

Rebuilding western Mediterranean fisheries: status and policy recommendations for 2025

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The western Mediterranean multiannual plan (West Med MAP), introduced in 2019, is the European Union's primary framework for the conservation and sustainable management of demersal stocks in the Western Mediterranean Sea. It covers waters of France, Italy, and Spain and focuses on six key species: blue and red shrimp, deep-water rose shrimp, giant red shrimp, European hake, Norway lobster, and red mullet. Over a decade after the last reform of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), and five years since the entry into force of the West Med MAP, significant challenges remain to manage western Mediterranean fisheries in line with legal obligations. This factsheet outlines Oceana's recommendations for the setting of fishing opportunities and complementary measures for 2025 to assist the European Commission, the Council of the EU and Member States in fulfilling their responsibilities for sustainable fisheries in this region.



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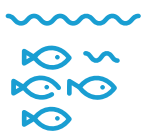
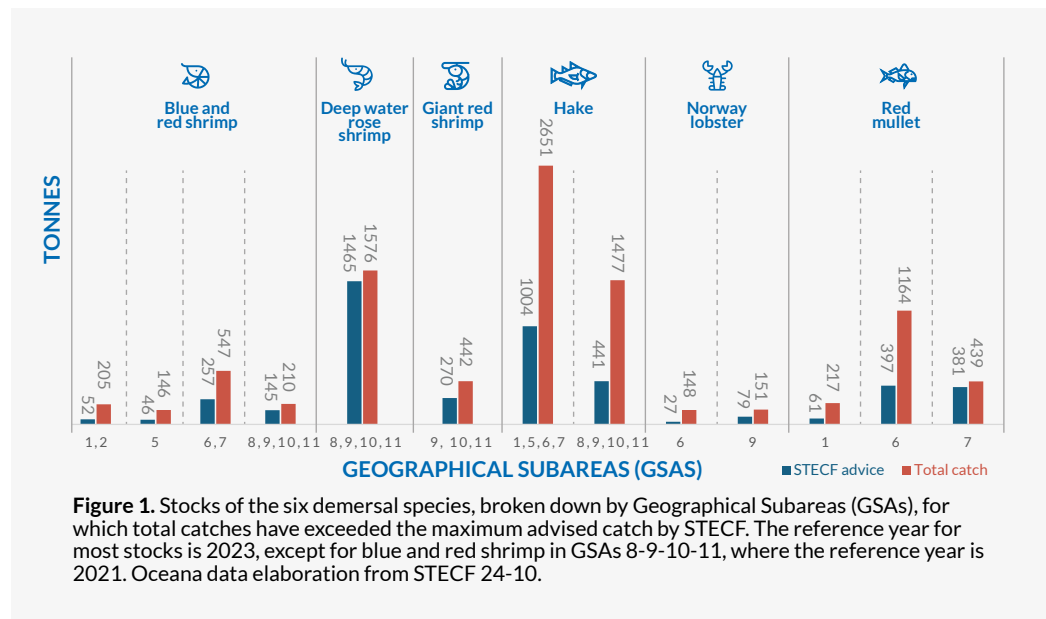
CURRENT CHALLENGES

Despite significant progress made through the West Med MAP, the target of sustainable fishing mortality rates in the Western Mediterranean remains far from being achieved. While the reductions in fishing effort, spatial-temporal closures, and selectivity improvements are steps in the right direction, stock recovery remains slow. Fishing mortality rates continue to exceed sustainable levels, and there is a growing risk that the legally required target of ending overfishing by 1 January 2025 may not be achieved. In this line, the European Commission's recent assessment of the plan's first five years¹ highlighted important milestones, yet it also underscored the urgent need for further action to fully recover populations, many of which are still overexploited.



High fishing mortality: Despite a roughly 40% reduction in fishing effort and the implementation of technical measures, overfishing is widespread. Fishing mortality remains alarmingly high, averaging 1.94 times the maximum sustainable yield rate (F_{MSY}), with 60% of assessed stocks subject to overfishing.^{2,3}

For certain stocks of species like European hake and blue and red shrimp, fishing rates are up to three times the sustainable level. This suggests a high likelihood of failing to meet the 2025 target fishing mortality. Figure 1 shows the consistent pattern of overfishing, illustrating that total catches of all six species across most geographical subareas (GSAs) significantly exceeded the annual maximum scientific catch advice by the Scientific Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF).



Low biomass levels: The recovery of populations in the Western Mediterranean is alarmingly slow, with 80% of assessed stocks remaining below the necessary biomass thresholds for healthy populations.⁴ Of particular concern is the situation of seven populations with abundance levels estimated to be below precautionary biomass reference points (B_{PA}), three of which are also below safe biological limits (B_{LIM}).⁵ For all populations of European hake, biomass levels have dropped to less than 10% of B_{MSY} , putting them at risk of collapse.



