

## From data to quota: How are the Belgian quota determined?

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According to European legislation, each Member State involved in European fisheries has to collect data on its fisheries and aquaculture. For Belgium, the Flanders Research Institute for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (ILVO) is the coordinator of the Data Collection Framework. Collected data serve all sorts of purposes for a broad range of stakeholders, with one of the main goals to set the TACs (Total Allowable Catches) each year.

The Belgian commercial fishing fleet is sampled by seagoing observers, who register and analyse the catches composed of landings (including landings smaller than the minimum landing size) and discards (including de minimis discards). More specifically, for 14 commercial fish species length, weight and for certain species also age, sex and maturity are determined, depending on the area fished and the period of the year. All the collected data are stored in a quality controlled database 'Smartfish'. The sampled length frequency data are extrapolated to the entire Belgian fleet using an auxiliary variable (landings) and converted to an age distribution using the length-weight and age-length relationship.

The calculated age distributions, registered landing and effort data from the Belgian fleet are provided by ILVO to the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES). The data are used in stock assessments together with fisheries independent data from research surveys (e.g. the Belgian Beam Trawl Survey). ICES scientists compile data from all Member States fishing on a particular stock and acquire insight in the population structure. This allows them to forecast catches for data rich stocks and formulate scientific advice according to the maximum sustainable yield (MSY) principle. For data poor stocks, for which no length or age distributions are available, advice is provided by evaluating a trend in biomass or abundance.

Yearly, ICES provides this advice to the European Council of Ministers who uses it as a basis to determine the Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for each stock. Subsequently, the TACs are divided among the Member States according to historical agreements (i.e. quota). Finally, Member States may choose to exchange (parts of) their quota with other Member States and finally allocate them to their fishing fleet.

Keywords: Data Collection Framework; ILVO; ICES; stock assessments; TAC; quota