



forestry, fisheries & the environment

Department:
Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

RECOMMENDATION OF THE SMALL PELAGIC SCIENTIFIC WORKING GROUP ON INTERIM MANAGEMENT OF DIRECTED SARDINE CATCHES FOLLOWING THE 2026 PILCHARD HERPES VIRUS (PHV) MASS MORTALITY EVENT

07 September 2026

BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

Since late July 2026, mortalities of sardine have been reported initially along the West Coast and subsequently around the Cape Peninsula, along the South and Eastern Cape coasts, and northwards along the Wild Coast. Mortality events have also been reported from Namibia. Pilchard Herpes Virus (PHV) has been detected at high levels in dead sardines sampled in both the Western and Eastern Cape, and sequence information indicates a close relationship to the virus associated with earlier Australian sardine PHV mortality events. Lower or varying levels have also been detected in a small number of apparently healthy sardines. Further pathology, diagnostic testing, genomic comparison and testing of appropriate control and archived material are required to clarify the role, prevalence, origin and epidemiology of the virus.

At its meeting on 4 September 2026, the SWG-PEL considered the available diagnostic and epidemiological information, the geographic progression of reports, preliminary estimates of this mortality, recent catch and observer information, seasonal patterns in sardine catches, and information from the Australian PHV mortality events. The Working Group noted that the Australian estimates and conversion factors cannot be transferred directly to South Africa without accounting as best as possible for differences in coastline, oceanography, fish distribution and observation methods.

The available South African mortality estimates are scenario-based, very uncertain and non-additive. They depend on assumptions regarding the density of fish in visible patches, the width and continuity of affected coastal bands, the proportion of fish sinking to the seabed and the area across which local observations can be extrapolated. There is currently no acceptable method for estimating the number of fish that may have sunk. Although the preliminary scenarios considered do not indicate that mortality represents a large proportion of the overall sardine stock, the event may not yet have fully run its course.

Fisheries observer catch-rate information provided some indication of reduced sardine availability after the onset of the event, but the strength and magnitude of this signal remain uncertain because of limited data, changes in fishing effort and the normal seasonal decline in sardine catches (possibly in part a consequence of diminished availability) during late winter. Directed sardine catches are historically low during August and September, reducing the immediate risk of rapid uptake of the remaining TAC and providing a limited period during which further monitoring and sampling can be undertaken without exposing the sardine stock to undue risk.

The SWG-PEL therefore considered that a precautionary, time-limited restriction on catches of the remaining directed sardine TAC, accompanied by intensified observation and a defined reassessment date, provides an appropriate interim response. This approach retains the ability to act sooner should conditions deteriorate and indicate that to be necessary.

INTERIM DIRECTED SARDINE CATCH LIMITS

The proposed interim limits are based on 25% of the directed sardine TAC still available in each management area at the time of the SWG-PEL meeting. The calculated quantities are conservatively rounded down as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Interim limits on directed sardine catches from Monday 7 September to the close of fishing on Friday 2 October 2026.

Management area	Remaining TAC available	25% of TAC available	Recommended interim limit
West of Cape Agulhas	7 454.26	1 863.56 t	1 800 t
East of Cape Agulhas	8 936.89	2 234.22 t	2 200 t

These limits apply to directed sardine catches only. They do not revise the annual TACs, reallocate catch between the areas west and east of Cape Agulhas, or alter existing sardine bycatch provisions or catch limits for anchovy, round herring or other species. Individual right holders remain subject to their existing allocations, while industry should manage directed catches collectively to ensure that the interim limits are not exceeded.

Any portion of the interim limits not taken by 2 October 2026 should not become automatically available thereafter. Further directed sardine fishing after that date should be subject to the outcome of the SWG-PEL reassessment at that time and a subsequent decision by the delegated authority.

OBSERVATION, SAMPLING AND MONITORING

During the interim period, the following observation and monitoring activities should be implemented or continued:

- Targeted or increased observer coverage of directed sardine trips, as operationally practicable, with continued industry cooperation.
- Development and use of a standard field protocol by observers, vessel crews and shore-based staff to record the date, position, extent, photographs or video, counts and samples of (primarily) dead sardine and whether other species are affected.
- Rapid assessment of new beach wash-ups, including counts or densities over defined distances, effective cross-shore width, fish sizes and sections where no mortality is observed.
- Collection of fresh gill and other appropriate tissues from live, moribund and recently deceased sardines, together with suitable apparently healthy controls.
- Continued PCR, sequencing and pathology, including assessment of viral load and gill lesions and, where feasible, testing of archived material for evidence of earlier PHV occurrence.
- Compilation of directed catch, effort, searching activity, catch-rate, size-composition and spatial data, interpreted against seasonal patterns and changes in effort.

- Monitoring for unusual mortality, poor condition or breeding changes among sardine-dependent predators, and for substantial mortality of juvenile sardines, particularly fish smaller than approximately 12 cm.

URGENT REVIEW AND SCHEDULED REASSESSMENT

The Chair should convene an urgent SWG-PEL review before the scheduled meeting if new information becomes available which materially changes the assessment of risk. Indicators warranting urgent review include, but are not limited to:

- a substantial new mortality event or renewed wave in areas previously affected;
- substantial mortality among juvenile sardines, especially fish smaller than approximately 12 cm;
- unusual mortality, severe loss of condition or other marked changes among sardine-dependent predators;
- a marked deterioration in sardine availability, catch rates or size composition that cannot reasonably be explained by seasonality or fishing behaviour;
- any other evidence indicating that continuation of directed fishing under the interim limits may no longer be sufficiently precautionary.

In the absence of an earlier trigger, the SWG-PEL should meet during the last week of September 2026 (i.e. the week commencing on Monday 28 September) to reassess the situation. The reassessment should consider all new mortality reports, monitoring and sampling information, diagnostic and pathology results, catches against the interim limits, catch-rate and size-composition information, and any evidence of effects on dependent predators. The Working Group should then provide further advice on whether the interim limits should be lifted, extended, modified or replaced by additional management measures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The SWG-PEL recommends that:

- for the period from 7 September to the close of fishing on Friday, 2 October 2026, directed sardine catches be limited to 1 800 t west of Cape Agulhas and 2 200 t east of Cape Agulhas;
- the interim limits apply to directed sardine catches only and do not amend the annual sardine TACs, existing area allocations, sardine TABs or catch limits for other species;
- no transfer or reallocation be made between the areas west and east of Cape Agulhas, and industry manage catches within existing right-holder allocations so that the respective interim limits are not exceeded;
- the Chair convene an urgent review if any material warning signal emerges before the scheduled reassessment;
- the SWG-PEL meet during the last week of September 2026 (i.e. the week commencing Monday 28 September) to reassess the situation and provide further advice before 2 October 2026; and
- directed sardine fishing after 2 October 2026 be subject to the outcome of that reassessment and a further decision by the delegated authority.



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Janet Coetzee

Chair of the Small Pelagic Scientific Working Group

Date: 7 September 2026