

14th MEETING OF THE SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

7 to 12 September 2026, Tórshavn, Faroe Islands

SC14 – DW 01

Overview of Exploratory Fisheries

Secretariat

1. Summary

Information compiled by the Secretariat under CMM 13-2024 (Management of New and Exploratory Fisheries) indicates that:

- **Fisheries authorised:** six exploratory fisheries are currently authorised: toothfish fisheries of Australia, the European Union, Republic of Korea and New Zealand; and the Cook Islands trap fishery for lobster and crab, and dropline and jig fishery for hapuka (section 4).
- **Decision points:** all six authorising CMMs expire between 30 September 2027 and the 16th Commission meeting in 2028 (Table 1).
- **2025 catch:** The European Union reported that the TACs of 129 t and 33 t for its two research blocks were reached; Korea reported 19.07 t, Australia 2.54 t, New Zealand 1.02 t, and the Cook Islands 14.0 t of hapuka and 21.4 t of crab and lobster. Catch is set against the limit for each fishery at Figure 3.
- **Fishing after the reporting period:** Korea and the Cook Islands both fished in 2026. Those catches fall outside the 2021–2025 reporting period, are noted in sections 7.4 and 7.5, and are not included in the tables or figures.
- **Data:** the data specified in each approved Data Collection Plan, and the data the Secretariat holds against it, are set out in the accompanying data workbook (Annex 1).

The SC is invited to:

- review this overview and to liaise with the Secretariat where updates may be needed.

2. Background

CMM 13-2024 (superseding CMM 13-2021) governs new and exploratory fisheries in the Convention Area. Fishing in an exploratory fishery may only be undertaken pursuant to approval by the Commission, under an approved Fisheries Operation Plan (FOP), for periods of up to three years (CMM 13-2024, paras. 6, 17, 20–21). Once an exploratory fishery has been fished for 10 years pursuant to the measure, further fishing is to be undertaken only under a CMM managing it as an established fishery, and the Commission may decide at any time to manage a fishery as established where the information conditions in paragraph 29 are met (paras. 28–29).

Paragraph 30 of CMM 13-2024 provides that each year the Secretariat shall compile an overview of all exploratory fisheries authorised by the Commission, for review by the Scientific Committee and the Commission at their annual meetings. It requires that the overview “shall specify whether the fishery falls under subparagraph 4 a), b), c) d), or e)” and provide information about the target species, non-target and associated or dependent species, fishing areas, and gear used.



3. Data and methods

Reporting period: calendar years 2021 to 2025, with the historical series at section 6 reaching back to 2016. The Cook Islands limits and catches run to a fishing year of 1 July to 30 June, as defined in CMM 14b-2024, and are identified as such wherever they appear.

Each Member-specific CMM requires the authorised vessel to collect the data set out in its approved Fisheries Operation Plan and Data Collection Plan. Members report to the Scientific Committee through annual reports and dedicated papers on each exploratory fishery. Some Members also report monthly exploratory fishing catches to the Secretariat. Where reported, this is included in the Secretariat's monthly catch reports to Members but is not used in this report as annual reports provide final and, where applicable, corrected data.

4. Authorised exploratory fisheries

Six exploratory fisheries are currently authorised by the Commission: toothfish (*Dissostichus* spp.) fisheries of Australia, the European Union, Korea and New Zealand; and the Cook Islands trap fishery for lobster and crab, and dropline and jig fishery for hapuka. The details of the authorising measures, the periods covered and their expiry date are set out in Table 1. Catch and effort limits and tagging and observer requirements are presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Exploratory fisheries currently authorised, the authorising measure and the periods covered.

