

## Business calls for sea-change in pelagics management

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**CONTACT:**

NAPA Executive Director, Tom Pickerell: Tom@tomolamolaconsulting.co.uk

NAPA Communications, Katrina Ryan: Katrina@mindfullywired.org

*Gisli Gislason, Program Director for the North Atlantic at global certification body, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), shares his view on the difficulties facing these iconic commercial stocks in the Northeast Atlantic - and why the loudest in a sea of voices calling for change is the marketplace.*

Pelagic fish are small, but they are big business here in the North Atlantic. Fish and fishing are integral to national life. A pillar to the individual economies, cultures and history, our rich fishing grounds are some of the world's most abundant. The history of marine research in many of the countries that fish here dates back more than a century, and we've since built a multi-generational fishing business upon respect for the sea and these incredible resources.

But ensuring future generations have access to the same abundant seas is getting harder.

North Atlantic stocks are considered well-understood ('data rich') and abundant - part of a fishing area that is amongst the most sophisticated and sustainable in terms of management across Europe, and the wider world. But a new narrative is building around some of our most important fisheries: and it's a troubling one for the future of some of our best-known catches. North East Atlantic mackerel, Atlanto-Scandian herring and North East Atlantic blue whiting are all iconic pelagic stocks - caught by state-of-the-art vessels, backed by millions of Euros of quota value. Just two years ago, these stocks were all MSC certified - sign-posted by the blue tick as the 'safe choice' for purchases in supermarkets. But these fisheries, like most MSC certified fisheries, had conditional certification, requiring states to establish management measures ensuring total catches align with scientific advice. This has not happened and time to close these conditions has elapsed.

Now the story is different: those states with an interest in fishing these iconic stocks are increasingly deviating from catch levels recommended by independent fishery scientists - we are routinely exceeding the sustainable boundaries on quotas, and we are not addressing this escalating situation. This year, fishing nations will catch up to 40% more mackerel, herring and whiting than scientists advise.

This is a situation that has evolved since the early part of this century, and one that is the result of an array of complex factors and interactions. Climate change is affecting where these species swim, and where they feed. These changing conditions and patterns have put a strain on sharing agreements, meaning that there has been no collaborative quota agreement for

mackerel since 2009. Since 1997, there have been just four years (2006-2009) in which all Coastal States agreed on management for all three key pelagic stocks. No fishing agreements for herring have been reached since 2012, and in 2014 an agreed multi-national management plan for blue whiting collapsed. The last agreement for mackerel was back in 2009. Now we're in 2021, exceeding the safe limits on fishing for these stocks by up to 40%. Real political leadership and collaboration is required to overcome this entrenched threat to Atlantic sustainability.

One group showing leadership in calling for change is the supply chain – including retailers, seafood brands and fishmeal suppliers. Businesses involved in the purchase, processing and selling of herring, mackerel and whiting are keenly aware of the need for sustainable, science-based management of these stocks. A coalition has formed: the North Atlantic Pelagic Advocacy Group (or, NAPA). This group brings together more than EUR 250 billion in purchasing power and is asking for one thing: for fishing nations to respect fisheries science. What does that mean in practice? Collaboratively managing these valuable stocks with a long-term view, that supports and protects the environment, and delivers business security. When businesses have committed to sourcing sustainable products for the public, they rely on national governments to help make that possible - through their laws and their decision-making.

The scientific view is clear. The International Council for Exploration of the Seas (ICES) has recently issued its annual advice on these stocks. Across the board, it calls for reductions in catches: a 6.7% reduction for mackerel, an 8% reduction for herring and a huge 19% reduction for blue whiting. And those advised reductions are against the advised catch level from last year – not the actual catch levels, which were much higher than science suggested is safe.

This is not a comforting picture. There is consistent - and now highly visible – fishing exceeding scientific advice of mackerel, herring and blue whiting occurring in the Northeast Atlantic. NAPA members (everything from processing businesses to household-name retailers, covering the UK, EU, Japan, Africa and more) are issuing sourcing statements - many indicate that they will review their purchasing from these fisheries if the deadlock on sustainable management can't be broken by Coastal States. Some will stop sourcing from the region if an agreement can't be reached. It goes without saying: this has implications for people who depend on fishing for a living.

In this case, although there are complex environmental factors at play, the barrier is singular: political leadership is lacking. As a nation built on fishing, there is now an opportunity to come to the table and show political leadership to match the calls of the marketplace. In the end, a collaborative agreement will benefit all fishing nations - as it will protect the abundance of the stocks for the future.

It's time that Ministers, with support from the industry and other interest groups, from all fishing nations targeting pelagics in the North East Atlantic wake-up to the reality of the situation. Real leadership is needed to protect these rich resources, the environment and livelihoods. The states involved are some of the most sophisticated in the world in terms of fishing capacity,

control and enforcement, administration, and scientific expertise. It is inexcusable that these states cannot come up with workable solutions; solutions that ensure pelagic fisheries are managed in-line with the advice they seek from independent experts.

\*ENDS\*

*Notes to editors:*

### **More on NAPA**

NAPA is growing constantly, and currently represents nearly 50 retailers, food service companies and suppliers from EU and non-EU countries with the shared aim of sourcing sustainable and certified seafood in order to supply a growing demand for ecolabelled fish products. To achieve this, NAPA is seeking an agreement on total allowable catches for North East Atlantic pelagic fisheries in line with scientific advice, and for a long-term science-based management agreement.

Further detail can be found at: <https://www.seafish.org/responsible-sourcing/fisheries-management/north-atlantic-pelagic-advocacy-group/>

**NAPA Executive Director:** Tom Pickerell, Tomolamola Consulting

**NAPA Chair:** Aoife Martin, Seafish

**NAPA Communications:** Katrina Ryan & Fiona Birch, Mindfully Wired Communications