

Press Release

Time to stop fishing and start restoring habitats - zero catches and zero anthropogenic mortality advised for European eel

The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, ICES, published its [scientific advice for European eel for 2023](#) earlier today. It reinforces last year's advice, of zero catches in all habitats and for all life stages, by also highlighting conservation aspects and advising zero mortality for all non-fisheries related human impacts.

The European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) has been listed as Critically Endangered by IUCN since 2008, and is on the European Red List for freshwater fish. It is also included in Appendix II of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) and listed in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) since 2007. Despite the need for protection and efforts to aid its recovery, European eel continues to be fished across most of its natural range. Only Ireland, Slovenia, Malta and Norway have closed all fishing for the species.

In 2021, a change in the scientific advice to zero catches in all habitats for all life stages made very clear that no catches of the critically endangered European eel can be considered sustainable. This message is reinforced today by a new advice format including so-called “headline advice” on not just fishing opportunities in 2023 but also conservation aspects¹. This is part of a gradual move within ICES towards [including ecosystem-based management considerations in the advice](#). The European eel is the first species to receive such advice.

In addition, the new advice makes very clear that the “zero catches” also applies to glass eel landings for restocking and aquaculture, as none of these activities are likely to have net benefits to the reproductive potential of the population. ICES does acknowledge that so-called assisted transport of eel within the same waterbody can be considered a temporary conservation measure under certain circumstances.

Since the advice of zero catch last year, the need for further measures to aid eel recovery has been debated across and beyond the EU. The European Commission launched a consultation in December 2021, asking stakeholders and decision-makers for suggestions on how to implement the new advice. It also received [Special Request Advice from ICES](#) on the national implementation of the *Council Regulation (EC) No 1100/2007 establishing measures for the recovery of the stock of European eel*, which showed that no overall progress has been made in reaching the objective on increased silver eel escapement.

Just last week, the Commission published its [proposals for further measures](#)², a clear reinforcement of the existing temporary fishing closures in EU waters first agreed by the Council in 2017.

¹ICES. 2022. ICES Technical guidelines on conservation status advice. In Report of the ICES Advisory Committee, 2022. ICES Advice 2022, Section 16.4.12. <https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.advice.21435987>

²COM(2022)559 final: Proposal for a Council Regulation fixing for 2023 the fishing opportunities for certain fish stocks, applicable in Union waters and, for Union fishing vessels, in certain non-Union waters, as well as fixing for 2023 and 2024 such fishing opportunities for certain deep-sea fish stocks.

– *The proposal is a far cry from the advised zero catch, even if it is a step in the right direction, says Niki Sporrang, Senior Policy Officer & European eel Project Manager at FishSec. The Commission’s plan to continue to work with Member States on a more “comprehensive approach” addressing other threats, as well as inland waters, will be very important, as well as ensuring compliance with the new rules once adopted.*

Over the coming weeks, the proposals and the scientific advice will be discussed with the Member States. The objectives of the EU’s Common Fisheries Policy should also apply to eel, and the regions as well as many countries have made their own commitments to sustainability, following scientific advice and protecting biodiversity. These commitments need to be implemented now through national measures in inland waters.

– *Eel management should be aligned with EU objectives for fisheries and biodiversity, not only in EU waters but across the EU. It is time to stop fishing and start restoring habitats and water quality to save this enigmatic species, says Jan Isakson, Director at FishSec.*

Even though the ICES advice is produced for the EU and the UK, focusing on the Northeast Atlantic region, it covers an area well beyond that and is highly relevant for other countries as well. Next week, on 7–11 November, the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) will be discussing proposals for further measures on eel during its 45th Annual Session in Tirana. A decision on the Commission’s proposal is expected at the Fisheries Council meeting on 12–13 December.

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Notes to editors:

[1] The European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) population has been declining for a long time and is classified as Critically Endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN, 2018).

[2] ICES data on recruitment shows a dramatic decline since the assessment baseline (1960-1979), and no significant recovery. Glass eel recruitment continues to be very low. This year, the estimate for the North Sea area is among the lowest ever seen at 0.5 % of the baseline average. For “elsewhere Europe” an increase to 9.7 % is reported, but this is mainly a result of an increase in Ireland and not observed in the Bay of Biscay. Yellow eel recruitment in 2021 was at 19 %.

