	Council *Update on Requests to ICES Resulting from EPR Recommendations*	**CNL(25)15** **Agenda item: 6.a) and 6.d)**

Update on Requests to ICES Resulting from EPR Recommendations

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to provide Council with an update on information requested of ICES after the 2024 Annual Meeting, on some actions that were to be addressed independently of NASCO's high-level Action Plan.

Decisions

For the Bycatch Data Call:

- Council agrees to request the SSC to add in a new bullet in the ICES advice request for 2026 to enable a bycatch data call for salmon and for data from Canada and the United States to be included.

For ICES' assistance in revising / updating NASCO's aquaculture guidelines:

Council agrees

- to make a special request to ICES in 2025 for a fully-funded ICES workshop, advice to be delivered by August 2026, to support the NASCO process;
- to add ~£48,000 to the budget for ICES for 2026 to pay for the special request; and
- to request that the Secretary works with the ICES Secretariat to facilitate this work, which will include collaboration to enable a full understanding by ICES of the intent of the revised guidelines.

Background

At its Annual Meeting in 2024, Council agreed 'The Future of NASCO – a Ten-Year Strategy', CNL(24)71rev. Associated with the Strategy is an Action Plan that contains several high-level actions, many of which originate from NASCO's third performance review carried out in 2022 and 2023, and reported in 2023 – 'Report of the Third NASCO Performance Review', CNL(23)17rev.

However, a suite of decisions were also taken in 2024, independently of the Action Plan, where Council agreed a number of actions, including:

> *'to request that the Secretary work with ICES to develop a request to ensure that ICES databases and web-based applications, both present and future, accommodate salmon, as they do for other assessed stocks, and to request that Atlantic salmon be placed on the ICES bycatch list (to address recommendation EPR3 in Objective 1)'.*

Additionally, in the margins of the meeting, the Secretary agreed to explore with ICES the kind of support that ICES might be able to provide to NASCO in the revision / update of its Resolutions, Agreements and Guidelines.

Information from ICES

1. Status of the DIASPARA project and database for salmon in ICES

ICES has several ongoing data and advice initiatives that work in concert using a step-wise approach over time to help facilitate the recommendation that ICES databases and web-based applications, both present and future, accommodate salmon, as they do for other assessed

stocks. The ICES Data Centre operates according to the ICES data policy, and ICES manages a number of large dataset collections related to the marine environment. Specific ICES data tools that are directly relevant to this NASCO recommendation for the North Atlantic salmon assessments and advice include: (1) catch statistics (e.g. the Official Nominal Catches 2006-2020, Historic Nominal Catches 1950-2010, Preliminary Catch Statistics), (2) the Regional Database Estimation System (RDBES), (3) the Transparent Assessment Framework (TAF), (4) the Stock Assessment Graph (SAG) database for assessment output and graph production, (5) ICES official data calls (https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.22274884.v1, https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.21975842), and (6) the ICES data-profiling tool (DPT).

The DIASPARA project is an EU-funded project, which works towards making an inventory of existing data on (eel and) salmon populations and habitats, developing a database structure (which is where ICES is working with the project) and as well look into stock assessment methods. A useful link is: Cinea project DIASPARA

Recent activity concerning salmon data is the ICES data call that was developed for WGNAS. This ICES data call gathers all national catch data for all ICES member countries. An R-based tool was developed for WGNAS that automates the collation, analysis, and reporting of the national catch data for all ICES member countries on salmon relevant for WGNAS. This R-based tool was used for this first time in 2023; it will enable the standardised reporting for all salmon catches in the North Atlantic.

ICES is collaborating with the EU-funded project DIASPARA project to facilitate a faster (and funded) development of the data infrastructure needed. Following the first meeting at ICES, progress has been made towards designing a centralised, harmonised data infrastructure for diadromous species. The initial focus is on building a common database structure and vocabulary that will be consistent across working groups (WGEEL, WGNAS, WGBAST, WGTRUTTA), interoperable with ICES tools (like TAF and the Data Screening Utility DATSU), and scalable across spatial and temporal levels.

