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Evaluation of exceptional circumstances – SBT 2026

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Abstract

The meta-rules adopted with the CCSBT Management Procedure (MP) provide a process to determine whether exceptional circumstances exist and a process and guidelines for action to address issues when identified. The aim is to identify exceptional circumstances where stock or fishery indicators, the MP input data, population dynamics, fishery or fishing operations are substantially different from the conditions under which the MP was tested, or if catches are greater than the recommended Total Allowable Catch (TAC). If there is evidence for exceptional circumstances, then the next step in the process is to determine the potential severity of the 'exception' and follow the guidelines for action. This year we are using the meta-rules process to review the recommended TAC for 2027-2029 from running the MP in 2025.

The CPUE index value for 2025 is outside the 95% bound of projected CPUE values from operating models used in the Management Strategy Evaluation in 2019 and this is an exceptional circumstance. The trend in CPUE is positive and therefore risks to the stock are currently low. However, the high CPUE in recent years has had an impact on the MP TAC recommendation made in 2025, as the CPUE series is primarily driving the increase in TAC.

1 Introduction

The SBT meta-rules encompass the Management Procedure (MP) framework for providing scientific advice for rebuilding the stock and includes the full specification of the Cape Town Procedure (Attachment 8, Anon 2020). The meta-rules' schedule of activities includes an annual process for identifying exceptional circumstances (Anon 2020). Exceptional circumstances are events, or observations, that are outside the range for which the CCSBT MP was tested and, therefore, indicate that application of the total allowable catch (TAC) generated by the MP may be highly risky, or highly inappropriate.

The exceptional circumstances process under the meta-rules involves the following three steps:

1. Determining whether exceptional circumstances exist, by examining whether there were any substantial changes in stock and fishery indicators, inputs to the MP, population dynamics or fishery or fishing operations, and if recent catches and other removals have been greater than the MP's recommended TACs.
2. A "process for action" that examines the severity (and implications) of the exceptional circumstances for the operation of the MP, and the types of actions that may be considered.
3. "Guidelines for action" that determine how recommendations from the MP might be altered, if at all, based on the most recent reconditioning of the Operating Model (OM).

The meta-rules schedule of activities for implementation of the MP specifies frequency of TAC setting using the MP, that the stock assessment is offset by 1 year from MP TAC decisions, timing of an MP review, and the consideration of exceptional circumstances. The meta-rules provide a safety-net around the implementation of the MP and TAC recommendations, and transparency in advice from the ESC and decision making by the Commission.

This year we are using the meta-rules process to review the recommended TAC for 2027-2029 from running the MP in 2025.

2 Examining evidence for the existence of exceptional circumstances in 2026

The meta-rules specify the information that should be checked for evidence of exceptional circumstances. The following have been examined:

2.1 Stock and fishery indicators

The indicators papers (e.g. Patterson, 2026) and available national reports in 2026 do not identify any unusual or recent changes in characteristics of the stock or fishery.

The grid-type trolling index (juveniles) has been low in the recent decade, 2017-2026, relative to index values in the previous period 2006-2016 (Itoh, 2026a).

2.2 MP input data

The data used in the MP are the close-kin Parent-Offspring Pairs and Half-Sibling Pairs , gene-tagging and Japanese longline CPUE index of abundance.

In 2025, there was a concern that the reduced funding for the gene-tagging program would result in changes to the data input and require changes to the MP, which had therefore triggered an exceptional circumstance. In late 2025, funding was reinstated for the gene-tagging program and tagging work continued in early 2026. The future workplan for the gene-tagging program is currently unclear. If there are changes to the gene-tagging program, that affect the data input to the MP, the CCSBT will need to develop a new MP and complete full Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) testing to provide a scientifically robust MP for future TAC recommendations.

