

BRIEFING SERIES: Recommendations to the EU and the UK on the setting of fishing opportunities



Shared fish stocks

Briefing 4 of 11

July 2025

About this Briefing Series

This Briefing Series, supported by the 29 undersigned organisations, is designed to assist the responsible decision-makers in the European Union (the European Commission, the Council of the EU and the Member States) and the United Kingdom (the UK Government and devolved administrations) in managing fishing opportunities in a way that:

- ◆ Finally ends overfishing,
- ◆ Significantly contributes to restoring and/or maintaining all fish stocks above healthy levels and to minimising levels of incidental catches, and
- ◆ Safeguards marine ecosystem functioning and resilience, also in light of mounting pressures like climate change.

The Series consists of 11 Briefings covering the following topics related to the setting of fishing opportunities:^{1,2}

- ◆ 1. [Cover Briefing](#): Key recommendations on setting fishing opportunities
- ◆ 2. [Context and legal framework](#)
- ◆ 3. [“Best available” is not good enough - addressing shortcomings in the current scientific advice](#)
- ◆ 4. [Shared fish stocks](#) (this briefing)
- ◆ 5. [Fishing opportunities in an ecosystem context](#)
- ◆ 6. [Mixed fisheries considerations](#)
- ◆ 7. [The fishing effort regime in the Western Mediterranean Sea](#)
- ◆ 8. [Landing obligation challenges](#)
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- ◆ 11. [Deep Sea stocks](#)

In order to ensure that fishing opportunities support thriving fisheries while safeguarding ocean health, resilience and productivity, we call on decision-makers to follow all of our recommendations across the entire Briefing Series.

About this Briefing

Overfishing continues for many fish populations shared between the EU and the UK and/or other third countries. This is exacerbated for some of them by the continued lack of comprehensive sharing arrangements, which routinely results in catch levels well above scientific advice. This Briefing presents our recommendations on the setting of recovery-focused, precautionary and ecosystem-based fishing opportunities for shared fish populations. Concretely, we call on EU and UK decision-makers to:

- ◆ Uphold and deliver on their domestic and shared sustainability commitments in negotiations on shared stocks;
- ◆ Champion ecosystem-based and precautionary fisheries management, based on clear long-term objectives and harvest strategies, in negotiations with third countries;
- ◆ Avoid unilateral processes leading to catches above scientific advice and prioritise resolving allocation issues as part of the development of clear sharing arrangements.

Many decisions on fishing opportunities for fish stocks of interest for the EU or the UK need to be agreed bilaterally or with third parties such as Norway, or through the Northeast Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC) Coastal States process. Both the EU and the UK are NEAFC Contracting Parties and have established bilateral agreements and memoranda of understanding with the main Northeast Atlantic coastal fishing states, including the comprehensive Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) between the EU and the UK.³ While such arrangements provide management and negotiation frameworks, the setting of annual fishing opportunities still depends on annual negotiations between the EU, the UK and other third parties.⁴

To date, international agreements for Northeast Atlantic shared stocks have failed to deliver sustainable exploitation of these resources. The frequent inability to reach a consensus on stock shares, as seen with

¹ Over the years, the NGOs working on fishing opportunities have been providing a range of annually updated recommendations for different sea basins and groups of species. Many of our key recommendations and concerns are cross-cutting and do not change from year to year. For 2025 onwards, we have consolidated these points into this Briefing Series which is intended to remain valid for years to come. The Series will be complemented by bespoke regionally or topically specific recommendations as appropriate and current scientific state of the art findings.

² Cross-references will be included throughout the text using the relevant Briefing numbers. Full references to all Briefings are listed in ANNEX 1.

³ [Trade and Cooperation Agreement](#) between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community, of the one part, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland of the other part (2020). As part of a high-level EU/UK Summit in May 2025, the EU and the UK agreed on continued reciprocal access to each other's waters for an additional 12 years beyond the end of the transition period in mid-2026, until June 2038. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ukey-summit-key-documentation/uk-eu-summit-explainer-html>. This means that within this timeframe access to waters and the EU's and UK's TAC shares specified for “2026 onwards” in Annex 35 of the TCA will continue to apply and not need to be re-negotiated annually..

⁴ Other relevant third countries for the Northeast Atlantic include Norway and other Coastal States such as Iceland and the Faroe Islands.

mackerel,⁵ has led some parties to set their own quotas, the sum of which exceeds the agreed TAC and/or the scientific advice, resulting in overfishing.⁶ **The EU, the UK and the third parties with which they share fish resources must become constructive partners in the fight against overfishing, biodiversity and habitat loss, and climate change.** To achieve this, we urge the EU, the UK and other coastal states involved in the setting of fishing opportunities for shared stocks to follow the recommendations below.

