Press Release
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Stark scientific advice for key pelagic stocks released

KFO urges the Minister to support the industry

Amid much speculation, today ICES released stark scientific advice for several key pelagic stocks for 2026. The advice confirms the worst fears of Irish pelagic fishermen. For three key pelagic species, ICES has advised massive cuts of 70% for mackerel, 41% for blue whiting and 22% for boarfish. Combined these cuts, if translated into fishing opportunities for 2026 will result in losses for the Irish industry of more than €50 million compared to 2024. Such an economic shock to any industry will test its resilience in the extreme.

Following from the worrying ICES advice in 2024, the latest assessment of the mackerel stock has shown further steep decline. There has been little or no recruitment of young fish into the stock with surveys showing egg production at the lowest ever recorded levels. Fishing pressure on older age groups of mackerel resulting in low numbers of large spawners remaining has also increased.

Taking stock, Dominic Rihan, CEO of the KFO said, "*The dire state of mackerel lies firmly with those who have ignored the scientist's warnings, continued to ramp up fishing pressure, building bigger boats with more capacity and justified their super profits with spurious sustainability arguments. EU fishermen have fished sustainably within their quotas and are now facing into a financial crisis*".

Fishing effort in northern waters by several countries, notably Russia, on larger and older fish has continued to increase, particularly in the summer months when traditionally little fishing occurred. The advice shows a clear correlation between the increase in effort in this summer fishery in international waters and the sharp decline in mackerel biomass. There has been a marked reluctance to take any steps to curtail this fishery.

Ciaran Doherty, chair of the KFO explained, "*The increase in fishing effort in the summer months has wrecked the fishery. The number of Russian, Icelandic, Faroese and Greenlandic vessels operating in international waters has almost doubled. The Russians are being facilitated by foreign companies who are handling their fish with little or no monitoring. Now the science confirms what is plain to see – the stock is close to collapse*".

Mackerel is only part of the unfolding situation facing the Irish industry. ICES has also advised large cuts for blue whiting and boarfish. In recent years, catches of these two species have helped to soften the blow of the losses from the transfer of mackerel quota to the UK under Brexit.

Dominic Rihan said, "*The advice is a perfect storm for our members with no alternative fishing opportunities available to them unlike other industries in other EU Member States and Coastal States. The scale of the losses we are facing requires urgent action at national and EU level if we are to survive*".

The scientific advice will be discussed by the Coastal States group of EU, UK, Norway, Faroes, Iceland and Greenland, that meet annually under the auspices of the Northeast Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC). These negotiations in October are expected to be highly charged and agreeing on TAC levels that provide protection to the stocks, while maintaining a level of economic viability will be challenging.

Ciaran Doherty concluded, "*The situation has gone beyond words and negotiations that have constantly failed to deliver an agreement. We are calling on Minister Dooley to meet the industry urgently to discuss a tangible package of measures to support us through this crisis*".

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