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Copenhagen Monday 24<sup>th</sup> June 2019

Dear Hélène Clark,

On 27<sup>th</sup> February 2019, you wrote to BALTFISH and the BSAC about the eastern Baltic cod, inviting us to discuss and think about possible measures that can be taken during 2019.

Please find attached to this letter a recommendation from the BSAC for possible immediate emergency measures for eastern Baltic cod for 2019.

One OIG member has asked to be attached a reply sent to Commissioner Vella from several NGOs.

Kind regards,



Esben Sverdrup-Jensen  
Ex Com chair



Andrzej Bialas  
Ex Com vice chair

## **BSAC Recommendation for possible immediate emergency measures for Eastern Baltic cod**

### **Background**

On 27<sup>th</sup> February 2019, the Commission wrote to BALTFISH and the BSAC about the situation concerning the eastern Baltic cod. They asked both groups to discuss and think about possible measures to deal with this. At its meeting on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2019 the BSAC Executive Committee sent this matter to the Joint Working Group on 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> June 2019, together with a list of proposed measures<sup>1</sup>.

Preoccupying information about the eastern cod was already presented during the Baltic Sea Advisory Council Theme Meeting on 29<sup>th</sup> January 2019. Similar evidence on eastern Baltic cod was provided at the ICES benchmark WKBALTCOD2 on 4<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> February 2019, and at the second BSAC Theme Meeting on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2019. The ICES advice released at the end of May 2019 confirms this.

The BSAC is in no doubt that the eastern Baltic cod is in a critical state. The latest Baltic International Trawl Survey confirmed reduced catches by size and area, as well as reduced oxygen levels. The cod is experiencing reduced growth and reduced biomass. The decline has been linked to food availability, selective fishing pressure, hypoxia and anoxia, as well as changes in hydrology. Parasites (*Contracaecum*) are affecting the liver of the cod, and seals are causing damage to and preying on the cod. A whole spectrum of factors, both natural and man-made, is having an effect.

Fishing is not the only factor that is having an influence, and the stock cannot be improved by managing the fishing pressure alone, even if fishing has to adapt to the circumstances. The 2019 ICES assessment for eastern Baltic cod shows that even without fishing, the growth in the stock is negative. Mortality of the cod is the overriding factor, both natural and fisheries related. This calls for a complete long-term approach and the creation of a broad-based crisis council for all involved to address and come forward with a long-term management and rebuilding strategy for the eastern Baltic cod.

On 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> June 2019, at the Joint Working Group meeting the BSAC discussed possible emergency measures for eastern Baltic cod. In a roundabout, but comprehensive way, it addressed the bullet points provided by the Executive Committee (see footnote 1).

The BSAC wants to underline that there are no short-term solutions. There is a need to implement a long-term remedial plan. The problem needs to be approached in a holistic way, taking into account the cod stock, but also the people living from it.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.bsac.dk/getattachment/Meetings/BSAC-meetings/BSAC-Executive-Committee-meeting-\(4\)/BSACExComThememeeting29012019REPORTandSTATEMENTFINALOK.pdf.aspx?lang=en-GB](http://www.bsac.dk/getattachment/Meetings/BSAC-meetings/BSAC-Executive-Committee-meeting-(4)/BSACExComThememeeting29012019REPORTandSTATEMENTFINALOK.pdf.aspx?lang=en-GB)  
Conclusions on cod: [www.bsac.dk/getattachment/Meetings/BSAC-meetings/BSAC-Executive-Committee-meeting-\(4\)/BSACThememeeting290119BSACconclusionscodFINAL.pdf.aspx?lang=en-GB](http://www.bsac.dk/getattachment/Meetings/BSAC-meetings/BSAC-Executive-Committee-meeting-(4)/BSACThememeeting290119BSACconclusionscodFINAL.pdf.aspx?lang=en-GB)

However, unless cod population declines are halted in the short term, there will be insufficient cod to make the fishery economically viable.

If the EU were to adopt a complete stop for all fishing activities which are expected to catch cod of Eastern origin, it will have extreme socioeconomic effects.

Therefore, as an immediate reaction to the latest assessment from ICES, the BSAC recommends a **closure of all targeted cod fishery in Sub-divisions 25 and 26, from 1<sup>st</sup> July until 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2019**. The closure should cover both the commercial and recreational fisheries. The BSAC calls for an understanding of the difficult situation that any closure will create for the fishermen and invites the Commission to consider how to compensate those who are affected.

