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Oceana Canada Recommendations to the 2+3 Capelin Advisory Committee 2026

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Erin Dunne
Chair, 2+3 Capelin Advisory Committee
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Fisheries and Oceans Canada
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RE: Oceana Canada recommendations to the 2+3 Capelin Advisory Committee 2026

Dear Erin Dunne and members of the advisory committee,

Background

Oceana Canada is an independent charity established to restore Canada's oceans to the richness, health, and abundance they once supported, and is proud to be a part of the largest international advocacy organization dedicated solely to ocean conservation. We respectfully work with civil society, academics, fishers, Indigenous Peoples and governments. As an engaged member of fishery advisory committees across Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) regions, we advocate for science-based fisheries management that rebuilds fish populations and strengthens the economic and nutritional benefits they provide to fishers and coastal communities, now and in the future. This letter contains our 2026 management recommendations following our participation in the 2+3 capelin (formerly 2J3KL capelin) advisory meeting.

Recommendations

1. **Pause the commercial capelin fishery**.
2. **Implement an upper stock reference (USR) and harvest decision rules (HDR)**.

We provide more detail on these recommendations below.

1. **Pause the commercial capelin fishery (total allowable catch of zero tonnes).**

Capelin recovery signals remain fragile. Recent stock assessment results for the 2+3 capelin stock show a modest increase in the biomass index, similar to the population growth observed between 2012 and 2015. During that period, DFO increased the total allowable catch (TAC) from 24,396 tonnes to 30,496 tonnes, leading to quotas not being fully taken and the stock experiencing a predictable decline in 2016. The biomass index subsequently fell into the critical zone in 2017. These outcomes highlight the importance of a precautionary approach and underscore the risks associated with increasing fishing pressure before the stock has rebuilt.

Forage fish, such as capelin, are critical to the marine ecosystem and must be managed to maintain overall ecological health. Oceana Canada calls for a pause in the commercial capelin fishery until a USR and HDRs are established, ensuring harvesting is ecologically sustainable and consistent with conservation objectives.

The TAC was not taken at all in 2022 and again underutilized in 2025, raising concerns about whether scientific advice and socioeconomic factors are being appropriately weighed in decision-making. The pause in the fishery targeting roe-bearing females in 2022, combined with the strong presence of age-3 fish in 2025, suggests that reduced fishing pressure may be contributing to improvements in biomass indicators. In addition, the capelin forecast model projects a decline in the biomass index next year, reinforcing the need for caution for a stock on the cusp of rebuilding. This period represents a critical opportunity to leverage the healthy cohort of age-3 fish to support rebuilding toward a scientifically defined healthy zone.

2. **Implement a USR and HDRs** in line with the Forage Species Policy[1] and the Precautionary Approach Framework (PA)[2].

The 2+3 capelin stock continues to lack essential reference points, limiting DFO's ability to manage the stock in a manner that promotes sustainability and rebuilding. Former Deputy Minister Annette Gibbons indicated in 2024 that a Precautionary Approach Working Group would be established "*to provide recommendations for the development of an upper stock reference point and harvest control rules for this stock. These tools will be helpful in establishing a harvest strategy for the fishery that promotes sustainability and predictability*."[3] Two years after this commitment, these tools have not yet been implemented.

While DFO works with the Precautionary Approach Working Group to develop these tools, the guidelines for implementing the Fish Stocks provisions in the Fisheries Act state that: "*If a stock does not have a defined Removal Reference (RR), USR and/or Target Reference Point (TRP) at the time it is prescribed under the FSP, the management measures for 6.1(1) must seek to avoid declining to or below its LRP, avoid exceeding the RR, [and/or] define an interim measurable biomass-related management target.*"[4]

As the 2+3 capelin stock is proposed to be listed under the Fish Stocks provisions in 2026, DFO should apply this guidance by implementing interim measures that avoid further decline and establish a measurable biomass-based management target until an USR and HDRs are in place.

Regulatory Guidance

Section 6.1(1) of the Fish Stocks provisions mandates the Minister to implement management measures to maintain major fish stocks at levels that promote their sustainability, taking into account the biology of the stock and environmental conditions.

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[1] DFO. 2013. Policy on New Fisheries for Forage Species. Policy on New Fisheries for Forage Species
[2] DFO. 2009. A Fishery decision-making framework incorporating the precautionary approach. A fishery decision-making framework incorporating the precautionary approach
[3] Deputy Minister A. Gibbons, personal communication, May 28th, 2024.
[4] DFO. 2022. Guidelines for Implementing the Fish Stocks provisions in the *Fisheries Act*. https://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/reports-rapports/regs/sff-cpd/guidelines-lignes-directrices-eng.htm#_Toc104898133

Ecosystem Approach

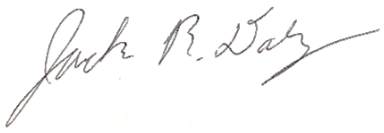
To support long-term sustainability and resilience of marine ecosystems, DFO should advance its ecosystem approach to fisheries management (EAFM) approach toward a more comprehensive ecosystem-based management (EBM) framework. Such an approach would align with international best practices and more fully consider species interactions, habitat, climate change, and cumulative impacts across fisheries.

The 2+3 capelin stock is more advanced than other east coast forage fish stocks in several respects. The limit reference point (LRP) for this stock is grounded in its historical trajectory, biological characteristics and ecological importance, including its role as a key prey species for northern cod. Although ecosystem variables are increasingly incorporated into scientific advice, DFO has not established clear management objectives for key ecosystem indicators, such as age and size structure. Similarly, while the LRP is derived from an ecosystem-informed model, harvest decision rules that explicitly account for ecosystem needs have not been implemented. Capelin therefore represent an opportunity for DFO to demonstrate best practices in forage fish management by fully integrating ecosystem and climate considerations into both science and management frameworks.

Conclusion

The 2+3 capelin stock, like other forage fish, face cumulative pressures from warming waters to fishing mortality. Pausing the commercial capelin fishery until modern fisheries management tools are in place would provide the best opportunity for this depleted stock to rebuild. Such an approach would support healthy ocean ecosystems while strengthening long-term prospects for coastal communities in Newfoundland and Labrador, including the continued rebuilding of groundfish stocks such as northern cod. Oceana Canada appreciates the opportunity to provide input and remains committed to supporting efforts to rebuild the 2+3 capelin stock toward its former abundance.

Sincerely,



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