

Chairman's report of the Thirtieth Meeting of the Extended Scientific Committee

This is a short report to describe and summarise the key activities and advice from the Thirtieth Extended Scientific Committee (ESC30) meeting of the CCSBT. The full report of ESC30 is at CCSBT-EC/2510/Rep02. The meeting was held virtually from 25-30 August.

Stock Status and Management advice

There was no new stock assessment in 2025. A stock assessment of Southern Bluefin Tuna (SBT) was carried out in 2023. The next stock assessment is scheduled for 2026.

Since 2017, the ESC has reported stock status based on a measure of total reproductive output or TRO. TRO is similar in concept to the commonly used measure, SSB, but assumes a greater level of reproductive success for older fish compared to younger fish. The ESC also reports B10+ which is the biomass of all fish aged ten years or older. Again, this is similar to SSB. The stock assessment conducted in 2020 indicated that the TRO was 20 % of the initial TRO and that the stock had grown steadily from its low point in 2009 of 10% TRO. The 2023 stock assessment indicates that TRO is at 23% of the initial TRO and is continuing to increase towards the CCSBT target of 30% TRO by 2035. B10+ is estimated as at 22% of its initial value. The TRO in 2023 is estimated to be 0.85 of the TRO associated with producing MSY and the fishing mortality rate is estimated to be at 0.46 of that associated with catching MSY.

Overall, the picture is of a stock that is recovering steadily towards the CCSBT target of 30%TRO by 2035, with fishing mortality rate at an appropriate level. The stock is expected to continue increasing under current management arrangements.

In 2019, the ESC recommended, and the Extended Commission (EC) adopted, a new management procedure as the basis for TAC setting. That procedure was developed to meet agreed strategic sustainability objectives set by the EC. The procedure is known as the Cape Town Procedure (CTP). The CTP uses gene-tagging estimates of abundance of two-year-old fish, Close Kin Mark-Recapture (CKMR) estimates of adult spawning population, and Japanese Longline catch per unit effort (CPUE) estimates as inputs to a decision rule when calculating future Total Allowable Catch (TAC). These estimates and other indicators are also used annually as part of CTP-defined meta rules process to consider whether there are Exceptional Circumstances which could trigger a need for the ESC to amend its management advice.

ESC30 ran the CTP decision rule to calculate a recommended TAC for the period 2027 to 2029. **The calculation included use of a revised CPUE series. Further work on that CPUE series was conducted during 2023, 2024, and 2025 and is ongoing.** This year, ESC30 followed the meta rules process agreed in 2020 to check if there is any scientific or technical reason to recommend any adjustment to the current TAC or to the CTP-recommended TAC. The ESC agreed that the change in the gene tagging program in 2025 and 2026 constitutes an Exceptional Circumstance. Nevertheless, at this time, and noting some concerns, the ESC confirms its recommendation that the global TAC for 2026 should be 20,647 tonnes, and recommends a TAC for 2027-2029 of 23,647 tonnes, an increase of 3,000 tonnes, the maximum available using the CTP.

Stock assessment and Management Procedure software development

EC29 provided funding for a project to update the stock assessment model software to make it more efficient and easily adaptable to future needs. The software has not been updated for many years and has been developed incrementally by various users. There is a need to service it and make it

suitable for future users to implement changes that might be required as the stock develops or advisory needs change.

Development has gone well with excellent progress made in dedicated meetings held in Tokyo in November 2023 and Seattle in June 2024 and 2025. The project was scheduled to finish in June 2025. There are a few small remaining tasks to complete and training to be provided but the new software will be used for the 2026 stock assessment and the scheduled review of CTP in 2027. It will not be available for any inter-sessional work to review the CTP in 2026.

Progress on CPUE modelling and implications

Southern bluefin tuna CPUE data need to be statistically analysed to develop indices that relate to stock abundance. These CPUE indices may then be used alongside other datasets which are used to inform stock assessments as well as the management procedure. A key CPUE dataset for SBT assessment and the CTP is from Japanese longline fleets. In 2020, following extensive analysis, it was realised that one unusually high index point was caused by the way the statistical models treat missing cells of data, where a cell is a point in time and space. As fishing has changed over time, there has been an increasing number of missing data cells and the importance of the way this is modeled has grown.