The sports and recreational fisheries acknowledge that their activities do not take place in the eastern Baltic. They do however fish in the western Baltic, including SD 24. Acknowledging the seriousness of the situation for the eastern cod, they are also ready to enter into a discussion. If there were to be a spawning season closure for commercial fishermen in SD 24, it should also apply to recreational fisheries. Recreational fishery is taking place in the Sound (Øresund) and near Lolland and Falster; one size does not fit all, and the bag limit could be differentiated in the western part of SD 24.

### Socioeconomic considerations

The BSAC recommends allowing for some area exemptions in Sub-divisions where cod occur in small numbers. This is the case in SDs 29-32 and for small vessels below 12 metres. The level of fishery should be limited to subsistence fishery. Åland fishermen have been fishing quite well for cod in the Åland Sea. The cod appear to be very fat and large, as opposed to the situation in the Baltic main basin. It would be regrettable if more severe measures are taken. They report that an annual catch quota of 50 tonnes is sufficient for a small-scale coastal fishery with nets, with 6-8 fishermen depending on it.

SD 24 represents a special problem due to the mixing of cod stocks and presence of both a flatfish fishery and a number of smaller vessels catching also some cod. A full closure here as well would mean a closure of a profitable fishery and devastating to the few local boats still there.

Moreover, landings of flatfish caught by Danish and Swedish vessels in SDs 24 and 25 have shown a significant development. Given the good development in flatfish stocks and the negative forecast for cod, this increasing importance of flatfish will probably continue. Any measure to protect the cod must take in account the fact that fishing for flatfish is the only way to survive for vessels that are not able to move fishing grounds.

This fishery cannot take place without a bycatch of cod. It is therefore absolutely paramount that an amount of cod can be landed and sold by a group of vessels.

The exact details on what levels of cod can be expected to be taken, which vessels can be allowed to continue fishing and how to define fisheries not targeting cod need to be discussed further and in more detail, but there needs to be a low, but reasonable amount of bycatch allowed. Recalling the ICES assessment that a total closure of all fishing for cod will only increase the SSB by 4%, it should not be a problem to allow continued fishing for a limited number of vessels with no other opportunities.

The BSAC is acutely aware of the various real and potential causes and effects of the present situation concerning the eastern Baltic cod. These causes also call for action. Uncertainties with respect to some of them need to be addressed through ICES. Fishermen will support the work of the scientists by monitoring and providing data. A complete and immediate closure to the eastern cod fishery will exclude fishermen from taking part in essential work to monitor and document the habitat and potential changes, for example of bottom fauna.

The BSAC also underlines the need to evaluate the effects of any measures taken to improve the situation of the eastern Baltic cod.

#### **Statements have been received from:**

**The National Chamber of Fish Producers** does not support the proposed recommendation. They are against the closure of all cod fishery in SDs 25 and 26 from 1<sup>st</sup> July until 31<sup>st</sup> December 2019.

Together with the Association of Fishermen's of Sea-PO, they presented reasons for continuing the cod fishery at the BSAC Joint Working Group meeting on 11<sup>th</sup>- 12<sup>th</sup> June 2019.

They explained that apart from socio-economic reasons and obligations (financial, quota swaps etc...), there are also other important biological reasons. They underlined the weak population structure, where the stock consists of many, small (not juvenile), but old individuals. These cod should be caught in order to reduce at the same time the pressure on large individuals from the exploited year classes which are very important for future generations. From a population perspective, a broader range of year classes should be exploited.

This, in their view, is the measure which can be implemented as a possible immediate measure for eastern Baltic cod.

They also underline that Poland has implemented a ban on sprat fishery from 10<sup>th</sup> June until 9<sup>th</sup> September. This measure is aimed at facilitating cod growth.

Given these arguments, they do not consider a closure of the targeted cod fishery in SDs 25 and 26 as a good solution which can improve the stock situation and they do not support it.

**The Association of the Fishermen of Sea PO** opposes the drastic measures proposed to protect cod in the Baltic by means of a total ban on the cod fishery in SDs 25 and 26 from 1<sup>st</sup> July to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2019. The ICES advice aimed at the preserving the cod stock does not encourage an active management of this species. Fishermen are constantly aware of the current cod situation and know how rapidly the situation changes. For many years, various measures have been implemented to protect the cod stock, but the situation is still described as critical. They do not agree to this and point out that the situation has improved significantly since last year. The cod is larger and has gained weight. They fully agree with the statement from the National Chamber of Fish Producers that fishing for cod should continue. Smaller mesh sizes should be used in order to minimise the disruption to the age and size structure of the stock. They propose an extension of the closed season for cod fishery to three months and closure of the spawning grounds of the Bornholm Deep.