2.2.1 Close-kin data

The close-kin data were updated in 2026 (Farley et al., 2026a). Only data from juveniles were used to identify new parent-offspring pairs and half-sibling pairs. There have been several years of disruption to the adult tissue sample and otolith activities in Indonesia, with low numbers of close-kin tissue samples collected in Indonesia for 2021/22, 2022/23 and 2023/24 seasons. Capacity building for resumption and rebuilding of the program has occurred since 2024. Adult sampling has been adjusted to compensate for the period of low coverage with a large number of tissue samples collected in the most recent 2025/26 season. This means that the previous period of low coverage is not an exceptional circumstance. The close-kin data are essential for operation of the MP and are also a key data set in the stock assessment because these data provide information on adult abundance, mortality and productivity.

2.2.2 Gene-tagging data

The gene-tagging program was developed and adopted as a recruitment monitoring program that provides absolute abundance of 2-year-old fish in the year of tagging for use in the MP. Tissue collection in the tagging and harvest sampling phases of the program have progressed well, however recent numbers of fish tagged have been lower than the target level. The 2024 estimate of abundance has a CV that is higher than the target level. The recent estimates are indicating a positive trend in recruitment and are well above the very low recruitments observed in the early 2000s (Preece et al., 2026).

There is a concern regarding the low numbers of fish tagged in the gene-tagging program in the recent years, which may affect delivery of abundance estimates or their precision in future. The most recent abundance estimate (for the 2024 age 2 cohort) has a CV above the target level due to both the lower number of fish tagged and the larger abundance of age-2 fish (resulting in fewer "recaptures", i.e. genotype matches). This is expected from a rebuilding population, and sample sizes can be adjusted. This is therefore not considered an exceptional circumstance.

2.2.3 CPUE series

A new standardised Japanese longline CPUE series (GAM model) was adopted for use in the MP following additional MSE testing in 2022 (Anon., 2022). The new GAM model ("GAM22") resolved exceptional circumstances identified in 2019, regarding the anomalously high CPUE point for 2018. The specified CPUE standardisation has been used to provide an updated CPUE index using data through to 2025 (Itoh and Takahashi, 2026). The index has increased in the recent year and is now higher than all other years in the series, i.e. since 1969. There remain unresolved uncertainties in CPUE in relation to unreported catches 1989-2005.

The CPUE index value for 2025 is well outside the 95% bound of projected CPUE values from operating models used in the MSE in 2019 (Takahashi, pers comm), and this is an exceptional circumstance. The trend in CPUE is positive and therefore risks to the stock are currently low. However, the high CPUE in recent years has had an impact on the MP TAC recommendation made in 2025, as the CPUE series is primarily driving the increase in TAC (Hillary et al., 2025). Further review of the high CPUE points in the series and relationship between CPUE and abundance is therefore recommended.

The sensitivity tests comparing the age-5+ index with the age-4+ base case, indicates the strong impact of age 4 fish on the estimates in recent years (see Figure 32 in Itoh and Takahashi, 2026). The sensitivity test comparing the all-ages index with the age-4+ base case indicates that the Japanese longline fishery is predominantly a juvenile fishery. These tests could indicate strong juvenile cohorts or changes in retention practices given increasing quotas (Itoh and Takahashi, 2026).

2.2.4 Population dynamics

The new stock assessment code has implemented substantial changes to the modelling of the population dynamics and propagation of uncertainty in model estimates. The 2026 assessment has a new structure for estimating natural mortality, which has resulted in a smaller range of

estimates for M at ages that were part of the grid in previous assessments (Eveson et al, 2026). Despite the structural model changes, the underlying dynamics of the population appear to be similar, and there are no major changes in our knowledge or understanding of the SBT population dynamics compared to the OM conditioning used to test and tune the Cape Town Procedure in 2019.

The 2026 assessment indicates that the probability of rebuilding to the target level of relative Total Reproductive Output (TRO) is on track and may occur soon, i.e. in 2028 (Eveson et al., 2026). The median current level of depletion is 0.28 which is above the initial rebuilding target of 20% of initial TRO. Fishing mortality (F) is around half $F_{MSY.}$ The rate of stock size increase is well within the range indicated in the robustness testing of the MP.

