

Director General Ms. Lowri Evans
D.G. Mare
Rue de la Loi 200
B-1049 Brussels
Belgium

Date: 8th July 2013

BS RAC advice and recommendations for the fishery in 2014
Comments to the Commission's Consultation on fishing opportunities

Dear Lowri Evans,

Please find enclosed in the attached pages the BSRAC's advice and recommendations on the fishery for Baltic stocks for 2014. A draft text was discussed, amended and endorsed by the BSRAC Executive Committee at its recent meeting on 4th July 2013.

We would also like to highlight the Commission's Communication on Fishing Opportunities for 2014. We take note of the information on the current state of the stocks and the fishery and the principles that will be applied by the Commission in formulating its proposals for 2014. We welcome the text produced by the Commission and in particular, we welcome the positive message in the Communication which points out that the state of fish stocks continues to improve. Some members of the BSRAC have stated that the Communication can be further improved by giving more detailed information on the state of individual stocks.

We hope that the Commission will take our input onboard when formulating its proposal for TACs and quotas for 2014 and we are ready to discuss further any of the details in the paper.

Kind regards,



Reine J. Johansson
Chairman of the BS RAC



Ewa Milewska
Vice-chair of the BS RAC

c.c. Member States, Fisheries Council of the European Community, European Parliament, Community, European Fisheries Control Agency, ACFA, ICES, HELCOM and Russian Federation (c/o Embassy)

BSRAC recommendations on the advice for the fisheries in the Baltic in 2014

BALTIC TACS AND QUOTAS 2014

1. The Baltic Sea RAC held a joint Demersal and Pelagic Working Group meeting in Copenhagen on 11th - 12th June 2013. John Simmonds, Vice-chair of ACOM of ICES, gave a presentation of the ICES advice for the fishery on the Baltic stocks in 2014. Also present at the meeting was Stanislovas Jonusas, DG Mare, and he gave a presentation of the Commission's Communication on fishing opportunities for 2014.
2. The members of the working group had a constructive discussion of the advice. A draft set of recommendations was sent to the Executive Committee. They were discussed, elaborated and agreed on at the Executive Committee meeting on 4th July 2013. The Executive Committee has agreed to forward the following advice to the Commission, Member States and the European Parliament.

Cod 22-24

BSRAC advice: Set the TAC at 17.000 tonnes. No further restrictions in days-at-sea.

1. As a consequence of the benchmarking of this stock, a range of reference points has been modified, and the perception of the status of the stock has changed. It is obvious that new information must be included when it becomes available and that management must adapt to meet the most recent perception of stock status. On the other hand, it should also be acknowledged that the industry cannot sustain significant changes from year to year, and that there is a difference between

“adapting to new information” and following it to the letter, based on the latest year’s information.

2. Therefore, the members of the BSRAC find that the management of the fishery for cod in 2014 should not simply be a matter of straightforward following the rules laid down in the management plan and applying these to ICES’ new perception of the stock.
3. Although the BSRAC is committed to following the rules laid down in the cod management plan for the Baltic, particular concern was raised regarding the reductions in days at sea, as stipulated by Article 8 (of Regulation No 1098/2007).
4. Regarding the development (or rather lack of development) in the mortality, the BSRAC takes note of the extreme level of uncertainty that lies behind the estimate. There is a direct contradiction between the various data sources. The BSRAC is sceptical that the lack of reduction in mortality over the latest four years, as indicated in the most recent assessment, should be the basis on which to take management decisions. Therefore, it is a little premature to conclude that the strategy has failed.
5. One particularly unwelcome consequence of the updated time series of mortality is that the new estimate revives the regulation of effort. The BSRAC has previously pointed out that it does not share the Commission’s interpretation of Article 8 in the cod management plan. ICES support this position and point out that according to the plan, the days at sea should have been increased in the last two years. For the BSRAC, this indicates that ICES is not particularly in favour of reducing the days at sea below the present level. The BSRAC strongly supports this view, as the effect of effort regulation is void. A further reduction of days at sea will have counterproductive effects: vessels will be less inclined to experiment with larger mesh sizes and to search for new fishing grounds. As stated on earlier occasions,

this will in particular be restrictive for vessels with few or no alternative fishing possibilities. An increase in discards is a likely consequence.

