



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR MARITIME AFFAIRS AND FISHERIES

The Director-General

Brussels,
MARE/C.5/NG

Dear Mr Brouckaert,

Thank you for your letter of 6 December 2024 providing the advice of the North Western Waters Advisory Council (NWWAC) on stocks to prioritise for benchmark workshops by the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES).

I share your views that stock assessments must be based on the best available science and that data limited stocks present specific challenges. ICES has made significant advances in reducing the number of stocks classified as category 5 or 6 over the past few years, moving away from precautionary based advice towards a more analytical approach.

While I understand the desire to prioritise economically and politically important stocks, the final decision on which stocks should be benchmarked, and when, rests with ICES. Of key significance in terms of the ICES decision to launch a benchmark is whether there are new data, or new modelling approaches available or there is a particular concern regarding the existing methodology. The decision to trigger a benchmark is based on a bottom-up approach, where the stock experts consider that these conditions are met, and a benchmark is warranted. It is also important to note that any requests to ICES on issues that affect stocks bi-laterally managed with the UK requires the agreement of both parties.

For three of the stocks you mention in your letter (plaice 7fg, sole 7h-k and lemon sole 3a, 4 and 7d), both the EU and the UK recognise that it would be desirable to improve the categorisation of these stocks. This is articulated in the Written Record of fisheries consultations between the United Kingdom and the European Union for 2025 ⁽¹⁾ (see paragraphs 1(m), 1(t) and 1(u)).

However, recognising that the decision to trigger a benchmark essentially rests with ICES, and acknowledging the concerns raised by the NWWAC and other affected stakeholders, the EU and the UK have agreed to establish technical experts' groups under

⁽¹⁾ <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/circabc-ewpp/d/d/workspace/SpacesStore/5016a7b0-3864-4e90-aa69-ca7636b774f3/file.bin>

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the Specialised Committee for Fisheries, together with ICES, with the objective to identify the data needs or gaps and how such deficiencies can be corrected with the aim of supporting future benchmarks. We plan to raise this work with you during the next NWWAC meeting scheduled for 10 March 2025 and will provide further feedback as the work progresses.

Regarding the linkage between different whiting stocks in the Celtic Sea, Eastern Channel and the North Sea, this is an issue that ICES considers as part of its benchmark process. To date, ICES has not changed the stock definitions despite benchmarks being carried out for both the Celtic Seas and the North Sea/Eastern Channel stocks several times in recent years. Until such time that new stock identification evidence is made available and assessed by ICES, the current TAC and stock definitions will remain as present.

I am looking forward to our continued and productive cooperation. Should you have any questions on this reply, please contact Dr Norman Graham (Norman.GRAHAM@ec.europa.eu) and Ms Julia Rubeck, coordinator for the Advisory Councils (functional mailbox: MARE-AC@ec.europa.eu).

Yours sincerely,

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