

Copenhagen 1<sup>st</sup> September 2017  
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Corrected 050917 – see footnote 5

## **BSAC proposals for possible ways forward to improve the situation of European eel**

The BSAC takes note of the request sent from DG MARE on 4<sup>th</sup> July 2017 to provide input on measures to improve the state of European eel, as well as to give an assessment on how such measures could affect fishermen engaged in the eel fishery.

On 29<sup>th</sup> August 2017, the Commission adopted its proposal for fishing opportunities for stocks in the Baltic. Article 8 of the proposal includes prohibitions with respect to eel, including a ban on recreational fishing for European eel.

Whilst acknowledging the prerogative of the Commission to put forward proposals, and with the understanding that TAC proposals to further regional discussions needed to be released prior to the BALTFISH meetings on 31<sup>st</sup> August, we must object to the procedure of not awaiting the response from the BSAC or not sending the request earlier with a different deadline for the BSAC.

Please find below replies from the BSAC to the two issues referred to in the original request from the Commission.

### **1. Measures to improve the state of European eel**

The BSAC acknowledges that the stock of European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) appears to be stabilized at a very low historic level<sup>1</sup>. It is currently managed under an EU management plan from 2007.<sup>2</sup> The BSAC agrees that full implementation of the eel measures in the national management plans is needed, as well as further management measures in light of the ICES scientific advice and assessment of the stock status<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and HELCOM refer to the conservation status of eel as critically endangered.

<http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/60344/0>

<http://www.helcom.fi/Red%20List%20Species%20Information%20Sheet/HELCOM%20Red%20List%20Anguilla%20anguilla.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Reg 1100/2007 of 18<sup>th</sup> September 2007:

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32007R1100&from=en>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.ices.dk/sites/pub/Publication%20Reports/Advice/2017/Special\\_requests/eu.2017.08.pdf](http://www.ices.dk/sites/pub/Publication%20Reports/Advice/2017/Special_requests/eu.2017.08.pdf)

The success of the eel management plans depends in most cases on restocking. This is particularly true for the Baltic where the natural recruitment of glass eel is very poor. Despite the CITES listing of eel and the prohibition of exports of glass eel to Asia, illegal exports still continue. Successful control measures in airports show the need for more effort in this field in order to reduce well organized, illegal activities.

Illegal fishery is widespread and is totally unacceptable. Controls must increase with targeted and joint measures in all Baltic Member States. With respect to European legislation in force, it is important that it is fully implemented before new restrictions and bureaucratic burdens are created.

The data situation leaves room for improvements in various ways in different Baltic Member States. Recreational catches are poorly reported.

Upstream efforts should increase, for example to monitor migration and open dams, or at least to stop turbines during several weeks in August-November. Fish passes and ladders should be established where appropriate. The costs for this must be borne by dam owners. Failure to remove obstacles to eel migration, or activities carried out to block eel migration should be penalized.

Any future measures must take account of the fact that agreed actions have not been fully implemented in all Member States. Some Member States have fully lived up to present obligations, whereas others have done nothing. The BSAC is concerned that further measures must not be demanded from those Member States which are in compliance with relevant measures, until non-compliant Member States have taken on their share of the burden. Please note that the above reactions and recommendations are supported by a unanimous BSAC.

Not all measures are applicable in all Member States. Instead of updating and tightening the original EU management plan and its measures, Member States could revise and update their national plans, because one size does not fit all, and they could pay special attention to migration. However, no fast results can be expected. Glass eels that reach the northern coasts of Europe have already been on their way for four years. It will take another 15 years on average before the silver eels start migrating, plus another year to travel to the Sargasso Sea.

The EU-funded EELIAD project<sup>4</sup>, using satellite tagging, has been giving very valuable information on this elusive and data poor species. More funding in this area of research is welcomed. Tagging studies using traditional tags have been very data poor. If there is no fishing carried out, no tags are returned.

There is serious evidence that a major factor for the decrease in the eel stock is “oceanic” along the migration from the spawning grounds in the Sargasso Sea to the European and African coasts and the migration of spawners back to the Sargasso Sea.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://cordis.europa.eu/result/rcn/56811\\_en.html](http://cordis.europa.eu/result/rcn/56811_en.html)

Another impact is the fishery for glass eel for direct human consumption as glass eel or for fish farming. This should be continued only in combination with restocking and the increase of silver eel escapement (catch & carry from inland waters with significant reduction of silver eel mortality) in the same order of magnitude.

Fishing for glass eel for other purposes than restocking should be stopped, unless it can be documented that the fishery has no impact on the eel stock.

There are other factors than direct human activities that have an impact on the eel stock:

- Predation from cormorants and herons has increased considerably over the last decades and is bound to have a significant impact.
- The occurrence of a parasitic nematode in the swim bladder is believed to have severe negative consequences for the ability of the silver eel to survive the trans-Atlantic migration.
- Toxic substances such as PCBs stored in the adipose tissue and released during migration when the eel lives on stored energy is under suspicion for preventing successful spawning.
- Viral infections (e.g. herpes virus HVA) are thought to play a significant role.

