

REPORT

Meeting: **ICES Advice 2026**
Parties: **DG MARE, stakeholders**
Date: **7 July 2025**
Location: **Interacio**
Chair: **Norman Graham**
Rapporteur: **NSAC Secretariat**

Norman Graham and Jurgen Bastleer, DG MARE, presented 2026 ICES Advice. The slides were shared with NSAC members together with his report. This report covers the Q&A session following the presentation.

Q&A

Michael Andersen noted that given the natural fluctuations in fish stocks and the fact that many North Sea stocks are currently within safe biological limits, how do you respond to concerns that the scientific advice for ling does not align with fishers' observations at sea? He believed a more pragmatic solution should be sought, especially considering that ling could become a potential choke species under the current management approach?

Patrick Murphy noted that given that hake is becoming a limiting factor under the multiannual plan and there's been little evidence of stock recovery, he believed that the current management system was failing and called for a review of the management system.

Emiel Brouckaert expressed his concerns about the decline in sole stocks in the Channel, which fishers are finding difficult to understand—particularly given that their observations at sea do not align with the scientific advice. This disconnect is having a significant impact on the resilience of certain fleets. Is there room to question the current advice, or will the Commission continue to follow ICES recommendations without further scrutiny? Additionally, should there be a priority listing for benchmark assessments to ensure the advice reflects the best available understanding?

Paul Thomas raised ongoing issues with the Irish Sea herring assessment model, raising important management questions—particularly regarding the potential change to the TAC. Will these concerns be taken into account when setting this year's TAC, or will the current model continue to guide decisions despite its limitations?

Kenn Skau Fischer relayed a concern among fishers regarding the perceived increase in North Sea plaice stocks, as current catch levels do not reflect the high TAC. With the process and timeline for adjustments coming up in the autumn, and the EU management plan for demersal fisheries effectively serving as the overarching strategy, when can we expect a

revision of the North Sea Multiannual Management Plan? Additionally, there is strong opposition to the use of Article 4.6, which has proven to be devastating for the industry.

Graham responded that the Commission understand the concerns raised regarding ling and fully acknowledge the importance of bringing these issues to light. We strongly encourage stakeholders to engage directly with ICES through forums such as MIACO and MIRIA, as these are key opportunities to share observations and raise questions about the advice. If there are additional sources of commercial data that could support or challenge the scientific assessments, it is crucial that these are flagged for consideration. The Commission is still in the process of analyzing the advice, and it will form part of the broader negotiations with the UK and Norway.

Regarding hake **Graham** noted that it is still in discussion whether the Commission will set the TAC lower than ICES advice under MAP.

On sole, **Graham** noted that the Commission fully recognise the heavy reliance on sole in the Channel, particularly for certain fleets. However, there is a legal obligation to base our management decisions on MSY advice. It's also important to note that we are not alone in this process—there are two other key partners involved in the consultations, and the headline scientific advice serves as the starting point for those discussions.

Graham added that Lemon sole is scheduled for benchmark next year.

On Irish Sea herring, **Graham** noted that the situation will largely depend on ongoing discussions with the UK. At this stage, it's unclear how the reissued advice will be handled, especially given its timing so late in the year. This does make it challenging to implement any significant changes within the current cycle.

On plaice, **Graham** encouraged that concerns also be raised directly with ICES to ensure they are fully considered. As for next steps, the Commission is currently reflecting on the advice and will be engaging in discussions with UK counterparts. The suggestion to revisit the North Sea Multiannual Plan is also noted and will be taken into account moving forward.

Jurgen Batsleer added that concerns regarding plaice are well known and reflect a longstanding issue where the assessment model does not fully align with fishers' observations at sea. While the Commission has limited scope to intervene directly, it is crucial that these concerns are communicated clearly to the experts at ICES. The possibility that the northern stock is characterized by larger individuals and the southern stock by smaller ones is an important factor that should be considered in the assessment. This kind of information is highly relevant for improving stock evaluations.

Manu Kelberine asked the Commission how do they plan to allocate the catch limits between recreational and commercial fisheries regarding seabass and pollock.

Graham responded that for pollock, the stock assessment has, for the first time, incorporated recreational catches into the model. Recreational fishing now accounts for over two-thirds of the total catch. ICES has provided separate estimates for commercial and recreational removals, and this topic has been discussed extensively in the Scientific, Technical and

Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF). At this stage, it's not yet clear how the Commission will address this in management decisions. Some ideas are being considered to introduce additional measures targeting recreational fishing activities. France already has national regulations in place for pollock. We are working closely with the UK on this issue and will provide further updates as the discussions progress.

Jurgen Batsleer added that regarding seabass, the catch is roughly split 50/50 between commercial and recreational fisheries, similar to pollock. Although a catch allocation tool for seabass exists, it is currently not being used. We are in discussions with the UK to request that ICES update its advice ahead of the annual consultations. Simulations are being run to explore how to effectively incorporate updated recreational and commercial catch data into management. Unlike pollock, where the inclusion of recreational catch in the assessment is new, we do have an existing tool for seabass that could support this process.

Patrick Murphy asked: would it be helpful to review the trends of various stocks like hake, haddock, and whiting to better understand their trajectories? If reduced fishing pressure alone isn't leading to stock recovery, could ICES provide insight into other factors or measures that might help revitalise these stocks?

Graham responded that stock trends can be observed in the ICES advice sheets. For example, Celtic Sea cod is experiencing extremely high fishing mortality. While several factors influence stock productivity, fishing pressure remains a key driver. The recent changes in productivity are indeed concerning and warrant close attention.

Frequent catch-ups will be planned with ACs going forward.