Recommendations on fish stocks shared between the EU and third countries


- ◆ **Uphold and deliver on the EU's and UK's legal and political sustainability commitments in negotiations on shared stocks**, i.e. ensure that total fishing limits for all exploited fish populations do not exceed the scientifically advised levels. The EU and the UK should also both reliably demonstrate that their respective negotiating positions are fully aligned with the sustainability requirements and objectives of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) and the UK Fisheries Act, respectively. If the resulting overall fishing limits nevertheless exceed scientific advice, despite the EU's and/or the UK's best efforts, the EU and the UK must not make their respective share of the overshoot above the advice available to their fishers.
- ◆ **Champion ecosystem-based fisheries management, including TAC-setting, in negotiations with third countries**, to boost the health, resilience and productivity of shared fish populations and the ecosystems they live in, to future-proof fisheries in the face of mounting pressures like climate change (see Briefings 1, 3 and 5), and to meet domestic requirements and international commitments. Larger and more productive fish populations, ultimately allowing for larger overall catches without jeopardising population or ecosystem health, could also help alleviate sharing disputes, as even smaller percentages of the overall catch would correspond to larger absolute quantities than can currently be caught. The EU and the UK should therefore exercise their influence in international negotiating fora to push for an explicit investment in larger, healthier shared fish populations, by setting TACs well below the single-stock advice from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) where this does not fully account for and safeguard ecosystem health and/or is not geared towards rapid recovery well above sustainable population levels (see Briefings 3 and 9). If the agreed fishing limits do not fully reflect these aspects, the EU and the UK should lead by example, as the UK has for sandeel in previous years,⁷ and not make the excessive part of their quota share available to their fishers.
- ◆ **Implement a genuine precautionary approach (as defined by the United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement)⁸ in agreements on shared stocks**. When the available data and information are uncertain, unreliable, or inadequate, and/or where the available single-stock advice does not yet fully reflect ecosystem needs and dynamics, decision-makers should apply more cautious management that safeguards vulnerable or data-limited stocks and habitats, as a lack of scientific certainty cannot preclude management action.
- ◆ **Include provisions regarding abundance of fish populations, limit reference points for mortality, and precautionary and ecosystem considerations in agreements on shared stocks.**

⁵ Note that while some of the relevant Coastal States (UK, Norway, Faroes) reached a partial agreement on mackerel in June 2024, a comprehensive sharing arrangement involving all relevant Coastal States has not been agreed yet. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-agrees-deals-on-mackerel-fishing-with-norway-and-the-faroe-islands>.

⁶ This situation applies to key commercial stocks for the EU and the UK such as Northeast Atlantic mackerel, Atlanto-Scandian herring and blue whiting.

⁷ Since 2021, the UK Government and devolved administrations have not allocated the UK's share of the bilaterally agreed sandeel TACs with the EU to its fishers, recognising the important function sandeel plays in the ecosystem as a food source for other marine life. Notably, in a judicial review of the Secretary of State's decision not to permit UK-registered vessels to catch any sandeel for commercial purposes in 2022, the Court ruled in favour of this decision on 28 February 2023, concluding that it "may properly be regarded as a modest but meaningful contribution to valuable maritime conservation and ecological goals" (paragraph 45). This sets a key precedent that shows the UK may under certain circumstances choose to withhold (part of) its quota share to achieve environmental benefits and is not by default obliged to fully allocate it to UK fishers (Petition of Sunbeam Fishing Limited [2023] CSOH 16, <https://www.casemine.com/judgement/uk/63ffa022831a7b3248443116>).

⁸ UN, *Agreement for the Implementation of the Provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* of 10 December 1982 relating to the Conservation and Management of Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks.



We urgently call upon coastal states to conserve biodiversity, minimise the impact of fishing activity on fish populations, sensitive species and on the whole ecosystem, including the seafloor, and use scientific knowledge to inform management decisions.

