

NWWAC Advice

on management measures for “Northern” seabass in 2026

04 November 2025

The NWWAC Focus Group on seabass met on 5 September 2025 to discuss the preparation of an opinion to the COM on the measures to be taken in 2026 for commercial and recreational fisheries to support the recovery of the “Northern” seabass stocks. The opinion presented below was approved by written procedure by the NWWAC Executive Committee on 04 November 2025.

The European Anglers Alliance (EAA) and the International Forum for Sustainable Underwater Activities (IFSUA) dissent from the majority NWWAC advice on sea bass fishing opportunities for 2026 and set out their minority position in the Annex, in accordance with the NWWAC rules of procedure.

1. Background - ICES advice

A benchmark study of North-East Atlantic seabass stocks was carried out in 2023 and 2024, with the aim of confirming the identity of the stocks, their structure and the methods to be used in future assessments. The expert group's work focused heavily on studying the spatial boundaries of the population in the area, as well as migratory behaviour and mixing between units. Recreational fishing was also included as an integral part of the study, and discard rates by commercial fishers were revised based on declarations by French fishers¹.

The impact of the benchmark on biological thresholds and levels, as well as on the structure and level of catch advice, can be clearly summarised in a table (Table 1). It shows that all biological reference thresholds have been revised upwards, as has the estimated spawning stock biomass (SSB). In particular, looking at the detailed figures in the tables in the 2025 advice, we can see that **the spawning biomass has exceeded the "MSY Btrigger" threshold since 2021, taking the average value, and since 2024, taking the lower value of the uncertainty range. In 2025, this threshold is significantly exceeded.** The revision of these figures thus confirms the feelings of commercial fishers since this period, which are reflected in the increase in discards.

¹ Benchmark report: https://ices-library.figshare.com/articles/report/Benchmark_workshop_on_selected_sea_bass_stocks_WKBSEABASS_/25002488?file=56883308



Table1 . Revision of biological thresholds and inclusion of migration and recreational fishing in the advice for northern seabass 2025, as well as the corresponding catch advice.

	2024 Advice for 2025	2025 Advice for 2026	Variation (%)
<i>Biological thresholds</i>			
MSY Btrigger	14,439 t	19,339 t	+ 34%
Blim	10,313 t	15,666 t	+ 52%
SSB 2023	13,484 t	23,257 t	+ 72%
SSB 2024	13,589 t	24,407 t	+ 80%
SSB 2025		25,234 t	
<i>Catch Advice (RMD approach)</i>			
SSB (n+1)	12,450 t	23,154 t	+ 86%
Total catch North	2,620 t	5,180 t	+98%
Total catch North + migration		6,590 t	+ 152%
Professional landings in the North	1,330 t	1,821 t	+ 37%
Professional landings in the North + migration		2,496 t	+ 88%
Professional discards	114 t	781 t	+ 585%
Recreational catch + released dead (with migration for 2026)	545 t	3,313 t	+ 508%
Recreational “no-kill” (with migration for 2026)		5,604 t	

2. Context - Management

Since 2015, to support stock recovery, fishing restrictions have been introduced in the northern area to reduce exploitation by prohibiting seabass landings in February and March and prohibiting targeted fishing for sea bass, except for hook and line fishing, with certain derogations for unavoidable by-catches² (Council Regulation (EU) 2025/202). Recreational fishing is subject to a daily catch limit. The management measures introduced for sea bass have led to changes in fishing behaviour to avoid sea bass catches: ICES reports that since 2017, most catches have

² In the United Kingdom: the exemption applies to "incidental catches", whether avoidable or not.

been unavoidable by-catches. These measures have resulted in a **dramatic decline in fishing mortality**, while **the spawning stock biomass (SSB) has recovered well above the precautionary threshold (MSY B trigger)**.

3. Recommendations on seabass management

Today, considering the benchmark results and the state of the sea bass stock, the NWWAC recommends that the Commission **lift the moratorium** (i.e. total fishing ban except for derogations). This change in the management regime should be reflected in the relevant article of the EU regulation from the beginning of 2026 and immediately implemented in national management frameworks. In addition, the AC is calling for the establishment of **multi-annual stock management strategy in consultation with the United Kingdom**. This will be essential to ensure the sustainability of the fishery and provide predictability for professionals. Work has been initiated in this direction by French professionals and the administration, and will need to be monitored closely during the autumn.

3.1. Commercial fisheries management measures

In concrete terms, the NWWAC is in favour of maintaining the current management system by fishing method, with significant relaxations. The exact level of these relaxations should be based, at a minimum, on the catch estimate taking into account all catches (landings and discards), including migration from the south, and should also see a reallocation of a portion of recreational catches to professionals, as the latter's share is greatly overestimated. Beyond maintaining targeted fishing for hook-and-line fisheries, given their economic dependence on this species, the basic principle is to transform, for all fisheries, unavoidable discards into landings in order to improve the acceptability of the regime and avoid socio-economic loss:

- **For trawls and bottom seines:** increase in individual annual catch limits.
- **For net and hook and line fishing:** lifting of capacity quotas.
- **For non-quota net and hook fisheries and other gear:** reopening of by-catch fishing with limited individual annual catch limits.
- **Annual closure:** possibility of landing unavoidable catches for all gear types by means of percentage limits per trip (e.g. 5% or 10%) in February and March.
- **Landing obligation:** maintenance of the non-application of the landing obligation.