2.3 Fishery or fishing operations

There were no major changes in most fisheries and fishing operations in 2025 reported in national reports and the Japanese fishing operation paper (Itoh, 2026b). The number of vessels catching SBT in the last decade has been approximately stable for Australia, Korea and Taiwan, increasing (doubling) for Indonesia and South Africa, and decreasing (halving) for Japan and New Zealand (CCSBT, 2026).

Catch in the Australian longline fishery, operating along Australia's east coast, has steadily risen over the last decade with Australian quota increases. The longline fishery is catching around 30% of Australia's quota. These fish are larger than the juveniles caught in the purse seine surface fishery in Port Lincoln and are in the juvenile to sub-adult size classes. This fishery is accounted for in the LL1 fishery in the OMs and projections, and no model changes are required.

There has been a shift in areas fished by the Indonesian longline fishery from Area 1 to Area 2, since 2021 (Satria et al., 2026) and a large increase in the number of Indonesian vessels reporting SBT catch (CCSBT, 2026). In the 2025/26 season, there has been a substantial increase in length sampling and biological monitoring compared with previous years which highlights the success of the collaborative project to restore and strengthen SBT monitoring capacity in Indonesia (Farley et al., 2026b). There remains uncertainty in the length composition of SBT landed and coverage of landing sites. Catch and length monitoring remains an area for ongoing improvements across all fisheries. These issues do not trigger exceptional circumstances.

2.4 Catch relative to TAC

Reported catches for the 2025 calendar year are below the TAC for 2025 (CCSBT, 2026).

The recent estimates of potential Un-Accounted Mortality (UAM) from Non-Cooperating Non-Members (NCNM) (Edwards and Hoyle, 2026) for the "Adj(JP)" scenario are within the range that the Cape Town Procedure has been designed to be robust to. The 2022 estimate of 2201 t is above the 2000 t UAM scenario used in the 2019 MSE (Anon., 2019). The agreed implementation of the UAM scenario in projections is that the UAM will increase to be at the same proportion of the current TAC as it was 2016. Since 2000 t in 2016 was 13% of the TAC of 14,637 t, the same proportion of the TAC would be 2410 t in 2022. Therefore, the UAM scenario for testing the MP has not been exceeded and is not an exceptional circumstance.

3 Conclusion

In considering the potential for exceptional circumstances, we have examined whether: 1) the inputs to the MP are affected, 2) the population dynamics are potentially significantly different from those for which the MP was tested (as defined by the 2019 Reference set of OMs), 3) the fishery or fishing operations have changed substantially, 4) available fishery indicators have concerning trends, 5) total removals are greater than the MP's recommended TACs and UAM accounted for in MP testing, and 6) if there are likely to be impacts on the performance of the SBT rebuilding plan as a result. It is possible that additional exceptional circumstances may be identified at the ESC's annual review of stock and fishery indicators.

The review has identified that the CPUE is outside the range of estimates used in the MSE to select the MP, and that this is an exceptional circumstance. The trend in CPUE is positive and therefore risks to the stock are currently low. However, impact on the MP TAC recommendation is high as the CPUE series is primarily driving the increase in TAC (Hillary et al., 2025), which is a concern that should be discussed by the ESC.

Last year, an exceptional circumstance was noted in relation to changes to the gene-tagging program that would result in changes to the data input and require changes to the MP. This was resolved in late 2025, with funding reinstated for the gene-tagging program and tagging work continued in early 2026. The future workplan funding is currently unclear. If future changes to the gene-tagging program affect the data input to the MP, then the CCSBT will need to develop a new MP and complete full MSE testing to provide a scientifically robust MP for future TAC recommendations.

There has been success in rebuilding the close-kin sample collection program in Indonesia. There is a need for ongoing improvements in data collection in all fisheries to reduce uncertainties, particularly in catch monitoring programs and provision of accurate length frequency data. UAM estimates are high in recent years but have not exceeded the MSE scenarios.

The meta-rules process provides a schedule of activities for the implementation and review of performance of the MP. The thorough and systematic annual examination of exceptional circumstances assists the ESC to provide transparent and clearly reasoned TAC recommendations to the Commission in the context of the objectives of the MP and the conditions under which it was tested.

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