Key outcomes relevant for NASCO:

Common Database Agreed: a unified database will be developed to host WGNAS data, supporting model inputs / outputs, life history traits, landings and environmental variables. This structure will use shared vocabularies validated by ICES and the WGs.

Integration with ICES Tools: there is strong alignment with ICES databases and tools. Where appropriate, landings and electrofishing data will be routed to RDBES. WGNAS will eventually integrate aggregated data via TAF.

Data Standardisation: significant emphasis is placed on harmonising spatial units (EMU, stock unit, river scale) and aligning them with ICES functional units. The creation of a common vocabulary and reference river database is underway in collaboration with the ICES Data Centre.

Practical Considerations: legacy datasets will require quality control and standardisation. Duplication between ICES databases and new WG-specific databases (e.g. for landings or electrofishing) is a known challenge, and data governance rules are being established.

Progressive Rollout:

- a first version of the continental habitat database is expected by spring 2025; and
- testing the full data structure using eel data across all species will begin in 2025, with a goal to finalise the structure by autumn 2025.

Next Steps:

- develop database templates for key domains (habitat, dams, electrofishing, life history);
- continue collaboration with ICES to finalise vocabularies and explore API-based integration[1]; and
- clarify data responsibilities and submission pathways (e.g. what goes into RDBES vs local / national systems).

Salmon on the Bycatch fish-list

Salmon was discussed as part of the Workshop on Fish Species Bycatch Relevance (WKFIBRE) in late 2024 (report still pending). The workshop excluded salmon with the criterion '*Stocks with assessment that provides a stock size indicator by any relevant scientific body'*. This criterion aims to exclude all stocks from ICES ETP (endangered, threatened and protected) species list of bycatch concern that are already assessed, as these stocks are generally not bycatch. This criterion corresponds to most of the stocks of categories 1 to 4 in ICES (which includes salmon). This exclusion criterion is not applicable for stocks of categories 5 and 6. If a stock is assessed under category 1 to 4 but some key information is missing, respective stocks should be flagged and will be addressed at a latter filtering stage under the exemption criteria for inclusion based on expert judgement. The two inclusion criteria suggested by WKFIBRE were: '*Stocks/species with data/assessment issues and vulnerable life history traits'*, and '*Listed as Data Deficient on any relevant conservation lists or very data poor species'*. The suggested mechanism for considering species inclusions was to engage with ecoregion-level experts after implementing all exclusion criteria while finalising the draft lists to be submitted to final approval by ACOM and SCICOM.

ACOM discussed the conclusions by WKFIBRE during its March 2025 meeting and agreed to move forward with the proposed next steps from WKFIBRE, which is to undertake an ecoregion-level review and updating of the list of fish species of bycatch relevance, including the application of inclusion criteria for the addition of selected fish species. In light of recent discussions between ACOM leadership and NASCO, ACOM discussed whether to systematically include Atlantic salmon in the fish list. Salmon is assessed by ICES, however, without reporting or accounting for bycatch in our assessments and advice. The addition of Atlantic salmon to the list of fish species of bycatch relevance would enable the Working Group on Bycatch of Protected Species (WGBYC) to request and provide bycatch information and estimates for these species at the scale of ecoregions.

ACOM decided on 28 April 2025 to add both Atlantic salmon and European eel to the list of fish species of bycatch relevance in all ecoregions. This means that that all ICES member countries will be reporting salmon and eel under the ICES Bycatch Data Call issued annually for the use in WGBYC. This will build a comprehensive database on the bycaught salmon in the area covered by this Group.

However, ICES has noted that it does not send its data calls to Canada and the United States. The NASCO Convention states '*This Convention applies to the salmon stocks which migrate beyond areas of fisheries jurisdiction of coastal States of the Atlantic Ocean north of 36ºN latitude throughout their migratory range'*. If the data call could be extended to cover salmon's full distribution in the North Atlantic that would be most helpful for the inclusion of bycatch data at the appropriate scale for NASCO. To enable this, a new request would need to be specified in the annual advice request, providing ICES with a reference to this in an updated data call for bycatch data. Such language could be.. '*NASCO notes the addition of Atlantic*

[1] API-based integration: API = Application Programming Interface. A set of protocols and tools that allow different software applications to communicate with each other

salmon to the list of fish species of bycatch relevance and requests ICES to gather data concerning bycatch information and, if possible, estimates of bycaught Atlantic salmon at the scale of ecoregions across the entire NASCO Convention area.' The request to gather data enables ICES to make the data call and the request for estimates of bycaught data enables the data to be gathered.

