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ASCOBANS

AGREEMENT ON THE CONSERVATION OF SMALL CETACEANS OF THE BALTIC, NORTH EAST ATLANTIC, IRISH AND NORTH SEAS

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Bonn, Germany, 1–3 September 2026
Agenda Item 3.5

PROGRESS REPORT OF THE INTERSESSIONAL WORKING GROUP ON UNUSUAL MORTALITY EVENTS (UMEs) AND MASS STRANDINGS EVENTS (MSEs)

(Prepared by the Co-Chairs of the Intersessional Working Group on UMEs and MSEs, Andrew Brownlow and Lonneke IJsseldijk)

1. The Intersessional Working Group on Unusual Mortality Events (UMEs) and Mass Stranding Events (MSEs) was established by the 29th Meeting of the Advisory Committee (AC29, September 2025), which adopted the Group's Terms of Reference (TOR) and instructed it to report to AC30. The Group succeeds and broadens the earlier Intersessional Working Group on Beaked Whales, whose final report was submitted to AC29 (ASCOBANS/AC29/Doc.4.2).

2. The TOR direct the Group to identify best-practice approaches for detecting, confirming and responding to UMEs and MSEs; to strengthen data flows and communication between strandings networks; to liaise with the IWC Strandings Expert Panel (SEP) and the European Strandings Database group; and, in the event of a suspected UME or MSE, to facilitate rapid international coordination. The TOR list is in Annex 2.

3. This document reports on the Group's activities during its first, necessarily short, intersessional period, sets out the priorities and guiding principles it has begun to develop, and proposes a plan of work directed towards AC31 (2027).

Action requested:

The Advisory Committee is requested to:

a) take note of the progress reported by the Working Group;

b) note the draft guiding principles for the identification, investigation and management of UMEs and MSEs set out in paragraphs 12-21, which the Group intends to finalise and adopt internally during the coming intersessional period;

c) encourage Parties to support the timely sharing of basic strandings information for key indicator species, as described in paragraphs 4-6;

d) note the investigative approaches and capability needs set out in paragraphs 9-15, and the gaps and needs identified in paragraphs 14; and

e) endorse the proposed plan of work towards AC31 set out in paragraphs 19-28.

Annex 1

PROGRESS AGAINST THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

Establishment and initial coordination

1. Following its constitution at AC29, the Group identified co-chairs and held preliminary discussions to set its priorities and to consider practical approaches for implementing its mandate. These discussions have concentrated on developing common principles for the identification, investigation and reporting of UMEs and MSEs, and on strengthening links with existing international initiatives and expert networks.

Detection, confirmation and response

2. During the reporting period, no unusual mortality event requiring coordinated action by the Group was identified within the ASCOBANS Agreement Area, and there has accordingly been no need to activate the rapid exchange and response mechanisms envisaged under the TOR. The Group nonetheless notes the increase in beaked whale strandings reported in European waters since mid-2025, which is being examined as a potential UME by ASCOBANS and the IWC Strandings Expert Panel (SEP); this matter is discussed further in paragraph 25. The Group also notes the unusual events involving a stranded humpback whale in the Baltic Sea between March and May 2026 ("Timmy"). As humpback whales are not an ASCOBANS species, coordination of the response to this event was undertaken through the IWC SEP rather than under ASCOBANS.

3. The Group recognises the particular importance of detailed investigations of mass stranding events, both for identifying plausible causes of death and for yielding broader ecological and population-level information - including insights into animal health, prey availability, environmental change and other pressures on marine ecosystems. It intends to develop guidance encouraging Parties to undertake comprehensive investigations of MSEs where feasible, while acknowledging that such responses frequently require resources beyond those available through routine strandings programmes.

Strengthening data flows and communication

4. The Group attaches high priority to the timely notification and sharing of basic strandings information – species, location and date – particularly for species that may serve as indicators of unusual mortality events, such as beaked whales and sperm whales. Regular epidemiological assessment of strandings incidence records both nationally and regionally can further assist in identifying changes in mortality patterns that warrant additional investigation.

5. As an interim measure to support information exchange, the co-chairs are considering curating some form of a shared online reporting form which would operate until a longer-term solution becomes available. Ultimately, the aim would be to develop pathways through which these data could be integrated into the developing IWC/ICES/ASCOBANS strandings database. Such a pipeline would provide a basis for annual reporting within the Group and contribute to the early identification of potential UMEs.

