed a list of key action items and a longer-term research plan. The long-term plan for future horse mackerel benchmark lists key actions to improve stock identification, genetic sampling, genetic analyses, biological data, age, fisheries independent data, Fisheries dependent data, assessment development and benchmark planning. We would like to highlight the importance of following up on this plan, though the setting up of a dedicated Horse mackerel study group. The PelAC will be doing so via its Horse mackerel Focus Group.

- **Implement FEISA on concrete case studies such as suggested by the PelAC in its letter to ICES**

In a letter to the Chair of ICES and DG MARE's Science Unit, the Pelagic Advisory Council (PelAC) proposed using case studies to apply the Framework for Ecosystem-Informed Science and Advice (FEISA), building on its ongoing efforts to advance Ecosystem-Based Fisheries Management (EBFM). To further this goal, the PelAC advocates for upgrading the management of Category 1 and 2 stocks by operationalizing FEISA—particularly for pelagic species—through the integration of ecological objectives. For pelagic stocks, this could involve quantifying risks related to climate change, assessing their role in marine food webs, and addressing other ecosystem considerations such as bycatch risk, CO_2 emissions, interactions with Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems (VMEs), overlap with Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and offshore energy, gear loss, vulnerable spawning habitats, gravel extraction, shifting fish distributions, changes in predation, and productivity.

To demonstrate the practical application of FEISA, the PelAC recommends that the European Commission submit a special request to ICES to apply the framework to North Sea herring. This stock is an ideal candidate, as the North Sea is a well-studied sea basin with extensive data and an existing Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) already in place.

Source: PelAC letter on FEISA

ICES-Commission Framework Partnership Agreement

Finally, 2026 marks the last year of the Commission's Framework Partnership Agreement with ICES and we would like to use this opportunity to highlight as others have, key improvements for a future agreement. As you can see from our list of priorities for 2026, the renewal of the ICES-Commission FPA is necessary. Feeding into this discussion, we would like to make three recommendations:

- Multiple stock assessors from different institutes for each stocks

The current structure of stock assessment often involves a data coordinator—responsible for compiling catch data—and a stock assessor—tasked with running the assessment model—who may work within the same or different institutes. However, national priorities, political pressures, and varying resource allocations mean that stocks deemed low priority by the assessing institute may

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receive insufficient time and attention, as evidenced by recent benchmark delays and poor preparation.

The PelAC would like to suggest that the future Framework Partnership agreement include more resources to support multiple stock assessors for each stock, ideally from different scientific institutes. This would not only promote continuous improvement and deeper scrutiny of data and models but also allow ICES to facilitate a more open process, enabling institutes to express their preferences and capacities.

- Balance in funding between data collection and skills

We note that EU funds have put a lot of focus on data collection and ensuring that fishing data is collected and sent to EU scientific institutes to be used in developing advice. We would like to highlight that there needs to be a focus also put on ensuring that more funds are invested in training scientists to be able to use the data collected. This request should be reflected in the future FPA.

- Expand the inclusion of Advisory Council in the ICES-Commission discussions

The European Commission better regulation toolbox highlights the importance of ensuring stakeholder engagement. The toolbox states that *"For very technical initiatives of limited interest for the general public, a targeted consultation of stakeholders is a more suitable means of collecting the necessary evidence".* The ICES special request and FPA fall under *"very technical initiatives"* where a targeted consultation would be warranted, and where the ACs have played a key role in providing concrete recommendations and key advice on ICES work, as shown by this extensive feedback provided by the PelAC. We would therefore request to be included in the drafting process on special request and in the future in the drafting process on recurrent advice.

Source: [European Commission better regulation guidelines]

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Annex: Additional text

ICES 2026 mackerel advice

The update to the guidelines for providing single-stock advice was discussed and approved during ACOM in early March. The mackerel benchmark took place at the end of March. The benchmark report, in line with the ACOM guidelines included a low productivity scenario that was based on a change in mackerel productivity identified in 2014. This is included in the benchmark report as follows:

"For each replicate, future recruitments are generated by resampling from the SAM recruitment estimates for the period 2014 to current year (figure 1.8.1). The rational for choosing this period is that a change in productivity was observed in the stock around 2014, with stable lower recruitment and recruit per spawner observed since then".

Prior to the publication the benchmark report was peer reviewed by two external reviewers and was reviewed by the Benchmark Oversight Group (BOG) and was sent to the ICES Advisory Committee for approval. The application of the new ICES guidelines to set fishing opportunities for stocks below Blim could have been done by BOG and recommended to ACOM. BOG should have flagged the issue around the guidelines and the most plausible low productivity scenario. The final report was approved by ACOM and published.

WGWIDE met in August-September 2025, the usual procedure took place with the group agreeing on the assumptions of the model before running it. WGWIDE had received a request to apply the guidelines approved by ICES ACOM in March. It is important to note that at this stage, the March ACOM report had not yet been published on the ICES website. During the benchmark, the stock assessor explored using the 2017-2024 assumptions because the recent recruitment values were not in line with the average of the 2014-2024 period. These values were explored as they led to significant differences from the 2014-2024 recruitment assumptions. The expert group could not find any scientific justification to change the assumptions used in the short-term forecast and recommended the use of the 2014-2024 recruitment assumptions in the short-term forecast.

WGWIDE report notes:

During the benchmark, a change in mackerel productivity was identified in 2014 (figure 8.8.1). This year marked the end of a high recruitment period, starting with the 2004 recruitment (2002 year-class) that was the first large recruitment that initiated the increase in the stock. The bench-mark therefore decided that the low productivity assumption should be based on the years 2014 onwards.