Potential request for advice related to the update of the NASCO guidelines on aquaculture

ICES could make an analysis of the current NASCO guidelines, matching national / sub-national regulations, management frameworks, and policies that support the guidelines throughout the NASCO area, and provide a **gap analysis of the national management / policy support and a gap analysis of the NASCO guidelines –** identifying issues or topics that NASCO should consider incorporating into its guidelines.

To do this work, ICES would build on the work done by Aquaculture Steering Group expert groups working with environmental impacts of aquaculture, those mapping regional and national policies to environmental impacts, and the ICES Aquaculture Overviews.

To fully facilitate an advice request from NASCO, ICES would benefit greatly from collaborating directly with the established sub-group tasked to update the NASCO aquaculture guidelines in autumn 2026 to fully understand the intent of the guidelines. The type of advice suggested would be intended to support NASCO working with their national delegations / jurisdictions to improve management and regulations and to level the playing field across the Convention area.

<u>ICES Community process</u>

ICES has the expertise within the ICES network to answer this request through the working groups and workshops under the Aquaculture Steering Group. This advice process would build on the work of ICES expert groups: WGREIA, WGPDMO, WKGIRAF, WGNAS, WKCulEf and the Aquaculture Overviews (AOs) for the North Sea, Celtic Sea, Norwegian Sea, and Faroe Islands ecoregions. ICES does not yet have an AO for Iceland, but can draw on information assembled for WKGIRAF.

The Working Group on Risk assessment of Environmental Interactions of Aquaculture group (WGREIA) seeks to prioritise areas where aquaculture management can lead to better environmental performance of the industry. WGNAS tracks the catch of escaped farmed fish and provides updates on sea lice and other diseases from aquaculture. The AOs contain detailed information on aquaculture activities and practices, production over time, policy and legal foundations, management frameworks, environment interactions and drivers, as well as future projections, emerging threats and opportunities.

ICES will draw upon the experts from these groups and beyond to answer this type of request. ICES would work with the NASCO sub-group and available NASCO publications on this topic, and stakeholders to answer such a request.

<u>Process</u>

ICES would convene an expert-led workshop with two chairs – its usual process. This workshop would have up to three external reviewers, representing a broad range of disciplines reflecting the topics covered in the NASCO guidelines, participating in the workshop. The workshop ToRs could call for a comprehensive listing of national-level regulations for sea lice and containment, and an analysis of best practices and gaps. The workshop would produce a report with an external reviewer's report, these documents would provide the ICES Advisory Committee with the scientific basis for drafting the advice.

Benefits

Such an advice process would bring together stakeholders, managers, and scientists from national laboratories, non-governmental organizations and academia to assemble the best available science and information to support sustainable wild fisheries and aquaculture in the NASCO area. It could serve as a useful tool for NASCO to work with its Contracting Parties to improve management and regulations and to level the playing field across the Convention area.

Very draft budget

Considering the above activities, a draft budget is shown below, based on 2025 costings:

Element	**Cost in EUR**
Workshop costs	6,987
ACOM leadership	5,514
ADG	8,877
Travel costs (ADG, WKs)	1,075
Secretariat support	22,259
External review	9,450
Total EUR	**54,162**

This budget should be taken as indicative, only a ball-park figure.

Alternatively, something much simpler, like a technical review of the current NASCO guidelines, could be done to inform NASCO how ICES considers the guidelines could be improved and where the gaps exist. This kind of special request would cost less, in the region of ~£10,000 – for the independent reviewers and ICES Secretariat costs associated with the review, and be a quicker process but, unlike the full review described above, it would only help NASCO identify where to focus the guideline updates. This approach would also have less transparency than the advice process with a workshop described above. It would also rely on a small pool of expert input – likely three independent reviewers. ICES would recommend the workshop etc. approach described above.

Secretariat
Edinburgh
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