Chairman's Report of the Thirty-First Meeting of the Extended Scientific Committee

This is a short report to describe and summarise the key activities and advice from the Thirty-First Extended Scientific Committee (ESC31) meeting of the CCSBT. The full report of ESC31 is at CCSBT-EC/2610/Rep02. The meeting was held in Brussels, Belgium, from 24-27 August 2026. Advantage was taken to use 28 August for informal OMMPWG meetings.

Stock Status and Management Advice

There was a new stock assessment in 2026 carried out using new software and models developed in a dedicated project over the past three years. The CCSBT-funded project involved a complete redevelopment of the assessment model and provides a faster, more transparent, and reproducible framework for developing scientific advice. The next stock assessment is scheduled for 2029.

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 of spawning stock biomass, SSB, but assumes a greater level of reproductive success for larger, older fish compared to smaller, 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 TRO in 2026 is estimated to be at 28% of the unfished level and at 99% of the TRO associated with producing maximum sustainable yield (MSY). The fishing mortality rate is estimated to be at 0.55 of that associated with catching MSY.

Overall, the picture is of a stock that is recovering steadily towards the CCSBT target of 0.30 TRO by 2035, with the 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 recommended TAC of 23,647 tonnes is an increase of 3,000 tonnes over the current TAC, the maximum available using the CTP and consistent with the continuing growth of the stock. This year, ESC31 followed the meta-rules process agreed in 2020 to check if there is any scientific or technical reason to recommend any adjustment to the previously recommended 2027-2029 TAC. The ESC discussed the high value of Japanese

longline CPUE and agreed that, while it technically constituted an exceptional circumstance, the ESC was satisfied that there is no reason to modify its advice on the 2027-2029 TAC.

ESC31 was asked to advise the EC on the potential impacts on scientific advice that might arise from changes in Members' allocations. While making projections of stock status using the new stock assessment model, OMMP16 ran a test assuming that all of the available 3,000 tonnes increase in TAC for 2027-2029 was taken in Indonesian fisheries. The test indicated that there was a negligible impact on the projected rebuilding of the SBT stock compared to results where nominal allocations are assumed.

Terms of Reference for Review of the Management Procedure in 2027

Following the meta-rules for CTP, the ESC is required to conduct a review of the MP every six years, including a review of the performance of the MP and, on the basis of the review, to determine whether the MP is on track to meet the rebuilding objectives or whether a new MP is required. Under the meta-rules, the next review is scheduled for 2027. ESC31 developed detailed terms of reference for the review as Attachment 6 of its report.

Work required for the review is extensive and will need to be undertaken by Members. The newly developed stock assessment and operating model software will allow Members to carry out work efficiently, though some further developments will be needed. Advantage was taken at the end of ESC31 to start discussions on model development needs and on further training of Members to use the new software. The key technical meeting will be OMMP17 but two half-day webinars have been added to the recommended work plan for 2027 to enable and coordinate progress.

The recommended terms of reference for the review involve two stages, the first being an evaluation of the CTP using the new operating model resulting from the 2026 stock assessment to identify areas that may require further consideration. The second stage would require EC direction about objectives and possible revisions, which would take account of costs and feasible alternatives.

Scientific Research Plan

A process was adopted at ESC 26 for considering research proposals and prioritising scientific and technical projects. Proposals for continuing gene-tagging and CKMR programmes to deliver estimates as set out in the CTP were considered. No other proposals were received in advance of the meeting but during the meeting work was carried out to propose a multi-national longline CPUE standardisation project. That proposal was not finalised and is therefore not included in the recommended work plan. It is expected, however, that a refined proposal might be received next year to continue ESC consideration of how to extract the best information possible from CPUE data. ESC31 also considered under the CPUE proposal how to make input to and take advantage of a planned workshop on CPUE standardisation to be held in Japan in October 2026. It is clear that while no proposal is being provided this year, the issue remains highly relevant and of importance.

Discussion on CPUE led to consideration of the need for more detailed simulation models to allow evaluation of alternative CPUE standardisation approaches. ESC31 noted that this

consideration extends beyond CPUE to the development of more detailed simulation models to enable incorporating other data sets into stock assessment and operating models, exploring alternative data inputs, investigating climate change impacts, and consideration of the goals expressed in the BBNJ process.

The workplan and budget proposed by ESC31 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, as expressed in the Strategic Plan. 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 and expects cost to be a consideration under the Review of CTP.

Budgetary implications

The budgetary implications of the ESC's three-year workplan has been included in paper CCSBT-EC/2610/07 on the Draft 2027 and Indicative 2028-2029 Budgets. Budget requests reflect necessary meeting costs, the gene-tagging and CKMR projects, additional costs related to the MP Review, and continued funding of collection and ageing of otoliths from Indonesian fisheries.

ESC31 has also put forward a proposal for a capacity building workshop on otolith ageing in South Africa with a limited request based on holding a workshop adjacent to ESC32 in Cape Town.