

Statement to the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine

25 October 2023

Sustainability Impact Assessment of Fishing Opportunities for 2024

The Minister for Agriculture, Food and Marine: (Charlie McConalogue TD)

- I welcome this opportunity to present this Sustainability Impact Assessment of Fishing Opportunities for 2024 to this Committee. As in previous years, a rigorous assessment has been undertaken to examine the implications for Ireland of the potential fishing opportunities for the coming year.
- The UK's withdrawal from the EU has led to significant changes to the processes involved in setting Total Allowable Catches (or TACs), for the majority of our commercial stocks.
- Approximately 40 of Ireland's fish stocks, which were previously exclusively Union resources, are now shared resources, most shared with the UK.
- The Commission has the sole competence to negotiate with Third Countries on behalf of the EU on the setting of fishing opportunities for shared stocks. This now includes the UK.
- The bilateral negotiations between the Commission, on behalf of the EU, and the UK began yesterday in London and I will go into more detail on these consultations in a moment. The online opening Plenary session for these negotiations was held this morning. Member State officials and Stakeholders, including Irish Stakeholders, were able to attend virtually and hear the opening statements by the UK and Commission negotiators.
- Based on the experience of the past years post-Brexit, and the subsequent changes in the procedures for setting fishing opportunities for the EU, I again decided to commence this Sustainability Impact Assessment

process at the start of September. The SIA is an essential step in Ireland's preparation for the TAC setting process and I wanted to have the process completed in time for the EU-UK negotiations.

- The benefits of carrying out the process at this stage allows for input from stakeholders, analysis by BIM and the Marine Institute and the views of the Oireachtas in time for the start of the TAC setting process.
- I decided to again use the ICES scientific advice as the basis for this year's SIA. The ICES advice forms the basis of the scientific advice used by the Commission. Therefore, the ICES advice for the relevant stocks provides suitable guidance for the TAC figures which would normally be proposed by the Commission.
- This allowed for a meaningful public consultation and realistic engagement with our stakeholders. It also allowed the Marine Institute and BIM to produce the biological and socio-economic assessments.
- The waters surrounding Ireland contain some of the most productive fishing grounds in the EU. We have a duty of care and a national self-interest to protect their biological richness and, as such, they must be managed responsibly and sustainably.
- However, my Department along with BIM continue to work together with fishers in order to adapt and develop the most selective and sustainable fishing methods. The continued efforts and commitment of our fishers in this matter has been very important.
- Progress is being achieved in terms of the sustainability of the fish stocks. For 2023, 39 stocks of interest to Ireland are fished at or below maximum sustainable yield. Fishing at Maximum Sustainable Yield, or FMSY, is the largest average catch or yield that can continuously be taken from a stock under existing environmental conditions.
- In 2013, only 20 stocks were fished at this sustainable level. The number of stocks fished above FMSY is 17 in 2023, and this move towards sustainability is improving over time.
- This is a significant achievement and Ireland will continue to work with stakeholders, the Commission, other Member States and Third Countries to build on this tangible progress to achieve our objectives of healthy fish

stocks and sustainable fishing.

EU-UK Consultations

- As I mentioned earlier, the bilateral consultations with the UK for 2024 for shared stocks began yesterday. The SIA process and your input here today will help to develop Ireland's position during these upcoming negotiations. The negotiations will be led by the European Commission. My team and I will be fully engaged at EU level to ensure that Ireland's interests are recognised and pursued with Commissioner Sinkevičius and his team.
- We are hopeful that agreement can be reached in time to allow the outcome to be discussed at the Fisheries Council on the 11th and 12th December and feed into the TAC & Quota Regulation for 2024.
- I will be insisting that the Hague Preferences are applied at the December Council for the relevant fish stocks.
- If an EU-UK agreement is not secured, there is a contingency plan in place to ensure that fishing can continue at the start of 2023. Under the Trade and Co-operation Agreement, in the event that agreement with the UK cannot be reached by 20th December, each Party may set provisional TACs applying from 1st January at the level advised by ICES.
- In previous years, the Commission developed a plan for provisional TACs for the first three months of the year. This saw TACs for most stocks set at 25% of the previous year's TAC level, with the full TAC applied for Coastal State stocks such as Mackerel and Blue Whiting.
- While this situation is not ideal, if needed, it provides certainty and continuity for our fishing industry in the New Year.

