SPSG
Scottish Pelagic Sustainability Group

30th September 2026

Mackerel Briefing Document

North East Atlantic Quota Shares and the Work Towards a Sustainable Fishery

Latest Scientific Advice

The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) is advising a Total Allowable Catch (TAC) of North East Atlantic mackerel (*Scomber scombrus*) for 2027 of 352,938 tonnes, which is 102% higher than their advice for 2026 (174,357 tonnes), and 18% higher than the final agreed TAC (299,010 tonnes) set by Coastal States.

According to ICES, the Spawning Stock Biomass (SSB) is 3.2 million tonnes and is predicted to rise to 3.34 million tonnes in 2028. This stock increase is being driven by good recruitment of two-year-old fish. ICES has also assessed the stock to be above the key SSB threshold known as Blim, below which the stocks capacity to reproduce and recover is considered to be reduced. Crucially, it has now been shown that the stock was not below Blim in 2025 – an assessment which at the time caused considerable turmoil and uncertainty in the industry.

Photo: Danny Bonnar, MSC

Looking to the Future

SPSG believes the current improving stock situation validates the decision-making process by Coastal States when they set the 2026 TAC, where socio-economic factors necessary to protect fishing communities and supply chains were also factored-in alongside the scientific advice.

Looking to the future, several initiatives are in place or are being planned to enhance fisheries management. These include the recent creation of the North East Atlantic Pelagic Group, comprising fisheries representatives from EU, Faroe islands, Iceland, Norway and the UK. This group will work with governments and other stakeholders to ensure better management of pelagic stocks like mackerel.

Furthermore, following the UK Fisheries Act 2020, the Scottish Government is leading work on developing evidence based Long-term Fisheries Management Plans for pelagic stocks, including mackerel, with a statutory deadline of 31 December, 2026.

ICES will provide advice on a management strategy evaluation at some point in the future, hopefully next year, following a service request from Coastal States.

In another development spearheaded by the UK, 2027 will be the first full year where pelagic vessels operating in UK waters are legally required to have Remote Electronic Monitoring in operation, providing a clear point of differentiation that underlines the UK's commitment to the sustainable management of mackerel.

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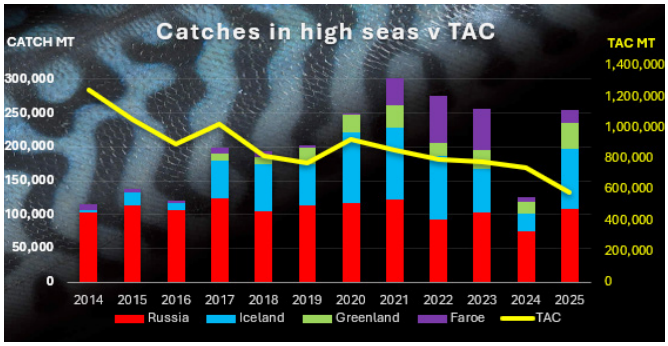
Background

The setting of unilateral quotas for North East Atlantic mackerel was first initiated by Iceland in 2008 which previously had no track record in the fishery. On the back of this, at the end of 2009, the Faroe Islands left the three-party agreement it was participating in with the EU (which the UK was a member at the time) and Norway, resulting in Iceland and the Faroe Islands then setting high unilateral quotas for themselves in the years thereafter. Over the intervening period, Norway, Russia and Greenland all followed suit with their own unilateral quotas at varying times, resulting in fish catches that have exceeded the scientific advice from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES).

However, significant progress was made on 15 December 2025, when the UK, Faroe Islands, Iceland, and Norway agreed an enhanced sharing arrangement for mackerel. This arrangement included a significant package of measures intended to improve long-term stock management.

According to the Scottish Government's own estimates, the agreement delivers

- A considerable reduction in fishing pressure, limiting fishing by Coastal States to around 107.5% of the total allowable catch, versus 127% before there were any arrangements in place.
- Parties to the arrangement also agreed to set total allowable catches for 2026 in line with an advised Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) catch scenario of 299,010 tonnes. This was a decrease of -48% compared to 2025.



Catches in International Waters (NEAFC) versus TAC by Coastal States 2014 – 2025

The UK, with the support of the Scottish pelagic industry, continues to consistently call for the two other main participants in the fishery, the EU and Greenland, to reach a fully comprehensive agreement that will bring everyone in the fishery into a sustainable quota sharing and management framework.

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Key Facts

- The UK has maintained its traditional share of the catch based on a long-standing historical participation in the fishery and has never set a unilateral TAC for mackerel and is committed to working with other coastal states in sustainable management.
- All mackerel caught by the UK fleet is in the UK Exclusive Economic Zone and not in international waters.
- All UK mackerel catches are for the human consumption market, whereas in some years significant tonnages from some other nations goes for fishmeal because they cannot find a market for the fish.
- Some of the nations that have set unilaterally high quotas have not even been able fully catch their self-set allocation.
- The UK is leading attempts to resolve the international quota impasse, with good success so far with the recent agreement with Norway, Iceland and the Faroe Islands reducing fishing pressure significantly.
- The UK Industry is opposed to the use of trans shipping of mackerel catches on the high-seas due to lack of adequate control measures.
- The UK industry favours maintaining closed areas to allow for the juvenile protection of mackerel.
- The UK Government is bound by the Fisheries Act 2020 where quotas must be set at a sustainable level, a legality supported by the UK pelagic sector.
- Under the auspices of the Fisheries Act 2020, Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs) for all key stocks in UK waters are currently undergoing formal consultation and will be adopted at the end of 2026 to re-establish sustainable management of UK stocks.
- The UK mackerel sector is committed to exploring credible pathways with industry partners to ensure MSC certification for North East Atlantic mackerel.