Exploratory fishery	Member (vessel(s))	Authorising CMM	Fishing authorised for	Measure expires
Toothfish — George V Fracture Zone Research Blocks A and B	European Union (F/V <i>Tronio</i>)	CMM 14e-2024 (fishery since 2021 under CMM 14e-2021)	Three trips, one each in 2024, 2025 and 2026; maximum 60 consecutive days between 1 May and 15 November	Following the regular meeting of the Commission in 2027
Toothfish — Macquarie Ridge Continuation Research Block	Australia (F/V <i>Antarctic Discovery</i>)	CMM 14f-2024	Up to three years; 2025 and 2026 contingent on toothfish being found in 2024; fishing in April, August or September	Following the regular meeting of the Commission in 2027
Toothfish — research blocks L to S	Republic of Korea (F/V <i>Greenstar</i> ; F/V <i>Sunstar</i> from 2026)	CMM 14h-2025	2025, 2026 and 2027	Following the regular meeting of the Commission in 2028
Toothfish — NZSWRB1 and Research Blocks A–H	New Zealand (F/Vs <i>San Aspiring</i> , <i>San Aotea II</i> , and <i>Janas</i>)	CMM 14i-2025 (efforts since 2016 under CMM 4.14, 14a-2019, 14a-2022)	Three consecutive calendar years: 2025, 2026 and 2027	Following the regular meeting of the Commission in 2028
Lobster and crab trap fishery — Foundation Seamount Chain and Northern Seamounts	Cook Islands (F/V <i>Akanui</i>)	CMM 14b-2024 (programme since 2019)	Three fishing years, 4 April 2024 to 30 June 2027	30 September 2027
Hapuka dropline and jig fishery — Foundation Seamount Chain and Northern Seamounts	Cook Islands (F/V <i>Akanui</i>)	CMM 14g-2024	Commenced 4 April 2024; initially three fishing years, with annual SC and Commission review	30 September 2027



Table 2. Catch and effort limits, tagging and observer requirements, as set by each Member-specific CMM

Exploratory fishery	Annual catch limit (t)	Sub-limits	Effort limits	Tagging	Observers
EU toothfish	129 (RB-A); 33 (RB-B)	Macrourus 150 kg or >16% of toothfish catch per haul or set; retained skates 100 kg or >5%; sharks >4 individuals of listed families or >2 of one family	≤ 5 000 hooks/set; ≤ 100 sets per annum; lines ≥ 3 nm apart; 600–2 500 m	5 per tonne per species; ≥ 60% overlap	One observer plus assistant; Electronic Monitoring on setting and hauling
Australia toothfish	40	Macrourus 16%, skates and rays 5%, other species 16% of the toothfish limit	≤ 5 000 hooks/line; sets ≥ 1 nm apart; 600–2 500 m	3 per tonne per species; ≥ 60% overlap	One observer plus assistant; multi-camera EM; ≥ 10% hooks observed
Korea toothfish	240	40 t per stratum, both species combined	Clusters ≤ 5 sets; ≤ 6 900 hooks/set; ≤ 17 250 hooks/cluster; clusters ≥ 10 nm apart	3 per tonne per species; ≥ 60% overlap	Two observers plus assistant; ≥ 10% hooks observed
New Zealand toothfish	290	50 t per research block; minimum three blocks surveyed	≤ 20 700 hooks/cluster; clusters ≥ 5 nm apart, fished once per year; ≥ 600 m	3 per tonne TOP, 1 per tonne TOA; ≥ 60% overlap	One observer plus assistant; video over hauling station
Cook Islands trap	300 (lobster and crab combined)	20 t Jasus per trip at Kopernik on reopening; CPUE limit 4 kg per trap at Kopernik	≤ 5 lines/day of 100 traps (lobster) or 200 (crab, below 350 m); closed July–September	Not applicable	One, preferably two, observers; video; ≥ 10% pots observed
Cook Islands hapuka	500, plus 100 t retained bycatch allowance	≤ 25 t per fishing year and ≤ 15 t per trip per seamount	≤ 10 droplines × 100 hooks; ≤ 12 jig lines × 30 hooks; no seabed contact in Kopernik Valley	Not applicable	One, preferably two, observers; video; ≥ 10% lines observed

The details required by paragraph 30 of CMM 13-2024 for each fishery are set out in Table 3. They fall under either sub paragraphs b) or c) of the CMM:

b) for the purposes of fishing with a particular gear type or technique, if it has not been subject to fishing by that particular gear type or technique in the previous ten years;

c) if fishing in that fishery has been undertaken in the previous ten years pursuant to this CMM, and a decision has not yet been taken in accordance with paragraph 28 or 29 of this CMM to either close or manage the fishery as an established fishery¹;

¹ Established fisheries are those within the scope of CMM 01-2026 (*Trachurus murphyi*), CMM 03a-2026 (Deepwater Species), and CMM 18-2026 (Jumbo Flying Squid). Until the Commission has adopted specific conservation and management measures for the chub mackerel fishery on the basis of the advice of the Scientific Committee, catches of chub mackerel in the jack mackerel fishery shall be considered to be covered by CMM 01-2026.