Coastal States

- Management arrangements for three migratory species in the North East Atlantic in which Ireland has an interest - Blue Whiting, Atlanto-Scandian Herring and Mackerel - are negotiated by means of a Coastal States Framework between the parties in whose waters significant

concentrations of these stocks are to be found and who have normally had a track record in the fishery.

- The annual Coastal States negotiations for 2024 took place in London earlier in October.
- The Coastal States agreed on setting the TAC for Mackerel at 739,386 tonnes in line with the ICES advice. The ICES advice is based on the Maximum Sustainable Yield approach and represents a reduction of 5% compared to the 2023 TAC.
- The TAC for Blue Whiting was set at 1,529,754 tonnes in line with ICES advice. This is a 12.5% increase on 2023.
- Agreement was reached on setting the TACs for Atlanto-Scandian Herring at 390,010 tonnes. This is a 24% decrease on 2023. The EU, and Ireland, have a relatively small share of this stock.
- There are currently no international sharing arrangements in place for these three Coastal State stocks. Discussions among the Coastal State parties on new sharing arrangements continued throughout 2023. I have been clear on the need to agree on sharing arrangements that respect the EU, and in turn Ireland's, proper share of the global TAC for these stocks.
- We continue to oppose the setting of unacceptably high unilateral quotas for Mackerel by a number of third countries. I have articulated our serious concerns on this issue at EU Fisheries Council and directly to Commissioner Sinkevičius. If this unacceptable behaviour continues in 2024, the EU must re-double its efforts and use all available tools so that there are real and effective consequences for such behaviour.

Sustainability Impact Assessment

- Moving on to the SIA itself, in order for it to be carried out, the ICES scientific advice for the stocks has been used as a basis for the SIA.

- As part of the SIA, an open consultation process was initiated, whereby stakeholders were asked to submit their comments and observations on the ICES advice for fish stocks for 2024 and the European Commission's Communication "*Sustainable fishing in the EU: state of play and orientations for 2023*" and its accompanying Staff Working Document.
- From the 1st September, an online web portal on www.fishingnet.ie was activated to enable the transmission of electronic submissions for consideration. Three submissions to the public consultation were received and will be published on the fishingnet.ie website.
- In addition to the written submissions, I convened a meeting of stakeholders including fishing industry representatives and environmental NGO's on the 17th October. The purpose of this meeting was to give a further opportunity to stakeholders to outline their positions on the many aspects of the communication and the scientific advice. I would like to thank all the stakeholders for their contributions to this impact assessment.
- The stakeholders set out a range of positions. However, there were also many commonalities. I agree with many of the sentiments expressed through the consultation process which all, I consider, have the same objective of sustainable fishing and the protection of our fishing resource and our marine ecosystem for future generations.
- There is a clear call for adherence to the advice on setting TACs in accordance with fishing at Maximum Sustainable Yield. We must also make use of the provisions of the Western Waters Multi annual plan to deal with stocks where scientific advice indicates the stock is in poor shape. In recent years, in order to reduce catches of depleted stocks in mixed fisheries, TACs were set as by-catch only at levels that help the biomass of these vulnerable stocks to recover to sustainable levels. These were complimented by remedial technical measures in the Celtic Sea, West of Scotland and Irish Sea.
- The Marine Institute and BIM have made invaluable contributions to the assessment of the ICES advice, which is contained in the Sea Fisheries Sustainability Impact Assessment before you today. I would like to briefly set out the findings contained in that assessment.

Biological Assessment

- From a purely biological perspective, the Marine Institute's view, which coincides with the ICES view, is that there has been an improvement in the status of some fish stocks. However, others remain a concern.
- In the Impact Assessment, the Marine Institute summaries the pressure on the 74 stocks which will be dealt with in the 2023 Stock Book and compares this assessment with the same evaluation presented in previous years' Stock Books. The number of sustainably fished stocks for 2022 is 39. In terms of percentages, this is 53% the same as last year. The percentage and number of stocks fished above FMSY is currently 17 stocks or 23%. The number of stocks with unknown status has decreased to 18.
- It is good to see the general improvement in stocks over time. It must be remembered that there were only 20 sustainably fished stocks as recently as 2013 and we now have 39.
- There are multiple reasons why stocks have unknown status including short time series of biological data, conflicting input data, low catches or insufficient sampling data, or missing catch information. Over time the percentage of stocks with unknown pressure and state indicators has declined.
- The specific details for all stocks are available in the Sustainability Impact Assessment before you today. Further information on the fish stocks of interest to Ireland are available in the Stock Book, which is prepared annually by the Marine Institute and is available on their website.