[3] Assessment of European eel is complex due to the great geographical range of the population, including a number of countries outside of the ICES areas. This makes it impossible for ICES to use fishing mortality, Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) and other standard reference points for eel. As data on eel fisheries and other anthropogenic impacts remain incomplete, the assessment is based on time series for glass eel and yellow eel recruitment. Even without defined biological limit reference points, it is ICES assessment that the European eel population is well below any potential reference points, such as $MSY_{Btrigger}$ and B_{pa}/B_{lim} .

[4] The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) has advised that all anthropogenic mortality should be kept as close to zero as possible since 2003 (ICES, 2020). This year, the advice has changed to zero for all anthropogenic mortalities.

[5] A Council Regulation (1100/2007) establishing measures for the recovery of the stock of European eel was agreed in 2007. Since then, 14 years after its adoption, no notable recovery has been

FishSec – the Fisheries Secretariat is a politically independent non-profit organisation dedicated to the protection and restoration of marine ecosystem services, with a focus on fisheries. FishSec was established in 2003 by the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, WWF Sweden and the Swedish Anglers’ Association. More info at www.fishsec.org

observed in the European eel population; this was confirmed by Special Request Advice on the national implementation earlier this year: <https://www.fishsec.org/2022/05/30/scientific-evaluation-no-overall-progress-on-eu-eel-recovery-targets/>.

[6] Only **two EU countries – Ireland and Slovenia – have prohibited all fishing for the European eel**, despite the fact that it is also on the EU Red List of Freshwater Fishes.

[7] **Trends in landings** – reported commercial landings of yellow and silver eel continue to fall overall. In 2019, the last year with complete figures, 3,962 tonnes were landed, whereas in 2021 landings were around 2,400 tonnes, if we assume that Germany landed >200 tonnes based on landings from recent years. However, **the Netherlands** stands out as the only country that has **substantially increased its commercial landings** in recent years, with commercial landings at 475 tonnes in 2020. While the overall trend for landings of yellow and silver eel is down, landings in Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Denmark, the Netherlands and Turkey increased in 2021. Algeria, Italy, France, Tunisia and Sweden reported reduced landings in 2021. Egypt, which has a substantial fishery for European eel and mainly targets yellow and silver eel, does not report any data to ICES and is not included in the overall estimates.

[8] **EU glass eel landings** – in 2022, total commercial landings of glass eel, a fishery completely dominated by France, increased from 51.6 tonnes in 2021 to 59.48 tonnes. In France, landings have been increasing since 2010 and this year is among the highest since 2008 at 53.4 tonnes. After Brexit, UK landings have fallen dramatically, from more than 3 tonnes to less than 500 kg. The Basque Country in Spain still allows a regulated recreational fishery for glass eel, with preliminary landings in 2022 of around 700 kg.

[9] **Recreational landings of yellow and silver eel** – reported recreational landings are decreasing or stable in most countries, but seem to be increasing in Lithuania, Germany and Spain. **In Germany, recreational landings remain very high**, higher than reported commercial landings, with 276 tonnes reported for 2019. That year, over half of all reported recreational landings took place in Germany. Among other countries reporting recreational landings, Denmark still has a large recreational fishery (not angling) landing 79 tonnes in 2021, about 25% of total Danish landings. Tunisia, Belgium, Poland, the Netherlands, Italy and the Czech Republic also report substantial recreational landings.

[10] **Restocking** involves catching wild glass eels in one place and letting them go in another, often spreading viruses and disease in the process. It has been used for decades in many countries – not as a conservation measure but in order to sustain fisheries for eel. Despite the prolonged practice, no net benefit to eel reproduction has been shown.

[11] Eels have a complex life cycle, going through several different life stages and generally live for 10–20 years. The very small, translucent eels arriving at European coastlines every year are called **glass eels**. When they reach brackish or fresh waters, they transform into less transparent **elvers**, and then grow into **yellow eels**, which live along our coasts, in rivers and lakes for up to 25 years. When mature, they transform again into **silver eels**, which will undertake the long journey to the Sargasso Sea to spawn.