Furthermore, the NWWAC **warns against the use of the "seabass allocation tool"**. This has already been discussed in the opinion on seabass management published in 2021³. The main reservations of AC members regarding this tool remain unchanged: unrealistic assumptions (consumption of the entire ceilings, etc.); lack of seasonality; failure to take certain measures into account; lack of reliable data for recreational fishing. Therefore, if this tool were to be updated

³ NWWAC Advice: https://www.nwwac.org/_fileupload/Seabass/Year%2017/Final_NWWAC-NSAC_Advice_Seabass_EN.pdf

and used to simulate management measures for 2026, **the AC would like to be able to review it in order to produce a recommendation on the application of the results.**

Finally, the NWWAC would also like to point out that national legislation **prohibits Irish vessels from landing seabass**. This ban causes **great difficulties** for fishers, as seabass catches are unavoidable and are increasing as stocks recover.

3.2. Proposal for recreational fishing

In the ICES Advice 2025, it is essential to note that **the distribution of projected catches for 2026 between commercial and recreational fishing is not a scientific recommendation**, but is determined on the assumption that average partial mortality rates (2022-2024) will apply in 2026. This distribution key must therefore be adjusted. In concrete terms, the NWWAC recommends that the 2025 measures be renewed for 2026. In addition, the implementation of the obligations of the revised European "control" regulation concerning the registration of recreational fishers and the declaration of their catches must be monitored closely by national administrations, in conjunction with the relevant federations.

3.3. EU-UK seabass management

The NWWAC wishes to reiterate the importance of **harmonised management** of seabass stocks between the EU and the UK. The importance of this issue is particularly linked to the difficulties encountered by fishers as a result of different management measures between the EU and the UK. The NWWAC appreciates that this issue has been on the agenda of the Specialised Committee on Fisheries and continues to monitor developments through the Inter-AC Forum on Brexit, in order to contribute where necessary.

In addition, the AC wishes to highlight an ongoing management issue. In 2021, the EU and the UK agreed to introduce catch reporting for inshore gillnetters and to allow them to land by-catches of sea bass⁴. The Welsh administration has begun work on the declaration, with several options identified in its Advisory Group. However, no concrete steps seem to have been introduced so far. The NWWAC urges the Commission to ensure that this issue is addressed and to continue to monitor developments.

⁴ Point 13(f)(ii) of the "Written record of fisheries consultations between the United Kingdom and the European Union for 2021".

Annex - EAA and IFSUA recommendations

Stock

- The European Anglers Alliance (EAA) and the International Forum for Sustainable Underwater Activities (IFSUA) note the SSB estimate carries a high degree of uncertainty, i.e. approximately 10,000 tonnes on a projected value of 25,330 tonnes. The EAA and IFSUA believe this warrants a **precautionary approach to management in 2026**.
- The EAA and IFSUA advocate for **further rebuilding the stock** in 2026 closer to the level that delivers MSY, aiming to increase CPUE and enhance the social and economic benefits for coastal communities. The EAA and IFSUA therefore urge fishery managers **not to adopt the ICES MSY advice for 2026, which recommends** doubling the catch from 2025 to 2026 and depleting the mature stock by 8.6 %, which will reduce CPUE, and undermine social and economic gains.
- The EAA and IFSUA support maintaining **closed seasons** that apply equally to both recreational and commercial fisheries.
- The EAA and IFSUA **request further refinement of recreational catch figures**, particularly in the Netherlands and France where sample sizes have been limited.

Catch Allocation

- To continue to grow the stock in 2026, it is essential to **broadly maintain the current structure of these measures** for sea bass and to **keep bycatch limits tight**.
- However, it is now appropriate to increase the recreational bag limit, recognising the improved perception of the SSB, the recreational bag limit have remained unchanged for five years, despite annual increases in commercial quotas - including not only bycatch allowances but also targeted increases for hook and liners; and the comparatively higher social and economic value generated per ton of sea bass landed by recreational fisheries.
- A significant increase in seabass landings by other métiers would undermine the profitability of small-scale fishers who rely on maintaining high market prices. It would also negatively influence the recreational sector that derives economic benefit from larger fish, due to this being an important driver of angler satisfaction. The EAA and IFSUA note the high-capacity seine fleet has increased rapidly – from 21 vessels in 2019 to 64 vessels in 2025 (according to the gentlemen’s agreement, the EAA and IFSUA are advised) – greatly increasing its potential impact on the sea bass stock.
- The EAA and IFSUA recommend ICES, COM and the UK collaborate swiftly to establish a project management timeline for the **Sea Bass Catch Allocation Tool**, including key milestones and a clear completion date.
- To mitigate the risk of increased discards as the stock grows, the EAA calls for the implementation of **real-time area closures** to prevent the most harmful bycatch.

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