6. In support of this work, the Group has reviewed the use of strandings records reported by Parties through the National Reports. The Group reviewed the national reports and noted that, while they provide useful summaries of national stranding activities, they do not generally contain the underlying stranding records in a format suitable for incorporation into the database currently under development. The Group therefore recognized the need to better align national reporting with the database to avoid duplication of effort and ensure consistent reporting. The most appropriate mechanism for achieving this, whether through generating reports from the database or populating the database from national reports, remains under discussion.

Liaison with international initiatives and expert networks

7. The Group intends to strengthen its connections with relevant international initiatives, including the emergency response and diagnostics subgroups of the IWC SEP. Such collaboration will help facilitate access to expertise, support capacity building, and encourage consistent approaches to investigating and diagnosing unusual events. The Group notes the IWC proposed workshops on euthanasia and mass stranding events and would highlight the value of these initiatives for the wider community.

8. The Group also recognises the value of the Global Strandings Network (GSN, https://globalstrandingnetwork.com/) as a repository of best practice and will explore opportunities for sharing national protocols and experiences through that platform.

Investigative Approaches and Capability Needs

9. A cetacean Unusual Mortality Event is historically defined by three cumulative characteristics: unexpectedness, significance for the affected population, and the demand for immediate response. Drawing on this well-established practice the Group proposes to develop criteria appropriate to the ASCOBANS context, addressing what constitutes a UME, what it signifies, and how Parties might best respond.

The Group proposes to:

10. Define recognition thresholds based on the established criteria into temporospatial clustering and departure-from-expected measures calibrated to ASCOBANS species and the transboundary nature of the Agreement Area, so as to distinguish routine local response from an event warranting notification of the Group;

11. Articulate what a UME signifies as potential sentinels of wider marine ecosystem change;

12. Promote a multidisciplinary standard of investigation. Determining the cause and significance of a UME or MSE rarely rests on a single line of evidence. Robust investigation draws on complementary disciplines e.g.: gross and histological examination, microbiology, toxicology, and the assessment of environmental and anthropogenic causes including underwater noise. A clear understanding of these is needed both to guide national capacity-building and to identify the expertise required when an event occurs.

13. For certain species, notably beaked whales, the differential diagnosis should include the direct and indirect impacts of anthropogenic noise, whose assessment requires both pathological examination and correlation of strandings with acoustic monitoring and noise-registry data. The Group adopts and carries forward the former Intersessional Working Group on Beaked Whales' recommendations on improving the scope and accessibility of such data.

14. Set out proportionate response expectations. Investigative capability depends on practical foundations that are frequently the limiting factor in mass stranding response: welfare assessment and, where necessary, humane euthanasia of live-stranded animals; carcass access, recovery, refrigeration, transport and disposal; protection of responders against zoonotic risk; and harmonised sampling, an agreed minimum dataset and tissue archiving to permit comparable and retrospective analysis. Much of this expertise can be accessed through the IWC Strandings Expert Panel rather than duplicated, and the Group will frame its response and capability-building around that connection, while recognising that comprehensive investigation often demands resources beyond those of routine strandings programmes (see para 27).

15. The Group proposes to develop these criteria during the coming intersessional period and present a consolidated statement to a future meeting of the Advisory Committee.

Beaked Whale Strandings Since Mid-2025

16. The Group draws the Advisory Committee's attention to the increase in beaked whale strandings in European waters, reported by the IWC Scientific Committee (SC70) and being investigated as a potential UME jointly by ASCOBANS and the IWC Strandings Expert Panel, with review also by the IWC Beaked Whale Intersessional Correspondence Group. A report is to be provided to the IWC Scientific Committee at SC71. The Group considers this an early and illustrative test of the coordination and data-sharing arrangements its TOR are intended to support, and will follow developments closely, in liaison with the SEP, during the coming intersessional period.

Workplan Towards AC31

17. The Group expects to prepare a revised version of this report incorporating the outcomes of its summer meeting, and to bring forward a consolidated set of recommendations and, as appropriate, draft guidance for the Advisory Committee's consideration at AC31.

18. The Group further notes that immediate response to a UME or MSE is, by its nature, unfunded under routine programmes, and that the additional costs of comprehensive investigation can be a decisive constraint. The Group does not propose a solution at this stage, but flags for the Advisory Committee's consideration whether any standing or rapid-access funding mechanism might be explored to support response and investigation when an event occurs.

