

Summary of Natural Resources Wales' risk-based nature conservation advice for Northern Shelf Mackerel and Northern Shelf Blue Whiting Fisheries Management Plans

Background and context

Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs) introduced under the Fisheries Act 2020, set out the policies designed to restore one or more stocks of sea fish to, or maintain them at, sustainable levels.

The Northern Shelf Mackerel and Northern Shelf Blue Whiting FMPs apply to UK waters of ICES areas 2a, 4, 5b, 6, 7a, 7d, 7e, 7f, 7h, 7g, 7j, and 12b, with ICES areas 7a, 7f and 7g covering all of Welsh waters.

This document has been produced in consultation with the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) and contains our risk-based nature conservation advice on the impacts across Welsh waters from fishing for the FMP species.

In November 2025, following discussions with Welsh Government, we agreed to provide high-level risk-based nature conservation advice for the Northern Shelf Mackerel and Northern Shelf Blue Whiting FMPs and SEA Environmental Report by the end of June 2026. Due to a revised consultation programme, Welsh Government now require our advice by the middle of April 2026. Because of this reduced time-period, we have reviewed our previously provided advice for the Celtic Sea and Western Channel (CSWC) Pelagic FMP and the Irish Sea Pelagic FMP, and provided summary advice relevant to the Northern Shelf Mackerel and Northern Shelf Blue Whiting FMPs' species and fishing gears.

Our advice considers the pressures from commercial and recreational fishing using pelagic trawls, pelagic drift nets, and pelagic fixed nets, which we understand to be the principal methods of fishing for the FMP species in Welsh waters.

Our risk-based advice considers the potential impacts from the pressures generated by relevant fishing gears, used to target the FMP species, on Annex I habitats and Annex II species features of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Ramsar sites (collectively referred to as Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)) designated under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands respectively.

Due to the high-level nature of our advice, it has not been possible to consider the impacts from fishing for the FMP species against the conservation objectives of individual MPAs. This would be required as part of any Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) under Regulation 63 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017.

Pressures are defined as mechanisms by which a human activity (e.g. fishing for the FMP species) or natural events affect an ecosystem (e.g. the designated features of MPAs). Our

advice uses the list of pressures employed by The Marine Life Information Network (MarLIN) in their Marine Evidence-based Sensitivity Assessment (MarESA) methodology¹.

Our advice will need to be added to by Welsh Government in any environmental assessments with, for example, detail on the amount, location, frequency, and management of activities. To assist with understanding the risk posed by the methods used to fish for the FMP species, we advise Welsh Government to initially determine where spatial overlap can occur between the fishing methods considered and protected features.

During any environmental assessment process, we advise Welsh Government to also consider the impacts from any other suitable methods to fish for or target the FMP species not included within our advice.

This advice has been provided to Welsh Government without prejudice to any future advice which we may provide in relation to our statutory functions.

Scope of NRW's advice

Welsh Government do not have programmes similar to the 2012 Revised Approach and the Marine Management Organisation's ongoing Fisheries Assessments that have assessed and managed fisheries activities within English MPAs. As such, we have considered the effects of fishing for the FMP species inside and outside of Welsh MPAs, on features occurring inside and outside of Welsh MPAs, as relevant.

Pressure-feature risk ratings

NRW **High**, **Medium**, **Low** and n/a pressure-feature risk ratings are determined by expert opinion based on a combination of available evidence, the likelihood of the activity/pressure occurring, and the sensitivity of pressure-feature relationship.

The risk ratings presented in this advice for Welsh waters reflect NRW's pressure-feature screening methodology. Risk ratings are assigned where a direct or indirect impact pathway exists between a fishing activity and a protected feature. They are based on the potential for a pressure caused by an activity to be a material consideration for a feature within an HRA when permitting an activity. Our approach disaggregates risks by gear type, pressure and feature group, and by whether the activity occurs inside or outside sites. As a consequence, some pressures may be assigned a **High** or **Medium** rating to reflect the sensitivity of the feature; the likelihood of the activity/pressure occurring; and the available evidence to assess impact.

Our approach differs from other published SNCB advice for Scottish, English and Northern Irish waters of the Northern Shelf Mackerel and Northern Shelf Blue Whiting FMPs which incorporate additional considerations such as scale of the fishery, and existing management measures which may mitigate impacts when determining overall risk. Any variation in risk ratings between our advice and other administrations is principally a consequence of

¹ [MarESA pressures and benchmarks - MarLIN - The Marine Life Information Network](#)

differing assessment approaches rather than substantive differences in underlying ecological risk.

