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Dun Laoghaire, 11 April 2024

Dear Dr Banel,

Subject: NWWAC request for a joint recommendation on management of the red mullet fishery in the Union waters of ICES subareas 4 and 7

Following discussions and inputs received at the last meeting of its Working Group 3 Channel on 13 March in Dublin, the NWWAC agreed to prepare the present advice to request the NWW Member States Group to work on a joint recommendation on management measures for the red mullet (*Mullus surmuletus*) fishery in European Waters of ICES subareas 4 and 7.

The red mullet is a benthic fish widely distributed in the North-East Atlantic. It grows rapidly during its first two years of life, and from the age of 3 there is significant sexual dimorphism, with females being larger than males (16,9 cm and 16,2 cm respectively).

The ICES stock assessment for red mullet stock in Subarea 4 and divisions 7.d and 3.a was downgraded to category 5 in 2022 as a result of a reduction in the sampling rate providing information on age and size structures and problems with the indices used. A benchmark was carried out by ICES in 2022-2023 to explore possible solutions to the difficulties encountered in the assessment and to improve the scientific advice. The benchmark highlighted an increase in biomass until 2007, followed by a very significant decrease until 2013 and peaks in recruitment abundance. However, there were difficulties in defining reference points. The benchmark recommended the application of the ICES category 3 stock assessment methodology, based on a biomass index derived from the scientific surveys of the second half of the year, data on landings in terms of size and data on the growth of this stock. Based on stock growth data and the size structure of landings, the stock is currently considered to be overexploited and the [2023 ICES advice](#) recommends no more than 1985 tonnes in each of the years 2024 and 2025.

Moreover, the [2023 ICES advice](#) mentions that recent catches of this stock mainly consist of fish ages 0 and 1. Red mullet start maturing at age 1 but are not fully matured before age 3. The stock status would therefore benefit from improved technical measures to reduce the catches of small fish and contribute to more stable yields.





The NWWAC suggests including the following measures in a joint recommendation by the NWW Member States Group in order to set a management framework for red mullet fisheries at European level:

- In the Technical Measures Regulation (EU) 2019/1241, Annexes V and VI, the two derogations "targeted squid fishing (*Loliginidae*, *Ommastrephidae*)" at 40 mm for bottom gears should be removed to enable a transition to 80 mm for all European vessels using towed gear in the area.
- Consideration should be given to introducing technical measures improving selectivity for this species in ICES 4c and 7d.
- A minimum conservation reference size of 17 cm should be introduced in ICES subareas 4 and 7.

The NWWAC believes this set of measures would constitute a good starting point for a better management of the red mullet fishery in the Channel and in the North Sea.

The AC also recommends liaising with the Scheveningen Group about the preparation of this joint recommendation.

To assist with the work of the Member States Groups, the NWWAC is attaching a position paper by the CNPMEM with information on the species biology and an overview of the French fishery targeting the stock.

We thank you for your attention to this matter that is considered urgent by the NWWAC members having an interest in the Channel. We appreciate the continued collaboration with the NWW Member States Group which is crucial for our work and look forward to your confirmation of expeditious attention to this advice.

Yours sincerely,

Emiel Brouckaert
NWWAC Chairman