In summary, the Group proposes to:

19. Develop clear criteria for recognising a suspected UME or MSE, including the temporospatial clustering and departure-from-expected thresholds that distinguish a routine local response from an event warranting notification of the Group;

20. Encourage Parties to share basic strandings data (what, where and when) promptly and in harmonised form, so as to enable the early identification of UMEs; recognising that populations and the pressures upon them are frequently transboundary, such sharing should extend to jointly maintained regional databases rather than remaining confined within national boundaries;
21. Encourage Parties to undertake regular epidemiological assessment of their strandings data, in order to detect changes in the incidence of strandings of more common species that may be indicative of UMEs;

22. Encourage Parties to undertake detailed examinations of mass stranding events, sufficient to identify plausible causes of death and to collect wider ecological and population data;

23. Promote a multidisciplinary investigative approach comprising pathology, microbiology, toxicology, epidemiology and, for relevant species, acoustic analysis, ideally supported by a harmonised sampling protocol for an agreed minimum dataset and tissue archiving to enable comparable and retrospective analysis;

24. Acknowledge that detailed UME and MSE investigation, and the wider ecological information it yields, often requires resources beyond the standard strandings response;

25. Encourage linkages between Parties and the IWC SEP emergency-response and diagnostics sub-groups in assessing such events and identifying potential causes, so that requesting regional support is not perceived as a barrier;

26. Highlight the GSN as a repository of best practice and encourage Parties to share their own protocols through it;

27. Support coordinated and accurate external communication during events, and independent scientific review of findings before conclusions are made public, so as to safeguard the credibility of investigations;

28. Recognise UMEs as potential sentinels of wider marine ecosystem change -including climate-related shifts, prey distribution and availability, disease emergence and anthropogenic pressures such as underwater noise -and encourage multidisciplinary approaches that consider both proximate causes of mortality and broader ecological context, including drivers operating well beyond the stranding site itself (for example, oceanographic or prey-distribution changes along the shelf edge that may culminate in strandings of beaked and sperm whales in the North Sea).

The Group proposes to develop these principles during the coming intersessional period, and to present a consolidated statement of them to a future meeting of the Advisory Committee.

Glossary

Mass Stranding Event (MSE): The simultaneous stranding of two or more cetaceans of the same species (excluding a mother–calf pair) at the same time and place, typically while alive. The phenomenon is disproportionately associated with gregarious, socially cohesive odontocetes such as pilot whales, false killer whales, and common dolphins.

Unusual Mortality Event (UME): A formal designation under the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act denoting a stranding event that is unexpected, entails a significant die-off of a marine mammal population, and demands immediate response thereby triggering a coordinated investigative protocol:

1. A marked increase in the magnitude, or a marked change in the nature, of morbidity, mortality, or strandings relative to prior records.

2. A temporal change in morbidity, mortality, or strandings.

3. A spatial change in morbidity, mortality, or strandings.

4. A species, age, or sex composition among affected animals that differs from that normally observed.

5. Similar or unusual pathological findings, behavioural patterns, clinical signs, or physical condition (for instance, blubber thickness) across affected animals.

6. Occurrence of morbidity, mortality, or strandings in a species, stock, or population that is of particular concern, for example, one already designated as depleted, threatened, or endangered.

7. Mortality that, although perhaps modest in absolute terms, is nonetheless significant relative to a small or otherwise vulnerable population.

References

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Annex 2

TERMS OF REFERENCE

FOR THE INTERSESSIONAL WORKING GROUP ON UNUSUAL MORTALITY EVENTS AND MASS STRANDING EVENTS

(Adopted by the 29th Meeting of the ASCOBANS Advisory Committee, September 2025)

The Intersessional Working Group on Unusual Mortality Events (UMEs) and Mass Stranding Events (MSEs) will:

1. Identify and agree best practice approaches for detecting, confirming, and responding to UMEs and MSEs, including protocols for outreach to relevant countries and mechanisms to facilitate rapid international coordination.

2. Strengthen data flows and communication by:
   - Reaching out to Member States' strandings networks to explore and establish mechanisms for real-time or near-real-time sharing of strandings data.
   - Liaising with the IWC Strandings Expert Panel (SEP) groups to harmonise approaches for the collection and integration of strandings data relevant to UME/MSE assessment.
   - Collaborating with the European Strandings Database group to develop and refine tools for early detection and identification of potential UME events.

3. In the event of a suspected UME and/or MSE:
   - Members to notify the group at the earliest opportunity, without impeding immediate local response.
   - The group to collate and share available information to assess scale and significance
   - Facilitate communication with national authorities, international bodies and expert networks, in line with best practice.
   - Encourage consistent approaches to data collection and reporting.

4. Reporting and review: The group will report on its activities, outcomes, and any identified gaps or needs to the next Advisory Committee (AC).