
Are fish stocks in the European Union healthy?

Some concerning facts and opportunities to rebuild.

Since the adoption of the European Union (EU) 2013 Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), a narrative has developed around the idea that the EU has put an end to overfishing, as it committed to do so by 2020 at the latest.¹ The reality on the ground is more nuanced.

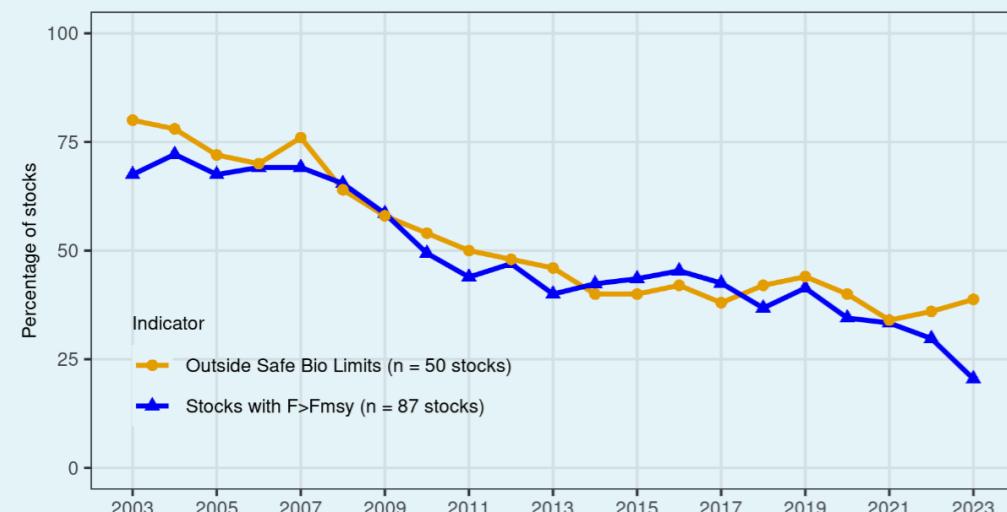


¹See Article 2(2) of Regulation N° 1380/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 on the Common Fisheries Policy and Article 1 of Directive 2008/56/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 June 2008 establishing a framework for community action in the field of marine environmental policy.

A decrease in overfishing...

To some extent, progress has been achieved. The blue line in the figure below shows that, for Northeast Atlantic stocks, there has been a decline in the number of overfished stocks between the 2003 baseline and 2023. However, 18 stocks remain overfished in the region.

Figure 6.8.1. Trends in stock status in the NE Atlantic 2003-2023. Two calculated proportions (as percentage) are presented: blue line: the proportion of stocks with $F > F_{MSY}$ (out of a total of 87 stocks) and yellow line: the proportion of stocks outside safe biological limits SBL ($F > F_{PA}$ or $B < B_{PA}$) (out of a total of 50 stocks).



Source: Own elaborations based on ICES data.

Source: European Commission: Joint Research Centre, Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries 78th plenary report (STECF-PLEN-25-01), Nord, J. and Doerner, H. editor(s), Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2025, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/8733382>, JRC142271

For the Mediterranean Sea, it has been noted that for stocks for which scientists have enough data, the number of overfished stocks has decreased from around 75 per cent in 2004 to over 50 per cent in 2022.²

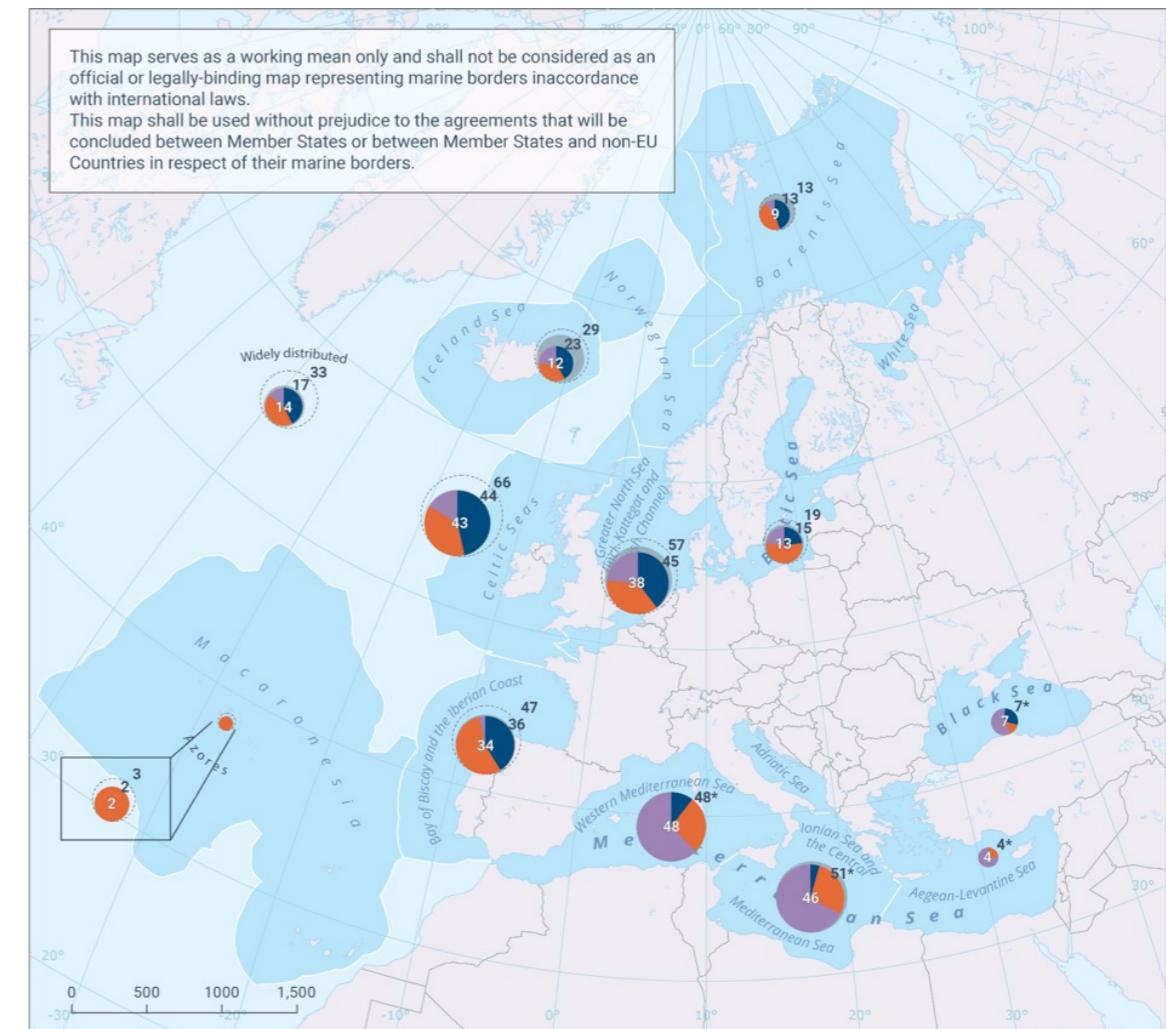
... but not sufficient to achieve healthy fish stocks