Economic and Social Impact

- As I indicated earlier, BIM has based the socio-economic assessment on the ICES advice, where available. In cases where the ICES advice was not yet available, or where ICES had provided zero catch advice, a rollover of last year's TACs was assumed so that the assessment of these stocks could be carried out.
- ICES advice for *Nephrops* (also known as prawns) is expected to be released on 31st October. In advance of the advice, to assist consideration of the stocks in the Celtic and Irish Seas, different scenarios of -10% and

-5% reduction, rollover and +5% and +10% increased were examined, as this is an important stock for our fishing industry.

- Therefore, it is important to highlight that BIM's estimates may change, depending on the final TACs agreed between the EU and UK. As this advice is for single stock assessment, we can expect significant changes for stocks in mixed fisheries where a particular stock is depleted. This is the case for cod stocks around the coast and the TACs for demersal stocks where cod is a by-catch will be set to support the protection and rebuilding of such depleted stocks.
- If the TACs were to be agreed on the basis of the assumptions I have mentioned, we would see a net decrease in fishing opportunity of 0.1% by volume in tonnes but a reduction of 6% by value. This amounts to a direct income reduction of minus €12.4 million.
- For the demersal (whitefish) sector, while this would mean a reduction of 15% in volume of fishing activity and a reduction of 8% by value, with a direct income loss of €9.2 million. This is due mainly as a result of deductions in Celtic Sea Whiting and Haddock and Cod and Pollock in all areas.
- For the pelagic sector, this would result in an increase of 4% by volume but a 3% reduction by value with a direct income reduction of €3.24 million. This is primarily due to the decrease in Mackerel where ICES advised a -5% reduction in catches for 2024. This would however be partially offset by following the increases in the advice for Blue Whiting (12.5%) and boarfish (20%).

Processing and ancillary sectors

- In addition to the direct losses to the fleet of quota reductions, income would also be lost from the processing sector as a direct result of reduced catches and in a number of ancillary industries (net making, chandlery, engineering, refrigeration etc).

Employment

- This would obviously have a knock-on effect for employment and BIM further estimates, on the basis of the most recent employment surveys of the seafood sector, that if the TACs were set in accordance with this single stock advice it could impact 268 full time equivalent jobs. This could

occur either through reduced incomes, partial lay-offs or redundancies in the seafood sector.

Hague Preferences

- The “Hague Preferences” which are additional amounts of quota that Ireland claims for important whitefish stocks when the TACs fall below set levels are negotiated annually at the December Fisheries Council.
- However, we cannot take the Hague Preferences for granted. Many Member States object strenuously to their application as the additional quota for Ireland comes off their allocations. These objections are intensifying in the face of quota reductions in other Member States arising from both the TCA and reductions due to scientific advice.
- Ensuring that the Preferences are applied will be a key political objective for me in the negotiations.

Conclusion on the SIA

- To conclude, the Sea Fisheries Sustainability Impact Assessment provides a good picture of the state of stocks and possible implications for 2024. I would like to thank and acknowledge all those who contributed to the production of this Impact Assessment.
- While the SIA is based on the ICES advice, rather than TACs proposed by the Commission, it does highlight the potential for significant impacts on the Irish fishing industry.
- There are some stocks where ICES has issued advice for zero catches. However, with the implementation of the landing obligation and the requirement to land all catches, including by-catches, from such stocks this would lead to “choke” situations in mixed fisheries.
- The EU and UK previously established specific TACs for by-catches of these stocks. They highlight the difficulty of fishing all stocks in a mixed fishery at MSY at the same time. We need to strike a balance between the potential for severe socio-economic impacts and the need to achieve good environmental status for stocks. I will be supportive of a similar approach as was taken in previous years for these vulnerable stocks.

- I now look forward to hearing your views and answering any questions you may have.
- Thank you Chair.