Table 3. CMM 13-2024 Paragraph 30 information elements (target species, other species reported, area and gear)

Exploratory fishery	Para. 4 subpara.	Target species	Non-target and associated or dependent species reported	Fishing area	Gear used
EU toothfish	4 c)	Patagonian toothfish (<i>Dissostichus eleginoides</i>)	[DATA NOT PROVIDED] — not detailed in the supplied stock assessment	GVFZ Research Blocks A and B (≈139°E / 53°S), 600–2 500 m	“Spanish” demersal longline
Australia toothfish	4 c)	Patagonian toothfish; no Antarctic toothfish (<i>D. mawsoni</i>) caught in 2025	Blue antimora, macrourid grenadiers, <i>Lepidion</i> spp., Lithodidae, Porifera (VME, 0.4 kg)	Macquarie Ridge Continuation Research Block	Autoline (integrated weighted line), ≈5 000 hooks per line
Korea toothfish	4 b)	Toothfish (both <i>Dissostichus</i> species)	Grenadiers, blue antimora, <i>Lepidion</i> codlings, ratfishes; VME indicator taxa recorded	Research Blocks L to S	Bottom longline (trotline system)
New Zealand toothfish	4 c)	<i>D. eleginoides</i> and <i>D. mawsoni</i>	Blue antimora, basketwork eel, giant hydrolagus, macrourids, cusk-eels, skates, lantern sharks; VME taxa 0.41 kg total, no thresholds reached	NZSWRB1 (SW of Macquarie Island) and Research Block A (Campbell Spur); survey boxes F, G, H and B	Integrated-weight demersal bottom longline; 1 200 m segments of 857 hooks
Cook Islands trap	4 c)	<i>Jasus caveorum</i> , <i>Projasus</i> sp., <i>Chaceon</i> sp.	Prawns, gastropods, cusk-eels and other teleosts; VME indicator taxa mainly octocorals	Foundation Seamount Chain (Kopernik, Lavousier) and Northern Seamounts	Baited traps on longline; ≤100 traps (lobster) or ≤200 (crab) per line at 25 m spacing
Cook Islands hapuka	4 c)	Hapuka (<i>Polyprion oxygeneios</i>)	Trumpeter, spiny dogfish (<i>Squalus</i> sp.), tarakihi, bluenose, porae, blackbelly rosefish; no VME interactions on droplines or jigs	Foundation Seamount Chain and Northern Seamounts	Droplines (≤10 lines × ≤100 hooks), dropline-B, jigging machines (≤12 × ≤30 hooks)

5. Catch and effort history, 2016–2025

New Zealand undertook the first exploratory toothfish fishing in the Convention Area in 2016 and has fished every year since except in 2018. The European Union entered the George V Fracture Zone in 2021, Australia the Macquarie Ridge Continuation Research Block in 2024, and Korea fished Research Blocks L to R in 2025. The Cook Islands trap programme has operated since March 2019. Figure 1 shows the years in which fishing is reported for each fishery, compiled from Member submissions and the approved Fisheries Operation Plans. Annual catch by Member is at Table 4 and Figure 2.

