

# WORKING GROUP ON WIDELY DISTRIBUTED STOCKS (WGWIDE)

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## WORKING GROUP ON WIDELY DISTRIBUTED STOCKS (WGWIDE)

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## i Executive summary

As a consequence of the impact of the COVID pandemic on international travel which prevented the traditional meeting from taking place, the Working Group on Widely Distributed Stocks (WGWIDE) met online via WebEx hosted by ICES. Prior to the 2020 meeting, the generic ToRs for species and regional working groups were re-prioritised by ACOM to allow the WG to focus primarily on those ToRs most applicable to the provision of advice. WGWIDE reports on the status and considerations for management of Northeast Atlantic mackerel, blue whiting, Western and North Sea horse mackerel, Northeast Atlantic boarfish, Norwegian spring-spawning herring, striped red mullet (Subareas 6, 8 and Divisions 7.a-c, e-k and 9.a), and red gurnard (Subareas 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8) stocks.

**Northeast Atlantic (NEA) Mackerel.** This stock is highly migratory and widely distributed throughout the Northeast Atlantic with significant fisheries in most ICES subareas. A diverse range of fleets from smaller artisanal, handline vessels to large (100m+) factory freezer vessels and modern RSW trawlers and purse seiners take part in what is one of the most valuable European fisheries. The assessment conducted in 2020 is an update assessment, based on the configuration agreed during the most recent inter-benchmark exercise in 2019 and incorporates the most recent data available from sampling of the commercial catch in 2019, the final 2019 egg survey SSB estimate, an updated recruitment index and tagging time series along with 2020 survey data from the IESSNS swept area survey. Advice is given based on stock reference points which were updated during a management strategy evaluation carried out in 2020. Following a strong increase from 2007 to 2014, SSB has been declining although it remains well above  $MSY B_{trigger}$ . Fishing mortality has been below  $F_{MSY}$  since 2016. There have been a number of large year classes since 2001 with above average recruitment over much of the most recent decade.

**Blue Whiting.** This pelagic gadoid is widely distributed in the eastern part of the North Atlantic. The 2020 update assessment followed the protocol from the most recent inter-benchmark in 2016 and used preliminary catch data from 2020. Due to the cancellation of the 2020 acoustic survey, this data was not available. The effect on the assessment was minimal and limited to increases in uncertainty of the terminal year estimates. The SSB continues to decrease from the most recent maximum in 2017 mainly due to below average recruitment since 2017, although it remains above  $MSY B_{trigger}$ . Fishing mortality has been above  $F_{MSY}$  since 2014.

**Norwegian Spring Spawning Herring.** This is one of the largest herring stocks in the world. It is highly migratory, spawning along the Norwegian coast and feeding throughout much of the Norwegian Sea. The 2020 assessment is based on an implementation of the XSAM assessment model introduced at the benchmark in 2016. This year's assessment indicates that the stock is continuing to decline from the peak in 2008 of 7Mt to just above  $MSY B_{trigger}$  due to successive years of average or below average recruitment. Catch advice for 2021 is given on the basis of the agreed management plan and represents a substantial increase over the 2020 advice due to an upward revision in the estimate of the 2016 year-class which is considered to be the most significant year-class since 2004.

**Western Horse Mackerel.** Horse mackerel is distributed throughout ICES areas 4,6,7,8 and 9 with the Western stock is found mainly in the Northern North Sea, west of Britain and Ireland and in the Bay of Biscay. Following a benchmark in 2017, the stock is assessed using the Stock Synthesis integrated assessment model. Stock reference points were revised in 2019. Following a period of declining SSB, above average recruitments from 2014-2018 have contributed to a recent rise in SSB, albeit from a low level in 2017 such that current SSB is just above  $B_{lim}$ . Following a decline associated with reduced catches, fishing mortality has been increasing since 2017 and



is now above FMSY. As in previous years the assessment output, while indicating the same trend as previous assessments rescales the absolute levels of SSB and F in the most recent 15 years.

**North Sea Horse Mackerel.** 2021 advice for this stock was issued in 2019. However, the WG considered an update assessment which is based on a combined survey index from groundfish surveys in the North Sea and the Channel following the benchmark in 2017. The most recent index value suggests that the stock remains at a low level following a decline in 2017. The ratio of  $F/F_{MSY}$ , estimated using length information from sampled catch remains slightly above 1 although with a declining trend.

**Northeast Atlantic Boarfish.** Boarfish is a small, pelagic, planktivorous, shoaling species, found at depths of 0 to 600 m and is distributed widely from Norway to Senegal. The directed fishery occurs primarily in the Celtic Sea and developed during the early 2000s, initially unregulated before the introduction of a TAC in 2011 and catches have reduced since 2012 to the current level. Advice is provided using the data limited category 3 approach based on output from an exploratory Bayesian surplus production assessment model with catch and survey data from groundfish surveys and an acoustic survey. The current assessment indicates that biomass peaked in 2012 before declining sharply. The most recent estimate is the highest for several years and is primarily due to an increased acoustic estimate in 2020 which contains a significant juvenile proportion.

**Striped Red Mullet in North Sea, Bay of Biscay, Southern Celtic Seas, Atlantic Iberian Waters.** This stock has been considered by WGwide since 2016 with advice given triennially on the basis of the precautionary approach. There is no currently assessment and limited information on abundance and exploitation level such that a further precautionary reduction in landings is advised for 2021–23.

**Northeast-Atlantic Red Gurnard.** This stock was first considered by WGwide in 2016 with advice issued biennially, most recently in 2019. This is a category 6 stock, with large uncertainties in landings data due to poor resolution at the species level. Landings have fluctuated without trend throughout much of the time series and discarding levels are significant. An index based on survey observations will be considered during a future benchmark.

ii Expert group information

Expert group name	Working Group on Widely Distributed Stocks (WGWIDE)
Expert group cycle	Annual
Year cycle started	2020
Reporting year in cycle	1/1
Chair(s)	Andrew Campbell, Ireland
Meeting venue(s) and dates	26 August- 1 September 2020, by correspondence (41 participants)