In essence, as fishing has contracted to fewer places and time periods, the statistical methods have had to interpolate for cells with no data from fewer and fewer cells with data, and with increasingly large gaps.

Collaborative work focused on improved methods of interpolating has been ongoing since 2021. That work has led to a more detailed understanding of the problem and available statistical approaches. Further work to improve interpolation has been carried out in 2025, including an exploration of the use of other (Australia, New Zealand, Korea) fleet data to assist in interpolation.

An updated CPUE analysis was carried out for 2025 that used methods developed to deal with contraction of the Japanese LL fishing activity, but it did not include other fleet data. **This CPUE was used in the CTP decision rule used to calculate the recommended TAC.**

Recommendations from the Performance Review Panel

The CCSBT Strategic Plan adopted in 2023 requires subsidiary bodies to report back on the progress of those activities and particular action items for which they have responsibility. ESC30 used the reporting template developed by the Secretariat in 2024 to provide an assessment of progress against those activities. The ESC filled in this template as Attachment 5 of its report. Notable items include that there was no progress on the use of electronic monitoring as part of the Scientific Observer Program Standard, though an input from Members is expected at ESC31. On strengthening relationships between the ESC and ERSWG, all suggestions have budgetary constraints at this time, so no progress was made. Regarding support of the CTP, the ESC recognised that members support it by ensuring catches remain within allocated TACs, but strongly recommends reinstatement of the gene-tagging program and establishing a long-term funding arrangement for monitoring programs that provide input to the CTP.

Scientific Research Plan

A process was adopted at ESC 26 for considering research proposals and prioritising scientific and technical projects. One proposal was made prior to ESC30 but a few more were received during the meeting which limited the time for review by Members.

A proposal on updating non-Member Unaccounted Mortality estimates was received. This is split into an update only part and a further part to improve the estimation methods. The update is required for the 2026 stock assessment.

A proposal for further work on CPUE methodology to include non-Japanese LL fleets was received. Work would require access to data at a level of detail that creates difficulty for some Members. This has implications, including budgetary, for what might be done and how.

A proposal to finish small outstanding items on the software development project was received. This includes some small outstanding technical matters but also documentation and training prior to the 2026 stock assessment and the 2027 review of the management procedure.

The remaining proposal is for a third year of capacity building for assessing SBT landings across multiple Indonesian ports.

These projects were ranked by the ESC. The software development project was the highest ranked with all others achieving very similar weight.

However, gene-tagging and CKMR programs provide essential inputs to the stock assessment and to the CTP. The ESC30 agreed that the alteration in the gene-tagging program due to budget constraints in 2025 and 2026 constitutes an Exceptional Circumstance under the CTP and that the program should be reinstated to ensure the Commission is not operating outside of the adopted Management Procedure. Further, if the gene-tagging program is not reinstated, then the ESC will need to test the performance of the CTP under the changes to the program to check for unacceptable risks of meeting the Commission's objectives. There are technical difficulties for doing this in 2026 related to new software being finalized during the year for use in the stock assessment. There is also a full review of the CTP already scheduled for 2027.

The ESC strongly recommends establishing a long-term funding arrangement for the gene-tagging program. The 2027 full review of the CTP could consider cost constraints and implications alongside sustainability objectives.

The ESC workplan and budget (below) includes continued, annual work on GT and CKMR projects. This is fully in line with the ESC supporting the EC to make decisions based on sound science, with stock assessments and the CTP based on high quality and up to date data.

The ESC does, however, recognise that the CCSBT is under financial constraints and that the science budget is a major part of the overall budget. With that in mind ESC30 discussed at length all SRP projects and their importance. ESC30 identified as essential, the ongoing gene-tagging (GT) and Close Kin Mark recapture (CKMR)-related projects.

Budgetary implications

The budgetary implications of the ESC's three-year workplan has been included in paper CCSBT-EC/2510/06 on the Draft 2026 and Indicative 2027-2028 Budgets.