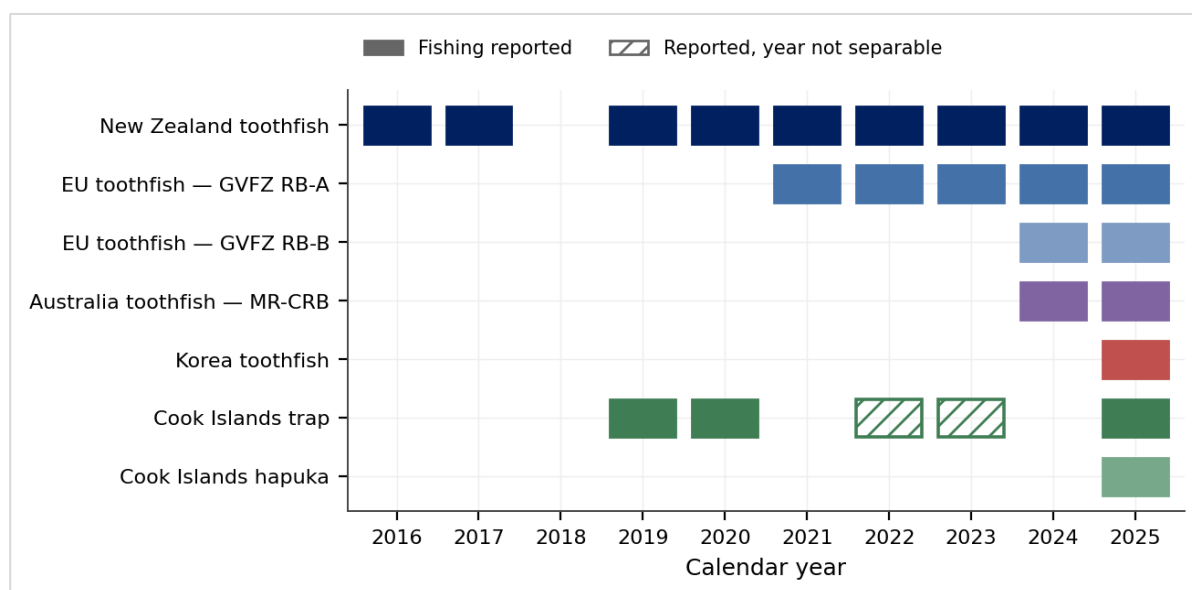


Figure 1. Years with reported fishing by exploratory fishery, 2016–2025. Filled cells denote a calendar year with reported fishing; hatched cells denote fishing reported but not separable by year in the sources held (Cook Islands trap trips 5 to 7). No fishing is reported by any participant for 2018, and none for the Cook Islands trap fishery in 2021 or 2024.

Table 4. Annual reported toothfish catch in exploratory fisheries, 2016–2025, by Member. Catch in tonnes green weight as printed in the cited source

Year	NZ (t)	EU (t)	Australia (t)	Korea (t)
2016	28.96	—	—	—
2017	29	—	—	—
2018	—	—	—	—
2019	36.58	—	—	—
2020	41.01	—	—	—
2021	24.10	74.89	—	—
2022	38.72	74.90	—	—
2023	34.40	42.96	—	—
2024	32.70	149.67	4.68	—
2025	1.02	162.0	2.54	19.07