Although it is true that there has been a decrease in fishing pressure in the EU, fish stocks in the region are far from being in a healthy state.

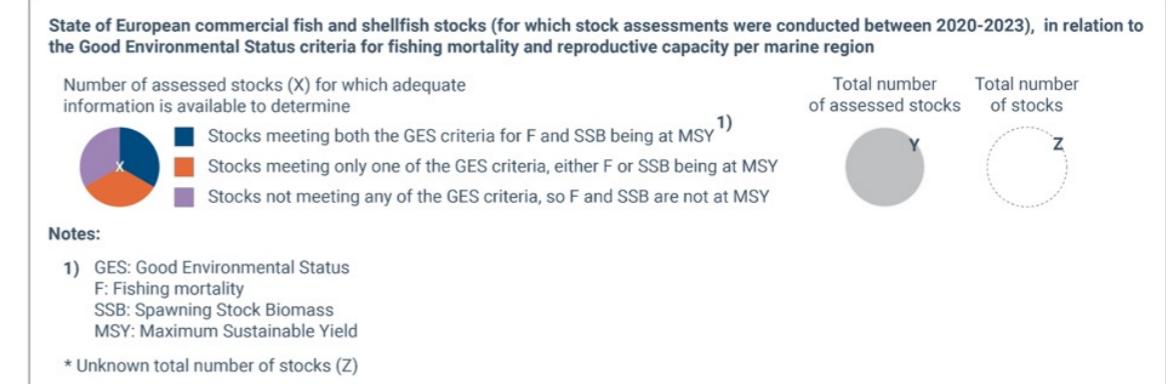
To determine if a fish stock is healthy (or in "Good Environmental Status"), two criteria have to be met:

1. The fishing mortality rate is at or below levels which can produce the Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY – i.e. the maximum amount of fish which can be caught every year from a given stock without impairing the ability of that stock to replenish itself through natural reproduction);
2. The total weight of all sexually mature fish in the stock is above levels capable of producing MSY.

An analysis carried out in 2024 by the European Environment Agency showed that only 76 (or 28 per cent) of the 270 stocks in Europe's seas (with adequate information available to assess if they are healthy or not) met these two criteria. It was further noted that "a further 100 stocks (37 per cent) meet one of the two criteria, while 94 stocks (35 per cent) fail to meet either, meaning they are neither in good biological condition nor fished sustainably."³ These findings are summarised in the figure below.



Reference data: © EuroGeographics, © FAO (UN), © TurkStat Source: European Commission – Eurostat/GISCO



²European Commission: Joint Research Centre, Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries 78 th plenary report (STECF-PLEN-25-01), Nord, J. and Doerner, H. editor(s), Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2025, p. 86.

³See: [Status of marine fish and shellfish stocks in European seas | Indicators | European Environment Agency \(EEA\)](https://www.eea.europa.eu/themes/oceans-and-seas/indicators/status-of-marine-fish-and-shellfish-stocks-in-european-seas)

Recommendations:

To ensure the health of all EU fish stocks, urgent action is required. Decision-makers should:

- **For each stock, set catch limits within the limits provided by scientific advice – following the best available scientific evidence to keep stocks healthy in the long-term;**
- In order to rebuild stocks which are in a bad shape, adopt remedial measures such as closed areas or seasons, technical and gear measures (mesh size restrictions, use of more selective gears, introduction of control and enforcement measures, Remote Electronic Monitoring cameras on vessels);
- **End harmful subsidies** for industrial vessels – this is funding overfishing and depletion of stocks.



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