



# SPSG

Scottish Pelagic Sustainability Group

# Mackerel Briefing Document

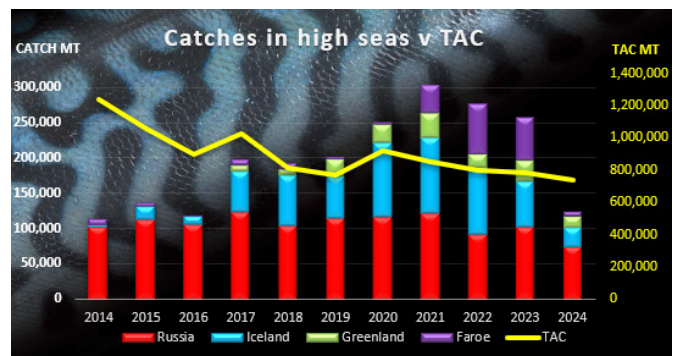
## North East Atlantic mackerel quota shares and the work towards a sustainable fishery

### 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, Russia and Greenland followed suit with their own unilateral quotas outside international agreement.

In 2010, the EU and Norway signed a 10-year bilateral agreement to provide stability based on quota shares at the time. In 2014, the three-party agreement with the Faroe Islands was re-established, although Iceland continued to set high unilateral quotas against scientific advice. On 31 January 2020, this agreement came to an end due to the UK formerly withdrawing from the EU and becoming an independent coastal state. The large extent of the UK's territorial waters or Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) resulted in a new relationship with the EU where some its mackerel quota share was transferred to the UK during an adjustment period ending in 2026 (Trade and Cooperation Agreement, TCA). In the meantime, however, both Norway and the Faroe Islands set themselves high unilateral quotas (with Iceland, Greenland and Russia also continuing to do so).

To try and resolve this, the UK Government led discussions with Norway and the Faroe Islands to secure more sustainable management of the mackerel fishery. A quota arrangement was secured with Norway in 2023 and with the Faroe Islands the year after. Through this agreement, fishing mortality or pressure and overall catches have been significantly reduced. However, this still falls short of what is required in having an all-encompassing international agreement with every participating nation.



Catches in International Waters (NEAFC) versus TAC by coastal States 2021-2024

### 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 EEZ and not in international waters.
- All UK mackerel catches are for the human consumption market, whereas significant tonnages from some other nations participating in the fishery goes for fishmeal because they cannot find a market for the fish. It is completely unacceptable that a fish of mackerel's value should be caught for fishmeal.
- 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 some success so far with recent agreements with Norway and the Faroe Islands to reduce fishing pressure.
- UK fishers and processors are committed to conservation and sustainable catching (see UK Sustainability and Environmental Initiatives section below).



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- The UK Industry is opposed to the use of transshipping of mackerel catches on the high-seas due to lack of adequate control measures.
- The UK industry favours maintaining closed areas to allow for juvenile protection of mackerel (since the early 1980s the UK has been a leader in establishing this, as evidenced by the South-West Mackerel Box).
- 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.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the North Atlantic Pelagic Advocacy Group (NAPA), a consortium of retailers and other stakeholders seeking a resolution to the dispute, has issued three key demands:

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.

### 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) secured the MSC eco-label. This was achieved for mackerel in 2016 but subsequently suspended and withdrawn in 2019 because of the quota share dispute.

- The Scottish Pelagic Fishermen's Association has its own Chief Scientific Officer to spearhead science initiatives
- The pelagic sector was instrumental in the creation of the of the Scottish Pelagic Industry-Science Data Collection Programme and how it has now become the main source of biological data on pelagic fish catches in Scotland, and which is used in the ICES stock assessment process.
- 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 across their pelagic operations.
- The UK pelagic sector participates in triennial mackerel egg surveys to estimate the spawning stock biomass of mackerel.
- UK large-scale pelagic processing factories have all been equipped with RFID (radio frequency identification) mackerel tag detectors for recovering tags. Samples of mackerel are tagged at sea, with the UK joining the effort in a survey named MAKTAG, where mackerel are tagged onboard a fishing vessel and then released, providing valuable information on stock dynamics and mortality.
- The UK pelagic sector participates in the EU Life project CIBBRiNA on bycatch mitigation.
- The UK pelagic sector is a key participant in the pilot project, 'Catch to Batch', providing traceability from the moment pelagic fish are caught through



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to their processing and distribution, connecting the digital data streams used for fisheries science, quality assurance, welfare assessment, and seafood production.

- The UK pelagic fishing fleet will become one of the first countries to become engaged in Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) on pelagic vessels that will record all fishing activities.
- The UK pelagic fleet is engaging with the Sea Mammal Research Unit on Endangered, Threatened and Protected (ETP) species observer work, including on whales.

### The position of the Scottish Pelagic Sustainability Group

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

- 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.
- The cessation of the setting of unilateral quotas outside international agreement.
- 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.



### Did you know?

- Research has shown that Scottish caught mackerel is highly nutritious and has an extremely low carbon footprint compared to most other forms of protein production, including many types of plant protein sources.
- The Scottish mackerel fishery is a 'clean' fishery with virtually no by-catch of other species or under-sized mackerel.
- The mid-water trawls and purse seine nets used to catch mackerel do not touch the seabed.