- ◆ **Avoid unilateral processes leading to catches above scientific advice.** Talks on joint management should be comprehensive, including all relevant cooperative coastal states and stakeholders. Where one or more of the relevant coastal states are not part of the relevant discussions, as has been the case for Russia since 2022, quotas set and catches nevertheless taken by such parties must be factored in in a precautionary way when agreeing catch limits between the other involved coastal states. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea⁹ (UNCLOS) determines that collaboration on management must be multilateral when more than two coastal states have a stake in a given fish population, or fishery.
- ◆ **Implement the transparency obligations and rights under the Aarhus Convention in the management of shared stocks.** The underpinning scientific advice, management proposals, negotiations, positions of the parties and decisions should be published for public scrutiny, with access guaranteed for all stakeholders (also see Briefing 1).
- ◆ **Apply long-term management as the underlying approach to fisheries management by default.** Although details will need to be revisited regularly, all stakeholders benefit from agreeing to, and working toward, long-term sustainable management objectives. This includes stable sharing arrangements and harvest strategies (including precautionary harvest control rules for setting catch limits). It also requires a robust monitoring and evaluation scheme, control measures and the fight against IUU fishing, a periodic review process, and any necessary mechanisms to transition from previous arrangements to a new system. For certain at-risk species and stocks, immediate emergency measures may be necessary.
- ◆ **Use published scientific advice from ICES as the basis for fisheries management decisions made by coastal states.** For additional scientific input explicit standards should be set, ensuring that only the best available, peer-reviewed scientific advice from independent institutions recognised at the international level is used.
- ◆ **Contribute to the timely implementation of the bilateral agreements and memoranda of understanding with the main Northeast Atlantic coastal fishing states.** Priority should be given to sustainable management objectives and principles, the precautionary approach and agreeing TACs in accordance with the best available scientific advice by ICES and governed by the Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) objective, as required for example under the EU-UK TCA.
- ◆ **Prioritise resolving the allocation issues of pelagic stocks (mackerel, herring, and blue whiting) with the NEAFC Contracting Parties,**¹⁰ and ensure that the overall catches for each stock do not exceed scientific advice, and - where this advice does not fully account for and safeguard ecosystem health - are kept well enough below the advice to safeguard wider ecosystem health, and in no case lead to unilateral quota increases.
- ◆ **Where the EU and the UK fail to reach an agreement on TACs for shared stocks by the 20th of December of a given year, provisional unilateral TACs must not exceed the respective party's share of the maximum catch level advised by ICES,** as per Article 499(2) of the TCA. This represents an important safeguard to ensure that stocks are not fished unsustainably where no agreement is reached.
- ◆ **Ensure that future bilateral EU-UK fisheries arrangements beyond the end of the TCA's transition period post-June 2026 deliver sustainable, ecosystem-based and precautionary fisheries management,** in line with each Party's domestic legislation as well as international

⁹ UNCLOS (1982). [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea](#).

¹⁰ See footnotes 5 and 6.

commitments.¹¹ Potential renegotiation of fisheries-related aspects such as access must not jeopardise the shared commitment to promoting ocean health, resilience and productivity as a fundamental requisite for thriving fisheries and coastal communities. Instead, both Parties should use the EU-UK reset aimed at strengthening ties and addressing challenges posed by Brexit as an opportunity to make meaningful progress on climate, nature and environmental standards and boost, rather than weaken, the protection of their shared environment to their mutual benefit.¹²

Environmental organisations remain committed to the objectives of the Common Fisheries Policy, the UK Fisheries Act, the Marine Strategy Framework Directive and the UK's Marine Strategy Regulations 2010, as well as the Trade and Cooperation Agreement and other international agreements. We will continue to scrutinise the progress in ending overfishing and boosting long-term population and ecosystem health and resilience as we urge the European Commission, the Council of the EU, the Member States, the UK Government and devolved administrations to finally deliver the EU's and UK's transition to truly sustainable fisheries. This Briefing Series provides a clear and comprehensive list of recommendations on how to get there.

¹¹ As mentioned in footnote 3, the EU and the UK agreed at a high-level Summit in May 2025 on continued reciprocal access to each other's waters for an additional 12 years beyond the end of the transition period in mid-2026, until June 2038. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ukey-summit-key-documentation/uk-eu-summit-explainer-html>.

¹² See this joint NGO letter, led by the European Environmental Bureau and co-signed by 28 organisations across both the EU and the UK, on climate, nature and environmental standards, ahead of the UK-EU Summit on 19th May. 30 April 2025. <https://eeb.org/library/joint-ngo-letter-on-climate-and-environment-for-the-2025-eu-uk-summit/>. Also see this corresponding press release: <https://eeb.org/uk-eu-reset-should-benefit-environment-urge-organisations-on-both-sides-of-the-channel/>.

