

Salmon Watch Ireland

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NASCO 2026 Annual Meeting Newsletter

Wild Atlantic Salmon at a Crossroads: Urgent Action, Unfinished Business, and the Need for Transformative Change



Introduction

The Forty-Third Annual Meeting of the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation (NASCO), held in Aviemore, Scotland, brought together governments, Indigenous Peoples' representatives and institutions, scientists, non-governmental Organisations, and fisheries managers from across the North Atlantic to address the continuing decline of wild Atlantic salmon.

The meeting took place against a sobering backdrop. Scientific assessments presented by ICES continue to show declining abundance across much of the species' range, with many populations at historically low levels and some now formally classified as endangered. Climate change, habitat degradation, poor marine survival, aquaculture impacts, disease, and fisheries-related mortality

continue to place significant pressure on salmon populations throughout the North Atlantic.

While the meeting delivered important progress in several areas, it also highlighted the scale of the challenge ahead and the urgent need for stronger action if salmon populations are to recover.

A New Era of Accountability: Conservation Commitment Reports

A major focus of the 2026 Annual Meeting was the introduction of Conservation Commitment Reports (CCRs), which form the foundation of NASCO's Fourth Reporting Cycle.

Each jurisdiction has been required to identify the most significant pressures affecting its salmon populations and develop a series of priority actions designed to address them. Unlike previous reporting cycles, the new process places a strong emphasis on measurable outcomes, accountability, and demonstrating how actions will contribute directly to salmon recovery.

The CCR Review Group stressed that conservation measures must be urgent, transformative, and capable of delivering tangible improvements for salmon. Actions will ultimately be assessed not on intentions or activities alone, but on their ability to improve survival, abundance, and resilience.

NGOs welcomed the introduction of CCRs and the stronger focus on accountability. However, many also expressed concern that some proposed actions remain incremental rather than transformative and may not yet match the scale of the conservation crisis facing Atlantic salmon.

As governments refine and finalise their commitments before publication later this year, NGOs are calling for greater ambition and stronger action capable of delivering meaningful recovery outcomes.

Scientific Advice Confirms Continuing Decline



The latest ICES advice reinforced concerns about the status of Atlantic salmon throughout the North Atlantic.

Many populations remain at low abundance levels, particularly multi-sea-winter salmon, which continue to show long-term declines. In many regions, returns remain well below historical levels despite decades of fisheries restrictions and substantial conservation investment.

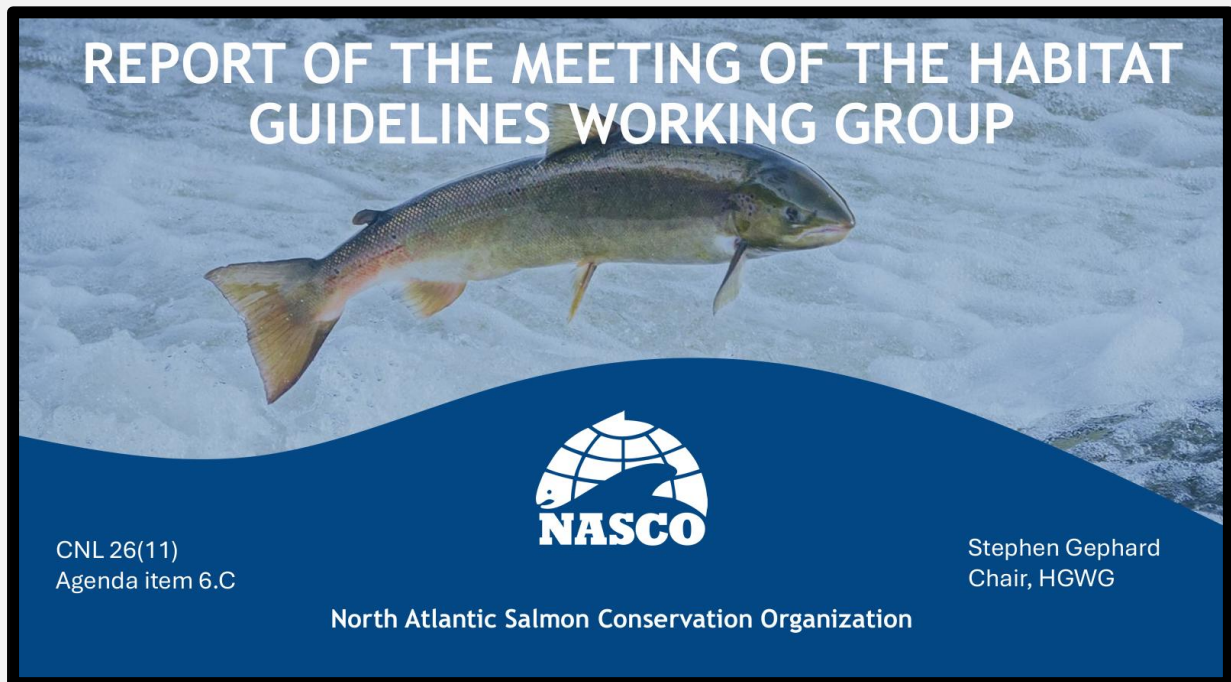
Scientists highlighted the growing influence of climate-related pressures, including drought, extreme temperatures, altered river flows, and changing marine conditions. These factors are increasingly affecting salmon throughout their life cycle and are expected to become more severe in coming decades.