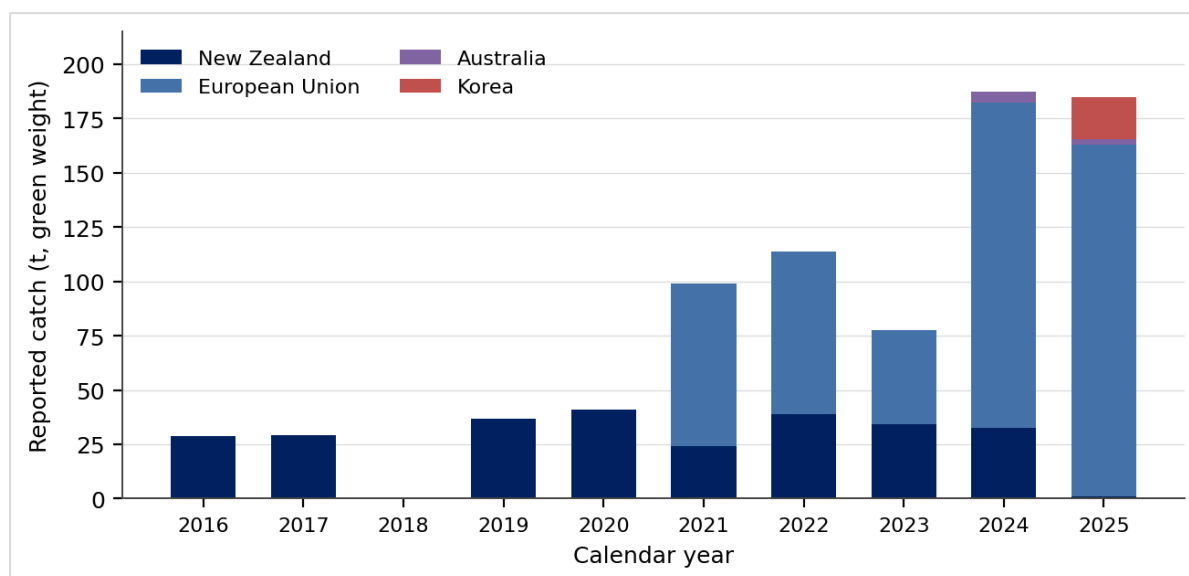


Figure 2. Annual reported toothfish catch in exploratory fisheries by Member, 2016–2025

6. Activity by fishery, 2021–2025

Activity by fishery for 2021–2025 is summarised in Table 5. Reported toothfish catch across the four exploratory toothfish fisheries totals 661.6 t over the 2021–2025 reporting period, and 797.2 t over the full series from 2016 (Table 4). The two Cook Islands fisheries target hapuka, crab and lobster rather than toothfish, and their limits run to a fishing year, so they do not form part of that series; their catches are reported at Table 5 and in section 7.5.



Table 5. Reported activity by exploratory fishery, from Member submissions and approved Fisheries Operation Plans only. Catch in tonnes green weight. Rows cover different periods and include a New Zealand trip subtotal, so the catch column is not a series total. The two European Union figures are the sums of the annual catches in Table 4 and carry the approximations shown there for 2021 to 2023. The Cook Islands rows run to the 2025–26 fishing year.

Fishery	Area	Period	Effort (sets / lines / hauls, n)	Hooks set (n)	Catch (t, green weight)	Tags released (n)	Tags recaptured (n)	Source
EU toothfish	GVFZ RB-A	2021–2025	27–56 hauls/yr	—	440.5	2,225	17	SC11-DW04; SC13-DW06
EU toothfish	GVFZ RB-B	2024–2025	16 lines (2024)	—	63.9	331	0	SC11-DW04; SC13-DW06
Australia toothfish	MR-CRB	2024	17 lines	—	4.68	28	0	SC13-DW02
Australia toothfish	MR-CRB	2025	7 lines	—	2.54	10	0	SC13-DW02
NZ toothfish	NZSWRB1	2025	9 sets	—	0.18	—	—	SC14 report
NZ toothfish	Research Block A	2025	5 sets	—	0.84	—	—	NZ report
NZ toothfish	Trip total	2025	14 sets	—	1.02	5	0	NZ report
Korea toothfish	Blocks L–R	2025	42 sets	162 180	19.07	65	2	Korea progress report
Cook Islands hapuka	FSC / NS	2025–2026 FY	29 sets	—	14.00	n/a	n/a	COK reports
Cook Islands trap	FSC / NS	2025–2026 FY	6 728 pots	n/a	21.38	n/a	n/a	COK Annual Report

Catch in 2025 was at the limit in the EU fishery and below the limit for others (Figure 3). The EU data records state that both TACs were reached, and catch is therefore shown as equal to the combined limits of 129 t and 33 t. The two limits for the Cook Islands cover a fishing year (1 July to 30 June) and the catch shown is a single trip within it, so that bar is indicative only. The Cook Islands trap fishery is shown separately because its catch is pending. The Korean bar is an estimate from monthly catch reports.