Delayed emergency action: Despite the legal obligation under the West Med MAP to adopt emergency measures for stocks below critical biomass levels (B_{LIM}), no explicit actions have been implemented to date. Moreover, with several stocks hovering below the precautionary biomass level (B_{PA}), Member States are also legally required to adopt remedial measures for these populations starting in 2025. Without immediate intervention, the risk of stock collapse will remain high, undermining the sustainability of fisheries in the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SETTING OF FISHING OPPORTUNITIES FOR 2025

As the West Med MAP moves into its second phase after the initial five years, its objectives and provisions remain both urgent and fit for purpose. From 1 January 2025, the MAP requires that fishing mortality across all stocks fall within F_{MSY} ranges, with particular attention to the most vulnerable stocks (Article 4). Additionally, safeguard measures will need to extend beyond stocks below B_{LIM} to cover any stocks below B_{PA} (Article 6(1)), both crucial for restoring and maintaining all populations above levels capable of producing maximum sustainable yield (MSY). Although the West Med MAP has supported some progress toward sustainability, there remains a significant gap between its legal requirements and the actual exploitation and status of demersal populations in the Western Mediterranean. This gap underscores the pressing need for further reductions in fishing mortality and the application of robust emergency measures to protect critically depleted stocks.

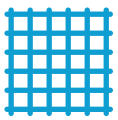


ADOPT EMERGENCY MEASURES

Under the West Med MAP, Member States are legally obliged to implement emergency measures for all stocks below critical abundance thresholds, specifically B_{LIM} since 2020 and B_{PA} as of 2025. Delay in enforcing these measures poses serious risks to stock recovery and undermines the sustainability of fisheries in the region.

The following recommendations focus on emergency measures for European hake, the most critically depleted species included in the West Med MAP. These actions should serve as examples of necessary interventions to be implemented for other vulnerable stocks for 2025. By adopting these precautionary measures, Member States can address the critical conservation needs of hake, while generating broader benefits for the health of additional commercially important species.

Recommended emergency measures for Hake in Effort Management Units (EMU) 1 and 2:



Increase mesh sizes to at least 52 mm square mesh codend. A 52 mm square codend would significantly reduce catches of undersized hake, and in turn reduce catches of juveniles of the remaining species managed under the West Med MAP. While this measure would temporarily affect catch volumes and profits, it is expected to improve stock recovery, potentially increasing catch volumes by up to 30% within a two-year transition period.⁶



Protect hake spawning and nursery areas: Restrict fishing activities capable of catching hake in known hake spawning and nursery grounds, informed by the best available scientific sources, such as STECF,⁷ MEDITS,⁸ and scientific papers.⁹ Although hake has some temporary reproduction peaks it occurs year-round,¹⁰ so implementing permanent closures of these areas is critical to ensuring adequate protection.



Include gillnets under the West Med MAP for European hake in EMU2 and red mullet in GSAs 1, 5 and 10. Given that gillnets account for approximately 15% of European hake catches, and more than 10% of red mullet in these waters,¹¹ and in line with Article 7(5), setting maximum allowable fishing effort or catch limits for these gears is essential to help control fishing pressure on this vulnerable stock, particularly on spawners. Regulating both trawlers and gillnets will, in fact, ensure an effective balance of the hake population's structure.¹²



Suspend directed fisheries. To prevent incentivising hake catches, any direct hake fishery should be suspended. Catches in the western Mediterranean should be limited only to by-catch and not exceed the ones corresponding to the maximum allowable fishing effort at levels consistent with a fishing mortality that is within the range of F_{MSY} .

REDUCE FISHING MORTALITY

The EU must urgently reduce fishing mortality to meet the F_{MSY} target by 2025. Oceana recommends putting in place the full suite of management tools provided by the West Med MAP, including:



Allocate fishing days for trawlers in line with scientifically advised levels. This would mean adopting further reductions in fishing days to keep fishing mortality within F_{MSY} ranges. Oceana supports setting maximum allowable fishing effort at levels that are lower than the ranges of F_{MSY} , to invest in the resilience of populations and ecosystems. However, having in mind the currently high overfishing rates, setting fishing mortality within F_{MSY} ranges in 2025 is a first step in the right direction.

Monitoring of catches against existing scientific advice is essential. As showed in Figure 1, catches of 13 out of 20 stocks considered (65%) exceed STECF advice.¹³ Additionally, in 2022, the only year with available data, catches of giant red shrimp in GSAs 9-10-11 exceeded legal catch limits by 9.5%. Additionally, the Council’s catch limit decisions have consistently exceeded STECF advice, with blue and red shrimp catch limits more than double the recommended levels across all three years, and giant red shrimp catch limits averaging 37% above scientific advice.



