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**April 2024 review Turtle Dove AHMM
Management scenarios and technical recommendation
(western and central-eastern flyways) ¹**

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The spring 2024 technical update on the Turtle Dove AHM mechanism contains new data from the Pan-European Common Bird Monitoring Scheme (PECBMS). For the first time, the population estimates provided represent the years 1998-2023 in the western flyway and the years 2000-2023 in the central-eastern flyway. Crucially, both datasets include the breeding seasons of 2022 and 2023.

WESTERN FLYWAY

2022 and 2023 are the first two breeding seasons when the temporary hunting ban was in place in the western flyway. The information submitted by the Member States authorities confirms that the ban was largely observed across the majority of the flyway. Where there were exceptions, like in the case of the Extremadura region of Spain, they seem to have been under the control of the competent authorities and the total number of captures is reported to have been limited. Note that this exception was not agreed by the Task Force and unilaterally decided by Regional authorities of Extremadura.

The updated PECBMS data 1998-2023 for the western flyway concluded that, although the turtle dove breeding population size was at its lowest recorded level in the spring of 2021, following the hunting ban in 2021 and 2022, the trend was reverted, and the population started to increase. The population size in 2023 was estimated to be the highest since 2011 (12 years). Also, the PECBMS 10-year multiplicative slope improved from “moderate decline” to “stable”, leading to the conclusion that the 2-year temporary hunting ban has had a noticeable effect at population level.

The biological data reveal that, starting in spring 2022, there has been significant progress towards meeting the population-related conditions set by the Turtle Dove AHM mechanism to allow resuming hunting, which were:

1. A **population increase of at least 2 years** measured with the PECBMS index (confidence interval with a lower limit > 0.95 and upper limit < 1.05).
2. An **increase in survival** that leads to a **growth rate (λ)** estimated by the population model that is **reliably equal to or above 1** (the reliability of stability or future

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population growth should be calculated by the assessment that the risk of decline is lower than 15%).

3. The existence of **credible regulatory and control/enforcement systems** in place at the time when hunting is reopened.

Even though the two biological conditions are only partly met in 2024 (the first criterion of two consecutive years' increase is met, but the increase in survival leading to population increase not been confirmed yet), it seems a realistic hypothesis that they could be possibly met next year, especially considering that the hunting ban was in place for another season in 2023. PECMBS data next year will attempt to report up to 2024, and the ongoing CMR programs in Spain will likely render reliable survival estimates post-moratorium that may possibly confirm the pattern.

In relation to the third criterion, the development of credible regulatory and control/enforcement systems in the western flyway, the 2024 assessment also detected progress towards the goal in several aspects and across Member States. The reports showed several examples of enforcement, including cases of inspection, successful detections of infringement, which ended in the imposition of fines, and examples of additional measures to promote compliance in at least some regions. However, they also revealed disparity in the deployment of measures and uneven efforts to lay out appropriate systems in place. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that the small national quotas will need either a strict criterion to spatially distribute the quota (i.e., not allow hunting in all the territory) or a mechanism to stop hunting from one day to the next (something unlikely to happen in countries like Spain where hunting is a competence of the regional government and the regulations need to be approved and published in regional Official Bulletins, all of which means that regulatory declarations require some time to be in place). It is to be desired that such systems will be ready as soon as possible, so that they do not hold off the reopening of hunting when biological conditions allow. Thus, it would be a critical objective for those among the four MS in the Western flyway that aim to reopen hunting to present in the next TFRB meeting a proposal of the system that they aim to implement in that respect, accompanied by a proposal for testing the system on another huntable species.

In terms of habitat management, the returns to the questionnaires revealed an ongoing lack of bestowed interventions aiming to improve breeding conditions or the survival of turtle doves. Most reported activities were still in the area of general improvement of habitat for multiple species, and very few had an associated research programme to test the effectiveness of the actions. Among research programmes, there were positive reports of national surveys in certain countries, but a lack of plans for such a survey in many others. Additionally, very limited efforts exist to put in place monitoring programmes to obtain demographic data (apart from the ongoing studies in France and Spain) and a debatable investment in further tracking programmes.

For all the above reasons, **the technical recommendation for the western flyway is to maintain the temporary moratorium in place in the 2024 hunting season**, and to review the situation in 2025 in the light of new population data and the available evidence on the implementation of credible regulatory and control/enforcement systems.

CENTRAL-EASTERN FLYWAY

For the central-eastern flyway, the evidence provided by the new data from the Pan-European Common Bird Monitoring Scheme (PECBMS) unfortunately confirmed the continuation of the decline and a worsening of the population status, with the PECBMS 10-year slope falling from “stable” to “moderate decline”. The population size reached its lowest level of the entire time series in 2023, after suffering a 46% decline since 2003 (21 years). This is in stark contrast with the situation observed in the western flyway.

Despite the recommendation to not allow hunting in 2022 and 2023, all the Member States that can allow hunting of turtle dove according to the Birds Directive reported some harvest of the species. This was in reportedly smaller numbers, with a total 65% reduction reported for 6 of the 7 countries. The information for Italy, historically the country with the largest take, was not complete (13 out of 15 regions in which turtle dove was huntable reported data, including partial data for Calabria, pointing to overall lower harvest), which made a comparison with previous years – also with incomplete data – imprecise.

Several Member States reported widespread inspections and many cases of infringement, potentially leading to fines. There were also additional compliance promotion mechanisms implemented across different regions. That said, it was not possible to assess progress towards the goals due to disparity in the reporting and a lack of information from previous years.

Habitat management activities were reported from most Member States, but these were generally in the form of agri-environment measures targeting multiple species and often linked to the management of protected areas, including Natura 2000 sites. There was little mention of monitoring of turtle dove use of those areas to assess the effectiveness of the measures.

No new studies to obtain flyway-specific demographic data (survival, reproduction) were undertaken in the central-eastern flyway, despite the specific indications made in previous years. This lack continues to hamper the possibility to develop population models particular to this flyway to inform management scenarios and also creates high uncertainties on the impact of hunting on this flyway.

Given the situation, **the technical recommendation for the central-eastern flyway is to maintain and fully implement a temporary hunting moratorium in the 2024 hunting season**, which should be in place until the agreed conditions to resume hunting are met:

1. A **population increase of at least 2 years** measured with the PECBMS index (confidence interval with a lower limit > 0.95 and upper limit < 1.05)
2. Obtaining **flyway-specific survival data**, allowing to develop a bespoke population model, **indicating a growth rate (λ) reliably equal to or above 1** (with the risk of decline lower than 15%);
3. **Credible regulatory and control/enforcement systems** in place at the time when hunting is reopened.

The example of the western flyway has shown that the species may potentially react quite quickly to the appropriate action, and that population recovery may be possible in a relatively short time frame.