The message from scientists was clear: climate change is no longer a future threat. It is already affecting salmon populations across the North Atlantic.

ICES Advice

	Council <i>ICES Advice</i>	CNL(26)06 Agenda Item: 4.b)																						
<i>ICES Advice on fishing opportunities, catch, and effort Greater Northeast and Greater Northwest Atlantic ecoregions Published 01 May 2026</i>		 ICES CIEM <small>International Council for the Exploration of the Sea Conseil International pour l'Exploration de la Mer</small>																						
North Atlantic salmon (<i>Salmo salar</i>) stocks																								
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<p>NASCO asked the following questions related to the North Atlantic as a whole. Answers to questions for the three commission areas – North-East Atlantic Commission (NEAC) area, North American Commission (NAC) area, and West Greenland Commission (WGC) area – are provided in separate advice sheets.</p>																								
<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>ToR</th> <th>Question</th> <th>Section</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>1</td> <td>With respect to Atlantic salmon in the North Atlantic area:</td> <td rowspan="9" style="vertical-align: middle; text-align: center;">sal.2127.oth</td> </tr> <tr> <td>1.1</td> <td>provide an overview of salmon catches and landings by country, including unreported catches (<i>indicate the location of the unreported catch in the following categories: in-river; estuarine; and coastal</i>) and (<i>numbers and weight of salmon</i>) catch and release (<i>acknowledge the fact that some of these fish will experience increased mortality before spawning. Estimates of mortality from caught and released fish should be carried forth in all parts of the ICES assessment process</i>), and production of farmed and ranched Atlantic salmon in 2025</td> </tr> <tr> <td>1.2</td> <td>provide an overview of the status of salmon at a key life stage for the North Atlantic Area as a whole, in tabular and graphical form, differentiating the North-East Atlantic and North American Commission area contributions</td> </tr> <tr> <td>1.3</td> <td>provide a review on the most appropriate methods to set and aggregate conservation limits (CLs) for stock complexes in support of providing fisheries advice at these levels.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>1.4</td> <td>scope out and recommend a process (e.g. ICES Annual Science Conference Theme-based Special Session, ICES Workshop(s), co-ordinated conversations between various ICES Working Groups) to identify where gaps exist in available marine datasets and how additional marine data might be made available to support investigations into the marine ecology and productivity of Atlantic salmon in the North Atlantic</td> </tr> <tr> <td>1.5</td> <td>report on significant new or emerging threats to, or opportunities for, salmon conservation and management (<i>include reports on any significant advances in understanding of the biology of Atlantic salmon that is pertinent to NASCO</i>);</td> </tr> <tr> <td>1.6</td> <td>provide a compilation of tag releases by country in 2025;</td> </tr> <tr> <td>1.7</td> <td>identify relevant data deficiencies, monitoring needs and research requirements;</td> </tr> <tr> <td>1.8</td> <td>NASCO notes the addition of Atlantic salmon to the list of fish species of bycatch relevance and requests ICES to gather data concerning bycatch information and, if possible, estimates of bycaught Atlantic salmon at the scale of ecoregions across the entire NASCO Convention area</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	ToR	Question	Section	1	With respect to Atlantic salmon in the North Atlantic area:	sal.2127.oth	1.1	provide an overview of salmon catches and landings by country, including unreported catches (<i>indicate the location of the unreported catch in the following categories: in-river; estuarine; and coastal</i>) and (<i>numbers and weight of salmon</i>) catch and release (<i>acknowledge the fact that some of these fish will experience increased mortality before spawning. Estimates of mortality from caught and released fish should be carried forth in all parts of the ICES assessment process</i>), and production of farmed and ranched Atlantic salmon in 2025	1.2	provide an overview of the status of salmon at a key life stage for the North Atlantic Area as a whole, in tabular and graphical form, differentiating the North-East Atlantic and North American Commission area contributions	1.3	provide a review on the most appropriate methods to set and aggregate conservation limits (CLs) for stock complexes in support of providing fisheries advice at these levels.	1.4	scope out and recommend a process (e.g. ICES Annual Science Conference Theme-based Special Session, ICES Workshop(s), co-ordinated conversations between various ICES Working Groups) to identify where gaps exist in available marine datasets and how additional marine data might be made available to support investigations into the marine ecology and productivity of Atlantic salmon in the North Atlantic	1.5	report on significant new or emerging threats to, or opportunities for, salmon conservation and management (<i>include reports on any significant advances in understanding of the biology of Atlantic salmon that is pertinent to NASCO</i>);	1.6	provide a compilation of tag releases by country in 2025;	1.7	identify relevant data deficiencies, monitoring needs and research requirements;	1.8	NASCO notes the addition of Atlantic salmon to the list of fish species of bycatch relevance and requests ICES to gather data concerning bycatch information and, if possible, estimates of bycaught Atlantic salmon at the scale of ecoregions across the entire NASCO Convention area		
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[New Habitat Guidance Provides a Roadmap for Recovery \(Full presentation available here\)](#)



