



UPDATED 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

30 September 2026

BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

Since late July 2026, a mass mortality of sardine associated with Pilchard Herpes Virus (PHV) has been reported along the South African coast. At its meeting on 4 September 2026, the SWG-PEL considered the available information on the extent of the mortality and its possible effect on the sardine population. Although the evidence available at that time did not indicate a stock loss sufficiently large to justify closure of the directed sardine fishery, the magnitude of the mortality remained uncertain, and it was not known whether the event had run its course.

The SWG-PEL therefore recommended that, from 7 September to 2 October 2026, each right holder be permitted to take no more than 25% of its remaining 2026 directed sardine TAC. This precautionary restriction was intended to limit catches while further information was gathered on the extent of the mortality and whether the event was continuing.

At its meeting on 29 September 2026, the SWG-PEL considered the information that had become available since the previous recommendation. No further large-scale mortality had been reported since 2 September, apart from an isolated stranding on the northern Wild Coast. There had been no recent reports of dead sardine washing ashore, floating at sea or occurring in bottom-trawl catches, and no evidence of large-scale juvenile mortality. Directed sardine fishing during September had, however, been extremely limited, with no directed sardine catch reported west of Cape Agulhas and only 26 t reported east of Cape Agulhas. Consequently, little new catch-rate or biological information was available with which to assess changes in sardine abundance or availability. Although the absence of further mortality reports suggested that the observed wave of mortality had subsided, uncertainty remained regarding the total population impact and the possibility of a further outbreak.

The SWG-PEL also considered information on African penguin body condition and prey availability at Robben Island, Stony Point and Dyer Island. The results were suggestive of recent changes in penguin weights but the magnitude of any effect and the extent to which it could be attributed specifically to the sardine mortality event could not yet be determined. In addition, the hydroacoustic observations presented were qualitative and require

further processing before possible changes in prey abundance can be assessed.

Accordingly, the SWG-PEL recommends that, from 3 to 30 October 2026, each right holder be limited to 33% of its remaining directed sardine TAC. This maintains a precautionary, stepwise approach in view of the continuing uncertainties. The restriction will be reviewed in the last week of October, or earlier if material new information becomes available.

RATIONALE

Conservation-sector biologists and ENGO representatives argued that the remaining uncertainty warranted a moratorium on directed sardine fishing in accordance with the precautionary principle. The SWG-PEL considered the principle, which states that “where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation”¹. It concluded that applying the principle did not necessarily require the complete cessation of fishing. A moratorium would involve substantial socio-economics costs but likely provide little benefit to predators. The Working Group instead considered that precaution required a proportionate and adaptive measure that could be adjusted as further information became available. The 33% limit broadly represents one month’s share of the TAC remaining for the final three months of 2026, allowing limited access during October while retaining the balance of the TAC pending further review.

Together with continued monitoring, this was considered an appropriate precautionary response to the available evidence and remaining uncertainties. The SWG-PEL further agreed that an earlier review could be undertaken in response to further wash-ups or reports of dead fish at sea, evidence of juvenile mortality, reduced sardine catch rates or availability, updated analyses showing an adverse effect of the mortality event on African penguins, or evidence of effects on other dependent predators.

INTERIM DIRECTED SARDINE CATCH LIMITS

The proposed interim limits are based on 33% of each right holder’s directed sardine TAC remaining in each management area as of 2 October 2026. Catch statistics available at the meeting indicated that 33% of the total uncaught TAC amounted to approximately 2 800 t west of Cape Agulhas and 2 700 t east of Cape Agulhas. These figures remain provisional, however, pending verification by Marine Resources Management (MRM) of the landings reported by individual right holders up to 2 October. This verification is required to determine the final tonnage available to each right holder, and the corresponding total for each management area.

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.

¹ United Nations Conference on Environment and Development: The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, June 13, 1992, principle 15. CONF.151/26.Rev.1(vol.1). Available at: [https://docs.un.org/en/A/CONF.151/26/Rev.1\(vol.I\)](https://docs.un.org/en/A/CONF.151/26/Rev.1(vol.I)) Accessed 30 September 2026.

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 30 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.

MONITORING AND INFORMATION REQUIREMENTS

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

- Targeted or increased observer coverage of directed sardine trips, as operationally practicable, with continued industry cooperation.
- All right holders must submit complete trip and catch information promptly, including trips with zero directed sardine catch and catches of other species.
- 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.
- 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.
- The African penguin analyses requested at the meeting, including quantitative hydroacoustic processing, should be completed and reported to the SWG-PEL as soon as possible.
- Planning for the 2026 spawner biomass survey should proceed as a priority.

REVIEW

The SWG-PEL should meet during the week of 26 October 2026 to review the restriction before it expires on 30 October. An earlier review may be convened if material new evidence becomes available. Triggers may include:

- renewed sardine mortality;
- evidence of significant juvenile mortality;
- new evidence of possibly-related material effects on African penguins or other dependent predators;
- marked deterioration in sardine catch rates, availability or size composition; or
- any other information that materially changes the assessment of risk to the sardine resource, the ecosystem or the fishery.

Following either review, the SWG-PEL may recommend maintaining, tightening (including the possibility of a moratorium on fishing), suspending or relaxing the interim limit.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The SWG-PEL recommends that:

- for the period from 3 October to the close of fishing on Friday, 30 October 2026, each right holder's directed sardine catch be limited to 33% of its TAC remaining as at 2 October 2026, as determined by MRM, in each of the management areas west and 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 are expected to 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 October 2026 (i.e. the week commencing Monday 26 October) to reassess the situation and provide further advice before 30 October 2026; and
- directed sardine fishing after 30 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: 30 September 2026