Joint observer statement on Coastal States mackerel

19-10-2026, London

Thank you chair for the opportunity to make a joint observer statement and for the invitation to deliver it in person. Blue Marine Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trusts, Seas at Risk, WWF UK, Angling Trust and North Sea Foundation strongly encourage the Coastal States to make the necessary short-term decisions and long-term commitments to ensure a productive and durable mackerel population and healthy pelagic ecosystems.

As we have called for in multiple statements, in line with similar calls from supply chain actors and fishing industry bodies, we urge the parties to secure a comprehensive sharing arrangement with reasonable allocations for all parties. Such an agreement would guarantee that the Total Allowable Catches set in this forum align with the sum of individually set quotas and produce catches that are in line with headline advice.

While we support following the headline advice for 2027, we note with concern that such a commitment can only be meaningful once shares in the TAC are firmly established and agreed by all parties. We also note that, while there have been multiple meetings in 2026 to advance these discussions, a final arrangement remains elusive. We reiterate our urgent call to resolve this as soon as possible and bring mackerel management up to the minimum standard expected of any internationally managed fish stock.

As we stated at the mackerel intersessional meeting last month, we are concerned by the use of a shortcut management strategy evaluation process to identify non-zero catch options for 2027. MSE is typically used to evaluate the longer-term performance of management strategies to achieve management objectives under a range of plausible scenarios and given scientific uncertainties.

Using a shortcut MSE for a short-term catch advice could provide misleading results in terms of performance to achieve objectives and should not form the basis for selecting a long-term management strategy. Using a shortcut MSE approach should not become a precedent for annual TAC setting, and stocks should not be managed by using constrained MSE requests in this way. This approach also risks narrowing the scope for ecosystem considerations and weakening progress towards a more inclusive scientific advice process.

It is our longstanding position that long-term management strategies – based on full MSEs – must be developed for all Coastal States managed stocks. Mackerel has been without an LTMS for over a decade, despite having just been benchmarked and despite this being an active point of discussion at the 2025 Coastal States mackerel consultations. While we gather that an MSE request has been submitted to ICES by some Coastal States, the ToR for this request has not been shared with observers, who have only received the ToR proposed by the European Union in 2025. This proposal was ambitious and laudably began the process of using MSE requests to deliver an ecosystem approach to fisheries management.

However when the full MSE is developed next year, the Coastal States should include a clear commitment in the mackerel agreed record for 2027 that this process will be comprehensive, ecosystem-oriented and stakeholder-inclusive. It should reflect the growing momentum in the region to move towards Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management (EAFM) and introduce more progressive management of small pelagic fish. Being ambitious does not mean fundamentally redesigning the approach to MSE and LTMS development to which the parties and their scientific advisors have become accustomed.

The inclusion of ecological variables, such as relevant oceanographic factors, indices of predator needs or other metrics of good environmental status (e.g. healthy population age-structure), as performance indicators or as the basis for alternative scenarios is a concrete place to start. WGWIDE highlights substantial changes in distribution associated with temperature and zooplankton availability, while also identifying potentially increasing predation pressure as a possible contributor to natural mortality, all of which merit exploration through the MSE. Going further should ultimately mean the inclusion of specific operational objectives relating to ecosystem health, a process that may be initiated through the possible agreement in November of an EAFM implementation measure in NEAFC. The Coastal States signalling their support for and alignment with this initiative would be a welcome development.

As always, observers stand ready to assist the Coastal States in achieving these goals where feasible and appropriate. We wish you the best of luck in the negotiations in the coming weeks.