One of the most positive outcomes of the meeting was the adoption of NASCO's new Guidelines for the Protection, Restoration, and Improvement of Atlantic Salmon Habitat.

Developed by an international working group, the guidance provides a practical framework for governments, Indigenous Peoples, NGOs, and restoration practitioners seeking to improve salmon habitat.

The guidance promotes three complementary approaches:

Protect

Safeguard existing high-quality habitats before they become degraded.

Restore

Recover damaged habitats through active or passive restoration.

Improve

Enhance habitat conditions where full restoration is not feasible.

The framework emphasises catchment-scale planning, baseline assessments, monitoring, adaptive management, stakeholder engagement, and long-term evaluation. Importantly, it recognises the need to design restoration projects that are resilient to future climate conditions rather than simply recreating historical environments.

For NGOs and restoration practitioners, the guidelines represent an important step forward in ensuring that conservation investments deliver measurable benefits for salmon populations.

Aquaculture Remains a Major Concern

Despite progress in other areas, NGOs expressed concern that aquaculture remains one of the most significant unresolved threats facing wild Atlantic salmon.

Sea lice, escapes from open-net pen farms, genetic interactions with wild populations, and pollution from marine aquaculture operations continue to affect salmon throughout much of their range.

While NASCO agreed to establish a working group to review existing aquaculture guidance, NGOs stressed that the urgency of the issue requires more than review alone. They called for the development of robust guidance capable of informing meaningful action and reducing the impacts of aquaculture on wild salmon populations.

Given the importance of aquaculture as a stressor in several jurisdictions, NGOs believe this work must be prioritised if NASCO's conservation goals are to be achieved.

Marine Mortality and Bycatch: The Missing Piece of the Puzzle

One of the strongest themes emerging from the meeting was the growing recognition that many of the pressures affecting Atlantic salmon occur beyond rivers and coastal waters.

While governments continue to invest heavily in habitat restoration and freshwater conservation, salmon must still survive an increasingly challenging marine environment.

NGOs highlighted concerns regarding marine mortality, including fisheries bycatch, and argued that these issues have not received sufficient attention within international conservation efforts.