Welsh Government will need to supplement our advice in any environmental assessment, with information on the amount, location, frequency, and management of the fishing activities/pressures concerned.

Summary of NRW's risk-based nature conservation advice for MPAs in Welsh waters of the Northern Shelf Mackerel and Northern Shelf Blue Whiting FMP areas

Only pressures considered to cause **High** or **Medium** risks to MPA features arising from the impacts of pelagic trawls, pelagic drift nets, and pelagic fixed nets are provided in our summary advice.

Due to species mobility some of these pressures can affect species features wherever they are. However, the pressures affecting habitats can only affect habitat features inside the boundaries of MPAs from fishing occurring either within or outside the MPAs.

Outside of MPAs, Annex I habitats contribute to wider Favourable Conservation Status (FCS) at a national level, and to Good Environmental Status (GES) under the Marine Strategy Regulations 2010.

The following list identifies the **High** and **Medium** pressure-feature risks for each of the three gear types considered:

Pelagic trawls

- There is a **Medium** risk inside and outside MPAs from harbour porpoise bycatch.

Pelagic drift nets

- There is a **High** risk inside and outside MPAs from harbour porpoise bycatch.

Pelagic fixed nets

- There is a **High** risk inside and outside MPAs from harbour porpoise bycatch.
- There is a **High** risk inside MPAs from abrasion and penetration to high MarESA sensitivity habitats e.g. maerl, seagrass beds, modiolus reefs and sea pens.

All gears

- There is a **High** risk inside and outside MPAs from the bycatch of herring affecting harbour porpoise prey availability.
- There is a **High** risk inside and outside MPAs from bycatch of Annex II fish species.
- There is a **Medium** risk inside the Carmarthen Bay, Northern Cardigan Bay and Liverpool Bay SPAs for the common scoter and red-throated diver features from visual and above water noise disturbance from fishing vessels.

- There is a **Medium** risk inside and outside MPAs from diving seabird bycatch.
- There is a **Medium** risk inside and outside the Severn Estuary SAC from the bycatch of herring, part of the fish community assemblage of the Severn Estuary SAC estuaries habitat feature.

Summary of NRW's risk-based nature conservation advice for GES in Welsh waters of the Northern Shelf Mackerel and Northern Shelf Blue Whiting FMPs

To develop our GES advice for Welsh waters, we have considered the 31 January 2024 advice produced by Natural England and JNCC for the Northern Shelf Mackerel and the Northern Shelf Blue Whiting FMPs. While the Natural England and JNCC GES advice for both FMPs applies to English waters, the analysis and assessment are also applicable to Welsh waters.

Some of the risk ratings for GES may be different than those summarised above in our advice for the designated features of Welsh MPAs or to the GES risk ratings produced by Natural England and JNCC for English waters due to the status of the descriptors in Wales or the likelihood of the pressure occurring. GES assessments often consider activities that cause pressures across a larger geographic scale than MPAs and FMPs, can include fishing activities not occurring in Wales, comprise additional activities other than fishing, and include additional receptors within groupings e.g. all cetaceans and not just bottlenose dolphin and harbour porpoise.

- There is a **Moderate** risk to achieving GES for cetaceans, seals, and seabirds (D1 & D4) through bycatch in pelagic trawls;
- There is a **High** risk to achieving GES for harbour porpoise (D1 & D4) and a **Moderate** risk to achieving GES for all other cetaceans (D1 & D4) through bycatch in fixed nets and drift nets;
- There is a **Moderate** risk to achieving GES for seals and seabirds (D1 & D4) through bycatch in fixed nets and drift nets;
- There is a **Moderate** risk to achieving GES for fish (D1 & D4) through bycatch in pelagic trawls, fixed nets, and drift nets;
- There is a **High** risk to achieving GES for harbour porpoise (D1 & D4) through bycatch of herring, an important prey species, in pelagic trawls, fixed nets, and drift nets; and
- There is a **Moderate** risk of achieving GES for marine litter (D10) from pelagic trawls, fixed nets, and drift nets.

An iterative process across FMPs and over several FMP cycles will be required to establish the evidence base relating to fisheries and required action to achieve GES. For example, it is suspected that some species bycatch pressures at a UK level may not be relevant to fishing occurring in Wales, but evidence is needed to confirm this.

15 April 2026.