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ANNEX 1 - FULL REFERENCES TO ALL BRIEFINGS IN THIS SERIES

This Briefing Series is supported by 29 organisations, including environmental NGOs and recreational representatives. [Briefing 3](#) is additionally supported by the Low Impact Fishers of Europe (LIFE), European Anglers Alliance (EAA), Baltic Salmon Fund and Baltic Salmon Rivers Association. [Briefing 7](#) about fisheries management in the Western Mediterranean Sea features fewer logos than the rest of the series since not all of the NGOs signatory to the Briefing Series are active in the Mediterranean.

Briefing 1: Cover briefing: Key recommendations on setting fishing opportunities. Briefing 1 of 11 in the Briefing Series “Recommendations to the EU and the UK on the setting of fishing opportunities”. July 2025. <https://www.clientearth.org/latest/documents/joint-briefing-series-recommendations-on-fishing-opportunities-briefing-1-cover-briefing-key-recommendations-on-setting-fishing-opportunities/>

Briefing 2: Context and legal framework. Briefing 2 of 11 in the Briefing Series “Recommendations to the EU and the UK on the setting of fishing opportunities”. July 2025. <https://www.clientearth.org/latest/documents/joint-briefing-series-recommendations-on-fishing-opportunities-briefing-2-context-and-legal-framework/>

Briefing 3: “Best available” is not good enough - addressing shortcomings in the current scientific advice. Briefing 3 of 11 in the Briefing Series “Recommendations to the EU and the UK on the setting of fishing opportunities”. July 2025. <https://www.clientearth.org/latest/documents/joint-briefing-series-recommendations-on-fishing-opportunities-briefing-3-addressing-shortcomings-in-the-current-scientific-advice/>

Briefing 4: Shared fish stocks. Briefing 4 of 11 in the Briefing Series “Recommendations to the EU and the UK on the setting of fishing opportunities”. July 2025. <https://www.clientearth.org/latest/documents/joint-briefing-series-recommendations-on-fishing-opportunities-briefing-4-shared-fish-stocks/>

Briefing 5: Fishing opportunities in an ecosystem context. Briefing 5 of 11 in the Briefing Series “Recommendations to the EU and the UK on the setting of fishing opportunities”. July 2025. <https://www.clientearth.org/latest/documents/joint-briefing-series-recommendations-on-fishing-opportunities-briefing-5-fishing-opportunities-in-an-ecosystem-context/>

Briefing 6: Mixed fisheries considerations. Briefing 6 of 11 in the Briefing Series “Recommendations to the EU and the UK on the setting of fishing opportunities”. July 2025. <https://www.clientearth.org/latest/documents/joint-briefing-series-recommendations-on-fishing-opportunities-briefing-6-mixed-fisheries-considerations/>

Briefing 7: The fishing effort regime in the Western Mediterranean Sea. Briefing 7 of 11 in the Briefing Series “Recommendations to the EU and the UK on the setting of fishing opportunities”. July 2025. <https://www.clientearth.org/latest/documents/joint-briefing-series-recommendations-on-fishing-opportunities-briefing-7-the-fishing-effort-regime-in-the-western-mediterranean-sea/>

Briefing 8: Landing obligation challenges. Briefing 8 of 11 in the Briefing Series “Recommendations to the EU and the UK on the setting of fishing opportunities”. July 2025. <https://www.clientearth.org/latest/documents/joint-briefing-series-recommendations-on-fishing-opportunities-briefing-8-landing-obligation-challenges/>

Briefing 9: Depleted stocks with zero or very low catch advice. Briefing 9 of 11 in the Briefing Series “Recommendations to the EU and the UK on the setting of fishing opportunities”. July 2025. <https://www.clientearth.org/latest/documents/joint-briefing-series-recommendations-on-fishing-opportunities-briefing-9-depleted-stocks-with-zero-or-very-low-catch-advice/>

Briefing 10: Stocks not managed by a Total Allowable Catch. Briefing 10 of 11 in the Briefing Series “Recommendations to the EU and the UK on the setting of fishing opportunities”. July 2025. <https://www.clientearth.org/latest/documents/joint-briefing-series-recommendations-on-fishing-opportunities-briefing-10-stocks-not-managed-by-a-total-allowable-catch/>

Briefing 11: Deep-sea stocks. Briefing 11 of 11 in the Briefing Series “Recommendations to the EU and the UK on the setting of fishing opportunities”. July 2025. <https://www.clientearth.org/latest/documents/joint-briefing-series-recommendations-on-fishing-opportunities-briefing-11-deep-sea-stocks/>