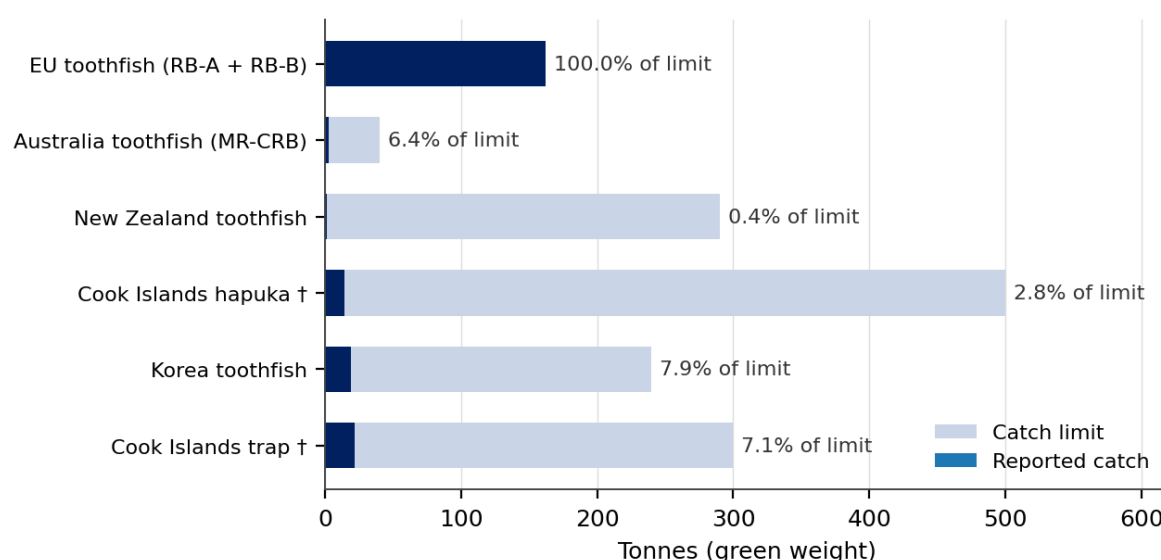


Figure 3. Reported catch in 2025 against the catch limit set by each Member-specific CMM.



6.1. European Union — GVFZ

The European Union submitted a stock assessment for the 2024–2026 campaign (SAERI, v3, March 2026), prepared for Georgia Seafoods Ltd, the vessel operator. It reports a biomass estimate for Research Block A of 12,149 t (confidence interval 7,270–28,069 t), states that the TACs of 129 t and 33 t were reached in 2025 and proposes a provisional annual TAC for Research Block A of 218 t for 2027–2029. It further reports 11 recoveries in the George V Fracture Zone of fish released in the Macquarie Island fishery and identifies rates of immigration and emigration as the priority for interpreting the biomass series.

6.2. Australia — MR-CRB

In 2024 (16–23 August) 17 lines were set over nine days for 4.68 t of toothfish, catching 448 Patagonian toothfish and one Antarctic toothfish, 28 fish were tagged (5.6 per tonne, overlap 75.48%), and bycatch totalled 3,186 kg, the largest components being blue antimora and grenadiers. 19.8 kg of VME indicator taxa was recorded, below trigger limits. In 2025 (15–18 July), seven lines over three days took 2.54 t of Patagonian toothfish, with ten fish tagged at 4 per tonne. In that campaign, 1,482.5 kg of bycatch was recorded, along with 0.4 kg of VME indicator taxa. Observer coverage was 100% in both years and no interactions with seabirds, marine mammals or other species of concern occurred. Catch in both years was below the 40 t annual limit. The reports state that the tagging is intended to inform population size and connectivity with the adjacent Macquarie Island fishery. The biological collections had not been analysed at the time of reporting.

6.3. New Zealand — NZSWRB1 and Research Block A

The 2025 voyage of F/V *San Aspiring* (12 October–5 November) was the first under CMM 14i-2025. Catches were low in NZSWRB1, at 12 Patagonian toothfish and one Antarctic toothfish by number. Catch weight was higher in Research Block A, where fewer fish were taken but individuals were markedly larger: mean individual weight was 10.9 kg in NZSWRB1 against 46.6 kg in Research Block A. All 31 retained toothfish were sampled. The report recorded 22 females among the 30 *D. eleginoides* and a predominance of spent fish, and notes that the sample is too small to support inferences on stock structure. Bycatch comprised 844 individuals from 13 taxa, of which blue antimora accounted for 58% and basketwork eel 23%. VME indicator taxa totalled 0.41 kg with no thresholds reached. No seabird or marine mammal interactions were observed and observer coverage was 73% of hauled hooks. A principal outcome was the gain of bathymetric information: several charted seabed features, being seamounts and ridge systems, were found on sounding either not to exist as charted or to be unsuitable for setting longlines, whether through depth or seabed form. The F/V *Janas* surveyed boxes F, G, H and B and found no fishable features.