UK pelagic fishermen are actively engaged in data collection

- UK pelagic fisheries are highly selective and have virtually no by-catch of other species or under-sized fish.
- The mid-water trawls and purse seine nets used to catch pelagic fish do not touch the seabed.
- As part of UK food security and resilience, it is important to continue to have UK processing capacity on key species, including mackerel.

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The Situation with UK and European Retailers

Whilst we understand there is great concern among retailers over the current situation, we have significant reservations about the sustainability credentials of other 'mackerel species' that have been adopted, or are being actively considered, as alternative products to stock, including Moroccan origin Atlantic chub mackerel (*Scomber colias*) from fishing area FAO 34 (Eastern Central Atlantic). The rigour of their stock assessments, management programmes and monitoring, and their supply chain integrity are not directly comparable with the high standards associated with the Scottish mackerel fishery. Chilean Jack mackerel (*Trachurus murphyi*), also commonly known as horse mackerel, but different from European horse mackerel (*Trachurus trachurus*) is another species being used as a substitute. Chilean Jack mackerel is not a true mackerel in the taxonomic sense - it belongs to the Carangidae family, whereas Atlantic mackerel belongs to the Scombridae (true mackerel) family (*Scomber scombrus*).

Consumers need to be aware that Atlantic mackerel and Chilean Jack mackerel are entirely different species and are not nutritionally equivalent. Atlantic mackerel contains more than twice as much omega-3, and is higher in other essential nutrients such as selenium. The nutrient-dense nature of Atlantic mackerel is one of the key reasons consumers prefer it over other fish species.

It is worth noting that the North Atlantic Pelagic Advocacy Group (NAPA), a consortium of retailers and other stakeholders who are also seeking resolution to the dispute, has issued three key 'asks' for North East Atlantic Mackerel:

1. Limiting high-seas (international waters) catches to 10% of total catches.
2. Focusing on human consumption for the use of whole mackerel.
3. Limiting banking and borrowing – in which countries bring forward or push back certain amounts of quota between years – to 10% of the annual total.

The UK pelagic sector is fully supportive of these measures and is fully compliant with them.

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UK Sustainability and Environmental Initiatives

The UK mackerel and processing sectors (mainly based in Scotland) is participating in and is spearheading a wide range of initiatives to help improve our understanding of the mackerel stock and enhance sustainability.

These include:

- The catching and processing sectors set up the Scottish Pelagic Sustainability Group (SPSG) in 2007 with the key aim of ensuring mackerel (and other pelagic fish) secure the MSC eco-label.
- Since March 2026, the UK pelagic fleet has Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) onboard all its vessels, meaning that all pelagic fishing activities will be recorded.
- The UK pelagic sector and Scottish government are working alongside the Norwegian Government to develop additional scientific surveys to improve understanding of mackerel recruitment.
- The pelagic sector was instrumental in the creation of the Scottish Pelagic Industry-Science Data Collection Programme, which has now become the main source of biological data on pelagic catches in Scotland, and which is used in ICES stock assessments.
- SPSG won the MSC UK Ocean Leadership award in 2022 in recognition for the efforts they have gone into conducting an industry-science data collection programme.
- The Scottish Pelagic Fishermen's Association has its own Chief Scientific Officer to facilitate direct engagement of the industry in efforts to continuously improve the knowledge and data required for assessing and managing pelagic stocks.
- Full traceability and provenance around seafood is an issue of concern and remains a high priority for our markets. The UK pelagic sector is working together to enable full traceability through the 'Catch to Batch' initiative to enhance the complete supply chain traceability of Scottish mackerel. This meets the Global Dialogue on Seafood Traceability (GDST) and represents one of the best traceability regimes in the global seafood industry that is now being rolled out to all Scottish factories.
- The UK pelagic sector participates in triennial mackerel egg surveys to estimate the spawning stock biomass of mackerel and annual tagging of mackerel in Scottish waters as part of the international tagging programme.
- The UK pelagic sector participates in the EU Life project CIBBRiNA on bycatch mitigation.
- UK large-scale pelagic processing factories have all been equipped with RFID (radio frequency identification) mackerel tag detectors for recovering tags, providing valuable information on stock dynamics.
- The UK pelagic industry participates in the Ocean Stewardship Initiative that focuses on ocean governance and conservation.
- The UK applies strict limits on quota banking and borrowing, helping to prevent overfishing and ensure that catch limits reflect responsible stock use over time.
- The UK mackerel sector is committed to exploring credible pathways with industry partners to ensure MSC certification for North East Atlantic mackerel.
- Supporting the development of a multi-year, Long Term Management Strategy (LTMS) and its implementation.
- The UK pelagic fleet is engaging with the Sea Mammal Research Unit on Endangered, Threatened and Protected (ETP) species observer work, including on whales.

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The position of the Scottish Pelagic Sustainability Group

With regards to the current situation, SPSG is calling for:

- All necessary actions to be taken to curb the additional and unwarranted fishing pressure placed on the mackerel stock by Russia.
- The EU and Greenland to join the UK, Norway, Faroe Islands and Iceland to become part of a comprehensive sharing agreement.
- A 10% cap on mackerel catches set in international waters.
- Catching opportunity to be based on zonal attachment and the availability of mackerel stocks in each coastal state's EEZ, and set within ICES recommendations.
- A limitation on quota flexibility where a country can only carry over or borrow up to 10% of its annual mackerel quota between years.
- A pledge from seafood suppliers that they will continue to source UK mackerel, given that the UK fishing fleet is catching mackerel responsibly and is committed to the sustainability of the fishery.

The innovative 'Catch to Batch' initiative.