Strengthen technical measures to reduce juvenile bycatch and support the West Med MAP’s sustainability goals. Improvements are recommended in fishing gear design, particularly mesh size adjustments to make them consistent with reproductive maturity size (e.g. 33 cm on average in the Western Mediterranean for European hake),¹⁴ along with additional spatial protections¹⁵ to limit fishing on juvenile hotspots and spawning grounds of stocks.

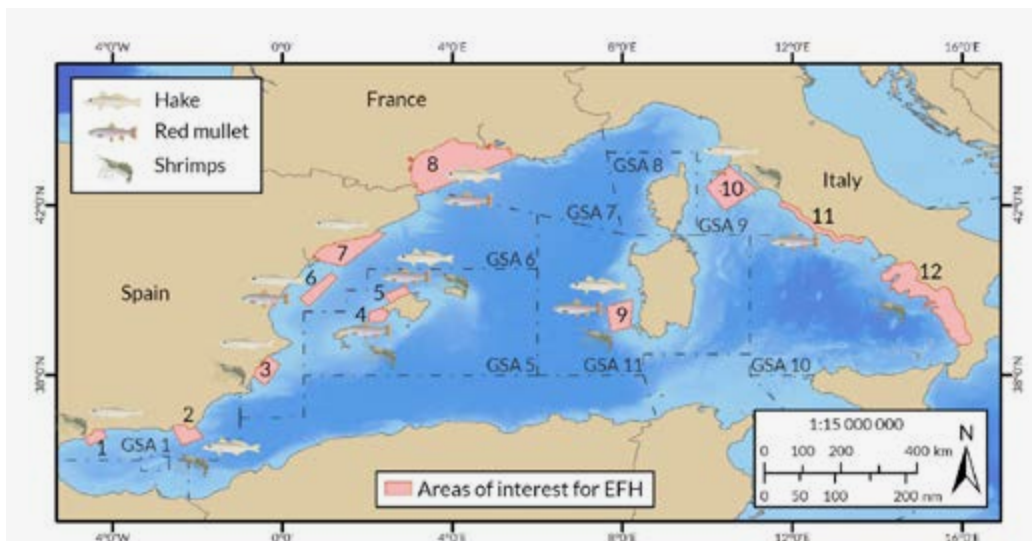


Figure 2. Areas of interest for protection of Essential Fish Habitats for demersal species under the West Med MAP, according to available scientific information.^{16,17,18,19,20,21,22} 1. Malaga Harbour – Marbella, 2. Almeria Gulf, 3. Alicante-Cartagena, 4. Western Mallorca, 5. Tramontana, 6. Southern Ebro delta, 7. Northern Ebro delta, 8. Gulf of Lions, 9. Carloforte shoal, 10. Northern Tyrrhenian Sea, 11. Central Tyrrhenian Sea, and 12. Western Calabrian coast.

¹⁵ The European Commission and Member States should prioritise the endorsement of new closures assessed positively by STECF and the regular assessment of existing closures against the compensation mechanism. The establishment of new closures should be complemented with impact analyses of the resulting displacement of fishing effort. Increased fishing effort in fishable areas, due to displacement from closed zones, raises concerns about using closed areas as criteria for granting additional fishing days, especially in the context of widespread overexploitation.



TAILOR MANAGEMENT APPROACHES

Oceana advocates for a tailored management approach within the West Med MAP, whereby fisheries management measures are customized to specific GSAs and individual stocks, where feasible. This allows for precision that aligns more closely with management goals. The MAP's objectives are best achieved by recognizing the diverse exploitation levels of different stocks: while some, like certain stocks of blue and red shrimp, deep-water rose shrimp or red mullet are currently sustainably exploited, others such as European hake urgently require stricter interventions.

The European Commission and Member States should consider adopting management measures that vary by GSA and stock. For instance, managing hake by GSA or clusters of GSAs, in line with the biological distribution of individual stocks, rather than broader EMUs, would allow for refined effort and conservation measures that directly address local conditions. Similarly, setting catch limits for species like blue and red shrimp by GSA, as opposed to broader management units, would optimize the scientific advice and better control fishing mortality. A tailored approach would ensure that stronger efforts are concentrated on overfished stocks, while avoiding unnecessary restrictions for those already managed sustainably.

CONCLUSION

Western Mediterranean fisheries face significant challenges in achieving sustainable exploitation, making it essential for Member States to fully commit to meeting the objectives of the West Med MAP in 2025. As the plan enters its second phase, urgent action is needed to reach target fishing mortality levels and implement safeguard measures for stocks in critical conservation status. By addressing these priorities, the EU and its Member States can secure the long-term sustainability of the region's marine resources and support the recovery of overexploited stocks.





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