6.4. Republic of Korea

F/V *Greenstar* completed 42 sets of 162,180 hooks between 14 May and 22 June 2025 across Research Blocks L to R, no sets being made in Block S. Retained toothfish catch was 19,067.2 kg, comprising 18,099.9 kg of Antarctic toothfish and 967.3 kg of Patagonian toothfish, against the annual limit of 240 t and a limit of 40 t per stratum. Catch was concentrated in Block N, which accounted for 99.5% of the annual total, while five of the seven blocks sampled produced none. Sixty-five toothfish were tagged and released, at 3.09 Antarctic toothfish and 9.30 Patagonian toothfish per tonne of the respective retained catch, and two previously tagged fish were recaptured in Block N. Non-target catch was 3,561.13 kg across eight taxonomic categories, of which grenadiers were the largest component, and VME indicator taxa totalled 62.244 kg across eight codes, with no encounter exceeding the applicable threshold. Biological measurements were taken from 71 Antarctic and six Patagonian toothfish, with otoliths and tissue retained.

After the reporting period, the F/V *Sunstar* (replacing F/V *Greenstar*) completed seven sets of 25,560 hooks in Blocks L and N between 11 and 16 February 2026, retaining 40,749.0 kg of Antarctic toothfish, tagging 125 fish at 3.07 per tonne with a tag overlap of 87%, and recording 23.07 kg of non-target catch and 1.215 kg of VME indicator taxa. The Korea report states that the 2026 operation was shorter and covered only two blocks, and that the higher catch rate recorded should not be read as evidence of increasing abundance.



Korea's research area covers strata L to S, which include strata previously fished by New Zealand. Korea's Fisheries Operation Plan states that the programme is designed to complement and integrate with the New Zealand research, that the strata were included to allow recapture of fish tagged during that research and comparison of the two gear types, and that the annual limit of 240 t was set to match the limit already adopted for the New Zealand fishery covering the same strata. New Zealand's current measure, CMM 14i-2025, applies to NZSWRB1 and Research Blocks A–H. The spatial relationship between the two fisheries is recorded here because paragraph 13 d) of CMM 13-2024 requires the Scientific Committee to advise the Commission on the cumulative impacts of all fishing activity in the area of an exploratory fishery.

6.5. Cook Islands — hapuka and trap fisheries

Trip 8 (30 August to 15 December 2025) was the first completed trip of the hapuka dropline and jig fishery under CMM 14g-2024, and the eighth trip of the trap programme running since March 2019; no trips were completed in 2024 owing to a change of vessel and refit. The trip fell wholly within the 2025–2026 fishing year. Hapuka accounted for 97.2% of the retained dropline weight, 14.0 t green weight against a limit of 15 t per trip per seamount, at a catch rate of 37.44 fish per set, and 954 hapuka were sampled including otoliths, genetics and stomach contents. The report records 81.1% of sampled hapuka as alive but injured on capture and 2.2% in good condition, and states that this indicates limited post-release survival at these depths. In the trap fishery the catch was 21,354.63 kg of crab and 23 kg of lobster, green weight, from 6,728 pot deployments over 38 fishing days concentrated at Kopernik Seamount, with crabs mostly 12–14 cm carapace width and above the approximately 10 cm size at 50% maturity. The report states that it finds no evidence of change in size structure across the programme, that catch rates have been consistent, and that a July to October sampling gap coinciding with the lobster closure limits seasonal reproductive information. Observer coverage was 200%, with two observers aboard throughout.

7. Caveats and next steps

All figures are drawn from papers submitted to the Secretariat by the participants themselves and are reproduced at the same or coarser aggregation, with vessel identities as published. No additional confidentiality exposure is created.