Some representatives of the Other Interest Groups (CCB, WWF, FANC and the Fisheries Secretariat) are of the opinion that in light of the CFP and MSY goal, the current targeted fishery cannot continue, including upstream fishing on eel, and it refers to the ICES advice, which is to keep all human induced mortality to as close to zero as possible. They consider that all recreational fisheries for eel should be stopped completely and must be subject to mandatory catch and release rules for fish caught accidentally. They also see all restocking efforts as emergency measures and they should only be allowed in open river systems and not in systems with dams and hydropower. They emphasise that regardless of where the fault in overfishing or mortality of this stock lies, action by all to protect this endangered species is paramount now, because of the long life cycle of the eel and the resulting delay in response on the stock.

## **2. An assessment on how such measures could affect fishermen engaged in the eel fishery**

The BSAC fully acknowledges the importance of the eel for some coastal fishermen. Because of this the BSAC is reluctant to endorse that further measures towards the marine fishery should be taken against Member States that have already reduced anthropogenic mortality in accordance with the eel management plan. The BSAC does not see this to be contrary to the precautionary principle, as it is not a failure to act. The objective here is to put pressure upon those who have not delivered, before applying further pressure on those who have. Representatives of the Other Interest Groups strongly disagree and support the ICES advice.

As mentioned above, there are also several other important activities that could be pursued before giving more problems to the coastal fishers.

The BSAC sees restocking as one way of keeping the fishermen in business, whilst also having the potential for enhancing stock recovery. An example of this is seen in Schleswig-Holstein, where efforts to rebuild the stock of juvenile eel are in place, using a combination of public and private funding<sup>5</sup>. The fishery for eel is of almost minor interest for German commercial fishermen, whereas it is important for recreational fishery and tourism.

Finland, which does not have a commercial fishery for eel, carries out restocking with mainly private funding (90 000 – 150 000 eels are restocked annually). Scientific research has shown that of the Finnish restocked fish, about 70 % of the eels survive to the silver eel state, as the fishing mortality is low. The Finnish silver eel also grow very large (1.5 – 2 kg) compared to Central European silver eel, which can be as small as a few hundred grammes, giving the Finnish silver eel a better chance of surviving the long journey to the Sargasso Sea. In the Finnish management plan therefore, it is more fruitful to focus on migration and restocking, using the coastal waters as a nursery for eel, whereas the situation in other Member States can look very different.

The BSAC finds that there is an imbalance between the stated importance of the problem, which is not contradicted by the BSAC, and the focus on the fishery in the marine environment. A dead eel does not contribute to the recovery of the biomass, regardless of where it is killed. There is also an urgent need to increase measures which focus on fresh water eel mortality. There is evidence that under present conditions in coastal waters of the Baltic Sea, there is a disproportionately higher silver eel escapement rate compared to inland waters.

The BSAC would like to clarify that if a ban on all fishing for eel was introduced (be it through a zero TAC, prohibition to fish for, or by any other means) it would mean the immediate termination of all coastal pound net fishing. Catches of eel in these enterprises account for 80% to 90% of the landed value and it is not possible to compensate such losses through increased catch of other species. If indeed all fishing for eel is stopped, there will be an urgent need for compensation to the industries affected.

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<sup>5</sup> Documentation supplied to ExCom member for the Association of Fisheries Protection, provided by the State Office for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Schleswig-Holstein: Restocking restocking costs in SCHLESWIG-HOLSTEIN from 2015 to 2017 in SCHLEI, TRAVE and coastal waters, provided by e-mail 25.08.2017 and 28.08.2017. **(Correction: reference to attached information deleted)**

	kg	Equivalent no. of glass eels	Cost	Private share
<b>2015</b>	3.806	2.066.861	256.937 €	62.775 €
<b>2016</b>	3.266	2.229.814	255.098 €	62.039 €
<b>2017</b>	3.178	2.058.809	258.135 €	63.254 €

The fishing industry is further convinced that the fishery in the Baltic – with the restocking that is involved – is one reason why there is still some production of eel. The termination of that fishery – and hence the termination of the restocking activities – may be the straw that breaks the camel’s back. The well-managed fisheries in the Baltic are contributing positively to the rebuilding of the stock – slow as it may be. It is quite obvious from the ICES assessment that the target escapement is achieved in Sweden, Baltic Germany and Denmark.

In concluding the assessment of the measures and their potential effect on the fisheries and fishermen, the BSAC is of the view that if all kinds of eel fishing were stopped, it would cost jobs and welfare in coastal regions. Eel is a part of the traditional food and culture in some regions, so it has high value for tourism.

The BSAC urgently encourages the Commission to request ICES to arrange a meeting with Member States and stakeholders to discuss all factors that affect eel (and not only in the Baltic) and to work towards the development of a pan-European eel management/recovery plan.

The BSAC will take an active part and contribute as far as possible with proposals for measures.