6. The BSRAC is not prepared to change the target mortality in the management plan at this stage. The BSRAC commends the fisheries ministers for going beyond the management plan and the Commission proposal in 2012 to set a TAC closer to the estimated FMSY, despite the fact that the MSY value for western Baltic cod is not in line with the MSY objective. It may indeed be true that the present target of 0.6 is at the high end of the range of possible MSY targets, but a sudden shift to a very low single species target is not welcomed. The members have noticed that multispecies target mortalities are generally higher than the single species targets and it is believed that a potential target mortality at a level between the present target and the single species target can be used as an interim objective. To simply use a single species target based on the argument that there is no data on multispecies interactions would be unwise. The interactions are there, whether we have data on them or not. This will have to be discussed during the creation of a new management plan.
7. The inclusion of German recreational catches has apparently not increased the accuracy of the assessment and the BSRAC is inclined to question the merits of the exercise.
8. ICES states that the apparent good status of the stock in the area is driven by a substantial inflow of cod from the East, and that the indigenous cod in Subdivision 22 warrants special protection. This presents a particular problem to the management. That cod migrate between the two management areas is old information and has been the reason for the fishing industry's fierce opposition to the splitting of the cod management into two areas. However, the problem that ICES indicates adds a new challenge to the management of cod in the area. The BSRAC has scrutinised the data and there may indeed be cause for concern. However, there

is a remarkable increase in 2012 in the number of cod in SD22 (Figure 8.4.2.4 in the ICES advice 8.4.2 for cod in SDs 22-24), and it would make sense not to overreact. The majority of the BSRAC therefore finds that a TAC reduction of 15% is a sufficient response at this early stage. If the positive development does not continue in next year's assessment, further measures can be introduced.

Cod 25-32

BSRAC advice: Set the TAC¹ at 70.301 tonnes. No further restrictions in days-at-sea.

1. The BSRAC takes note of the advice from ICES that according to the management plan, the TAC should be increased by 2 %. As is the case for cod in Subdivisions 22-24, the BSRAC is prepared to follow the management plan when it comes to setting the TAC, but it does not find it acceptable to further reduce the number of days at sea.
2. Also for this stock, the benchmark has changed the perception of stock status significantly. Again, the BSRAC advises that the newest information should be taken into consideration, but it should not cause an abrupt change of management.
3. However, the BSRAC takes note that a new single species target mortality has been suggested. The suggested value indicates that what members of the RAC have claimed for several years may indeed turn out to be true: the management plan has not been flexible enough to enable catches to increase sufficiently and to curtail the rapid increase in stock size. There is great concern that the exploitation of cod has led to a situation where the management has established an inflated system, with a very large cod stock which is eating large quantities of herring and sprat, preventing

¹ For EU fisheries

fishery for these species, and at the same time is suffering from reduced recruitment (either as a consequence of cannibalism or of a density dependent factor such as starvation, crowding or other).

4. One consequence of this assertion is that the members of the RAC are reluctant to introduce restrictions in the catch of small pelagics in the area where cod is abundant. First and foremost, the fishery in this particular area is pursued by smaller vessels that are incapable of going further east. Secondly, there is absolutely no indication that a reduced fishery will increase food abundance in the area. Sprat are quite abundant (although less so than in other areas) and it is not realistic to assume that this species is the limiting factor for cod. FISH supports the ICES recommendation that restrictions on sprat landings taken in the main cod area (SDs 25-26) should be established.

5. The BSRAC welcomes that ICES have tried to offer advice based on multispecies considerations and it believes that the information will provide an important platform when a new management plan is forged.

Plaice

BSRAC advice: Set the TAC at 4.091tonnes.

1. Although the ICES advice for plaice in the Baltic is divided in two, a similar positive development is observed in both areas. The BSRAC consequently recommends an increase in the Baltic TAC of 20%.

Herring 22-24

BSRAC advice: Set the TAC at 25.800 tonnes.

Minority position: Set the TAC at 20.801 tonnes

1. The assessment has reduced the absolute level of biomass, although the stock is still believed to be growing. The significant retrospective changes in estimate of important stock descriptors such as SSB and F are a good demonstration of why some members of the BSRAC are hesitant to “chase the results of the latest assessment”. In last year’s advice, the stock was believed to be harvested in accordance with MSY principles, so the TAC was set for 2013 in line with this assumption.
2. This year, ICES have increased the target mortality, the stock is still believed to be increasing, yet the advice is for a reduction in the TAC. The members of the BSRAC are not in a position to claim unanimously which is more correct: last year’s assessment or this year’s assessment. But it must be clear to everybody that they cannot both be right.
3. Based on the positive signals in the stock, the majority of the BSRAC recommends a roll-over of the TAC, which means a TAC for herring in 22-24 in 2014 of 25.800 tonnes.
4. FISH and the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation recommend following the scientific advice, which means setting the TAC at 20.801 tonnes

Herring 25-29 & 32 (excl. GoR)

BSRAC advice: Set the TAC at 164.000 tonnes

1. For this stock, the benchmark has resulted in a remarkably positive change in stock status and this is in good agreement with what has been claimed by industry representatives in the BSRAC. That the correction is to the positive side does not make it more accurate of course, but it makes it easier to accept the advice, at least for the industry. However, it does add a new perspective to the reductions in TACs that have been made in the last years, against the advice of the industry.
2. The BSRAC therefore recommends following the ICES MSY approach, of catches less than 164.000 tonnes, where the corresponding catch in the central Baltic management area for 2014 would be 159.080 tonnes, calculated as $164 + 0.18 - 5.1$.

