

Ms Charlina Vitcheva
Director-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries
European Commission
Rue Josef II 99
1000 Brussels
Belgium

Cc: North Sea Member States

NSAC Advice Ref. 13-2526 **NSAC Advice on Cod box in the Kattegat**

This paper was approved with consensus by the NSAC Executive Committee on 24 July 2026 via written procedure.

1 Background

On 2 October 2025, NSAC Skagerrak and Kattegat WG hosted DTU Aqua and SLU Aqua presentation assessing the effectiveness of fishing restrictions in the Kattegat cod spawning area, including the so-called Cod box.

The key message was that area closures should be evaluated against their original purpose and adjusted based on biological reality, particularly fish movement and stock structure. Two management options exist: if cod box effectiveness cannot be proven, we advise reopening the box and replacing this management measure with one that addresses the problem of cod stock in the Kattegat. If there is evidence that cod box effectively protects the stock, we advise evaluating it using Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Other Effective Conservation Measures (OECM) criteria with a view to count it against 30 by 30.

2 Cod box

The Kattegat Cod box was established as an emergency spatial management measure in response to the critically depleted state of the local Kattegat cod stock. Instead of permanent closure, a bilateral agreement between Denmark and Sweden was considered preferable, allowing for reopening or modification after an evaluation period if the designated area was deemed unsuitable. In practice, however, the area has remained closed since its establishment.

At the time of its introduction, scientific advice indicated that spawning stock biomass was already at an extremely low level and that large, mature cod formed vulnerable spawning aggregations in specific areas and seasons, particularly during the first quarter of the year. The closure was designed to protect these remaining spawning concentrations by reducing fishing mortality in key areas, thereby complementing restrictive catch advice and broader effort-reduction measures.



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Genetic analyses show that Kattegat cod consist of a complex mix of components. While juvenile cod from the North Sea and Western Baltic frequently occur in Kattegat, nearly all large spawning cod - the primary target for protection - belong to the true Kattegat component. Large recruitment peaks observed in 2011 and 2022 are now understood to originate mainly from migrating North Sea or Western Baltic cod rather than recovery of the Kattegat stock itself. Therefore, spawning stock biomass remains critically low despite long-standing closures.

Evaluation of the Kattegat closure indicates that:

- Closed areas were broadly well placed for protecting large spawning cod, particularly in Quarter 1.
- Medium and large cod tend to concentrate within closed or seasonal areas, while small cod are mostly found outside closures, especially in the northern Kattegat.
- Spatial measures alone had limited independent effect on reducing fishing impact.
- A roughly 70% reduction in total fishing impact between 2007 and 2017 was achieved mainly through reduced fishing effort and increased use of selective gears, with area closures playing a secondary role.

Overall, the evidence suggests that current spatial restrictions contribute to protection but are not sufficient on their own to rebuild the Kattegat cod stock. Further gains would require broader application of selective gears and reconsideration of how and where spatial measures are applied.

3 NSAC Advice

Given the critically low spawning stock biomass of Kattegat cod, the high degree of fish movement across management areas, and the limited independent effect of spatial closures observed to date, Member States are recommended to reevaluate the effectiveness of the Kattegat Cod box against its original conservation objectives.

This re-evaluation should:

- Assess whether the Cod box demonstrably contributes to protecting spawning Kattegat cod beyond what is achieved through effort reduction and selective gear use.
- Consider updated genetic and spatial distribution data for spawning, juvenile, and migrating cod.
- Examine whether current closure design (permanent vs. seasonal) remains biologically and operationally appropriate.
- In light of climate change, examine whether Kattegat cod stock recovery is biologically feasible.¹

Based on the results of this assessment, Member States should then decide whether:

¹ www.nsrac.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/05-2425-NSAC-Advice-on-climate-change-and-NS-cod.pdf

- The Cod box should be reopened or reconfigured if it is shown to deliver limited conservation benefit; or
- The area should be designated as an Other Effective area-based Conservation Measure (OECM) if it provides clear, long-term biodiversity benefits consistent with OECM criteria.

More generally, and in line with our previous advice on OECMs², we advise Member States to review all existing fisheries spatial technical measures by applying OECM criteria to identify effective conservation measures that could qualify and be designated as OECMs and thereby contribute to 30x30 commitments.

4 Conclusion

The Kattegat Cod box was introduced as an emergency measure to protect a critically depleted stock and was broadly well aligned with the distribution of large spawning cod. However, despite long-standing closures, the stock has not recovered and spawning stock biomass remains critically low. Evidence shows that reductions in fishing impact have mainly resulted from lower effort and increased use of selective gears, with spatial closures playing a more limited role. Given updated genetic insights, ongoing fish movement, and the modest independent effect of the Cod box, a structured re-evaluation is needed to determine whether it should be reopened, reconfigured, or designated as an OECM.

A similar exercise should be considered for all longstanding spatial measures with questionable effectiveness. The NSAC remains committed to advancing implementation of crucial fisheries and ecosystem management measures. The European Commission and North Sea Member States are welcome to reach out to our Secretariat for further exchange on the topic.

² <https://www.nsrac.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/01-2425-NSAC-Advice-on-Fisheries-OECMs.pdf>