The three first recruitments in this period (2014, 2015 and 2016) are, however, still relatively high compared to the following ones, and using the years 2017 onwards would represent a more pessimistic productivity assumption. Therefore, in addition to the STF based on the benchmark decision, WGWIDE also considered this alternative, more pessimistic, assumption. The expert group decided however that no scientific justification could be found to change the starting year from the benchmark suggested period starting in 2014.

The advice was then sent to the Advisory Drafting Group, which finalised the advice before submitting it to ACOM for approval and publication. The advice drafting group participants discussed with the

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WGWIDE Chair and decided to go with the 2017-2024 assumptions as the contributions of the 2026 and 2027 recruitment to the catches will make up more than 50 % if the 2027 SSB.

This approach was then sent to ACOM with the following justification:

Following the guidelines, to provide advice for stocks below Blim, 2017–2025 was selected as the time period to calculate the recruitment in the forecast to reflect the currently observed low stock productivity (ICES, 2025b).

The advice that was sent by the ADG to ACOM was approved and published as the 2026 ICES advice.

It is important to note that the PelAC has no issue with ICES's final catch recommendation. The issue is that the ADG went against the recommendation of WGWIDE. In times where rebuilding the mackerel stock should be the focus of the discussions on mackerel, the focus has been set on the ICES advice and the credibility of ICES as an organisation.

Since the benchmark meetings concluded, several groups could have flagged these issues related to the use of the new ICES guidelines:

- The Benchmark Oversight Group could have flagged the new ICES guidelines for ACOM before approving the benchmark report
- The Expert Working Group after discussing the ICES guidelines decided that the 2014-2024 recruitment assumptions met the new ICES guidelines.
- The Advice Drafting Group should have sought the expertise of the Expert Working Group and used their expertise to decide whether the current Recruitment assumptions are in line with the guidelines or not.
- The ICES secretariat should have published the guidelines before the ADG met.

In the end, the issue is linked to the process around ICES advice, WGIWDE's conclusions gave advice for 2026 using the 2014-2024 assumptions, and the ADG decided that the 2017-2024 assumptions were more in line with the guidelines. The PelAC is of the opinion that scientific matters should be decided by the Expert Working Group and not by the ADG.

Follow up on the implementation of the Horse mackerel research plan

In 2024, ICES published the report of the WKBHMB, benchmark report for the three horse mackerel stocks and the boarfish stock. As highlighted in the benchmark report, ICES's current process is *"deemed to be reactive to the degrading quality of the update assessments rather than proactive"*. To ensure continued development and that progress is made in advance of future benchmarks, ICES developed a list of key action items and a longer-term research plan.

The long-term plan for future horse mackerel benchmark lists key actions to improve stock identification, genetic sampling, genetic analyses, biological data, age, fisheries independent data, Fisheries dependent data, assessment development and benchmark planning.

In its long-term management plan, the benchmark includes a timeline and suggests the establishment of a specific long-term horse mackerel study group in ICES to ensure implementation of the long-term research plan. Furthermore, the research plan also suggests the setting up of an annual progress

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meeting where all parties involved are updated on the progress made. The PelAC has compiled a list of actions to be carried out each year to prepare for future benchmarks. The full list of actions is available in annex 1. The PelAC would like an update on the implementation of this plan by ICES and the national institutes.

- Could ICES clarify how a study group can be created, and how can the PelAC support the creation of a Horse Mackerel study group?
- Can we have more information on how to attend the annual progress meeting?

Additional PelAC suggestions:

- **The PelAC also has some stock specific recommendations to improve ICES advice such as:**

Atlanto-Scandian herring

Atlanto-Scandian herring was benchmarked in 2025, and the benchmark report includes recommendations for future work:

The first recommendation is on the inclusion of large incoming cohorts. For herring and mackerel, density-dependent growth causes large cohorts to grow more slowly, resulting in lower weight-at-age and potentially affecting maturity and selectivity assumptions, which can lead to overly optimistic stock advice if recent averages are used. The benchmark advises that annual assessments should analyze incoming cohorts and, in the case of large cohorts, adjust short-term forecasts for weight-at-age, maturity, and selectivity—either using SAM's "biopar" option or external adjustments based on past large cohort behavior.

The second recommendation suggests investigating alternative estimates of natural mortality in the future.

The third recommendation is on the development of a future Long-term Management Strategy, highlighting that the current advice is precautionary if the stability constraints are suspended. The PelAC recommends that a future LTMS for Atlanto-Scandian herring be precautionary, ICES-endorsed, and based on an MSE evaluation to restore and maintain stock biomass above MSY levels, while ensuring long-term sustainable fisheries, an ecosystem-based approach, and the stock's role in healthy food webs.

6a North Autumn Spawning Herring

The 6aN herring catches were dominated by spring spawning herring catches that were included in the assessment. However, the assessment is focused on Autumn spawners, as spring spawners are excluded from the genetically split biomass index used in the assessment. Since spring spawners are typically larger at age than autumn spawners this may affect the length Based Indicators. How is this included in the assessment?

For the fourth consecutive year, ICES has advised that the autumn-spawning herring in 6.a North are genetically identical to 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 suggests genetically assessing the 6aN Herring to evaluate whether the current stock should

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be assessed separately from North Sea herring. Investigate the effects that larger spring spawners may have **on the assessment**

6a South and 7b,c Herring

Given that the starting year of the constant harvest rule (CHR) was determined under a monitoring TAC and premised on the incorrect assumption that the 6aS,7bc stock was a minority component, the PelAC requests that ICES should re-evaluate the initial advice level established post-benchmark. This re-evaluation is necessary to ensure that the advice aligns with the current scientific understanding of stock composition and dynamics.

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