Atlantic salmon has recently been added to the list of species of bycatch relevance within ICES reporting systems. Early analyses suggest that several pelagic fisheries may pose risks to migrating salmon, including fisheries targeting mackerel, herring, blue whiting, capelin, horse mackerel, sardine, and anchovy.

Although current reporting remains limited, scientists acknowledge that bycatch is poorly understood and that available data are insufficient to fully evaluate its impact.

NGOs argued that conservation gains achieved through river restoration and fisheries restrictions may be undermined if mortality occurring at sea remains unaddressed. They therefore called on NASCO to facilitate higher-level international discussions focused specifically on marine mortality, bycatch, and ocean survival.

The recovery of Atlantic salmon will depend not only on what happens in rivers, but also on understanding and addressing what happens throughout their marine migration.

West Greenland: A Failure to Reach Agreement

The most significant governance issue of the meeting emerged during discussions on the West Greenland fishery.

Despite extensive negotiations, the West Greenland Commission was unable to agree a new regulatory measure or Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for the 2026 fishery.

The West Greenland fishery is one of the most important mixed-stock fisheries in the world. Salmon harvested there originate from rivers across the North Atlantic, particularly from Canada, but also from the United States and Europe.

Scientific advice from ICES continues to recommend zero catch in the fishery. However, Greenland argued that it had already made substantial improvements in monitoring, reporting, and fisheries accountability and emphasised the cultural, social, and food-security importance of salmon to local communities.

Other Parties expressed disappointment that agreement could not be reached. Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union all highlighted the significant sacrifices they have already made through fisheries closures, harvest reductions, and major conservation investments.

The inability to reach agreement was viewed by many as a missed opportunity at a time when salmon populations remain under severe pressure.

For NGOs, the failure raises broader concerns about international governance. If NASCO is to deliver meaningful conservation outcomes, it must be capable of translating scientific advice into collective action, even when difficult compromises are required.

At the same time, NGOs recognise that long-term solutions must balance conservation needs with community livelihoods, cultural traditions, and food security.

The challenge facing NASCO is therefore not simply biological. It is political, social, and economic as well.

Disease and Emerging Threats

The meeting also addressed several emerging threats to salmon conservation.

Particular attention was given to the continued risk posed by *Gyrodactylus salaris*, a parasite capable of devastating salmon populations. Recent detections in Sweden reinforced the importance of vigilance, monitoring, and rapid response.

Commission members adopted additional measures to strengthen cooperation and contingency planning and supported continued collaboration between affected jurisdictions.

Alongside disease concerns, scientists highlighted continuing uncertainties regarding marine survival, ecosystem change, and the cumulative impacts of multiple stressors acting simultaneously on salmon populations.

Looking Ahead

The 2026 Annual Meeting demonstrated that NASCO is entering a new phase of its conservation journey.

There is growing recognition that restoring Atlantic salmon populations will require:

- Stronger accountability.
- Measurable conservation outcomes.
- Habitat protection and restoration.
- Climate adaptation.
- Improved management of aquaculture impacts.
- Better understanding of marine survival.
- Action on bycatch and marine mortality; and
- Effective international cooperation.

The introduction of Conservation Commitment Reports and the adoption of new habitat guidance represent important progress. However, the failure to reach agreement on West Greenland and the continuing uncertainty surrounding marine mortality highlight the significant challenges that remain.

NGO Perspective: Recovery Is Still Possible

Despite the seriousness of the situation, NGOs remain optimistic that recovery is possible.

Across the North Atlantic, governments, Indigenous Peoples, NGOs, scientists, volunteers, and local communities are investing unprecedented effort into salmon conservation. Innovative restoration projects are reconnecting habitats, improving water quality, removing barriers, and restoring ecosystem function.

The science increasingly tells us what needs to be done.

The challenge now is implementation.

As NASCO moves towards the next phase of its Ten-Year Strategy, NGOs will continue to support practical conservation action, contribute scientific expertise, deliver restoration projects, and hold governments accountable for their commitments.

The decline of Atlantic salmon is not inevitable.

The solutions exist.

What is needed now is the ambition, cooperation, and urgency to deliver them.

Please go to the NASCO website to gain an insight to the most recent meeting and delve into the myriads of resources available to the public.