Herring in Gulf of Riga

BSRAC advice: Set the TAC at 25.800 tonnes.

1. The BSRAC is in agreement in recommending that the biological advice be followed, thus following the MSY approach advised by ICES, of catches less than 25.800 tonnes, whereby the corresponding catch in the Gulf of Riga management area for 2014 would be 30.720 tonnes, $25.8 - 0.18 + 5.1$

Herring in 30-31

BSRAC advice for SD 30: Set the TAC at 138.345 tonnes.

BSRAC advice for SD 31: Set the TAC at 4.317 tonnes

1. The advice is in good agreement with observations by fishers. However, the BSRAC would like to highlight the uncertainty that stems from the lack of Finnish effort data, as well as from the short acoustic survey by Dana. This must be corrected in the next year's assessment.

Sprat

BSRAC advice: Set the TAC² at 250.000 tonnes.

Minority position: Set the TAC³ at 247.000 tonnes, minus the Russian share.

1. Sprat in the Baltic is a stock that suffers from a particularly variable assessment. Every new assessment brings new reference points to the table, and the basis for the advice is questionable, partly because surveys do not cover the entire area of distribution. The calculations of the standing stock are, at best, snapshot estimates and give no real picture of the stock dynamics. SDs 25-26 may well constitute a "trough" where sprat keeps "moving in". It sometimes seems that the only stability in the history of sprat is the Russian catches, which have, according to ICES, remained stable at around 25.000 tonnes, regardless of EU quotas moving down from 454.000 tonnes in 2007 to 250.000 tonnes today. EU fishermen are not happy to pay the price of a continued Russian fishery on a shared stock. FISH does not support the points made in this section.

² For EU fisheries

2. ICES states that in the last two years, recruitment has been over 20% higher than the long-term average, so the BSRAC does not share that view that recruitment has been below average.

3. The advice to reduce the catch of sprat by 15% is thus not acceptable to the fishing industry, and the proposal to reduce the fishery in SDs 25-26 even further will have catastrophic effects on the small-scale fishery. ICES have created a text about the increase of herring catches from 37% to 49% “in the main cod distribution area” (in the sprat advice 8.4.1.5 under Additional Considerations, Management Considerations). Despite this alleged increase in herring catches, it remains a fact that the sprat catches in SDs 25-26 only constitute 10-15% of the total catches. This is a very small proportion, but nevertheless important to the vessels in the area.

4. The proposal to set an EU TAC of 250.000 tonnes– depending on Russian landings – would imply a mortality rate around Fpa.

5. FISH and the Finnish Association of Nature Conservation recommend following the ICES advice on the basis of FMSY.

Salmon in 22-31

BSRAC advice: Set the TAC at 108. 762 specimens

The Swedish Fishermen’s Federation: Abstains from any recommendations regarding salmon in the Baltic. They believe that the discussions are void of any substance and claim that the authorities responsible must take full responsibility for the situation.

1. The management of salmon is always a particularly painful exercise – almost as painful as trying to understand the logic of ICES advice. The figure that ICES proposes as an acceptable catch level is above the figure that was proposed last year. It is likely that the stock is increasing. Consequently, the TAC should also be increasing. For lack of better advice, the BSRAC recommends that the TAC is set as a rollover, providing the problems with reporting are effectively reduced.

Salmon in 32

BSRAC advice: Set the TAC at 15.419 specimens (a rollover on 2013).

Minority position: No targeted fishery on wild stocks, and a TAC of max 8.000 specimens

1. The Salmon fishery in the Gulf of Finland is based mostly on compensatory releases. The decreased effort in the Baltic main basin has increased the number of salmon returning to release locations. Despite the bigger amount of salmon in the fishing area, the poor market situation and seals have kept the level of catches low. The remaining fishery has moved closer to the coastal line where the likelihood of catching wild Estonian salmon is very low
2. In the advice, ICES notes that the TAC is a poor tool for managing salmon in the Gulf of Finland. The TAC has already been cut by more than 60 % from the 2004 level.
3. It is hoped that the coming Salmon Management Plan will include new tools for managing the Baltic salmon stocks. Meanwhile, the BSRAC advises to keep the TAC at 15.419 individuals.
4. Estonia has taken the following measures to protect the population of wild salmon:

It is prohibited for both recreational and professional fishermen to fish in traditional wild salmon rivers (Keila, Vasalemma, Kunda).

It is prohibited throughout the year to fish closer than 1 km of estuarine area of all the wild and mixed stock rivers.

Estonia has imposed a minimum size for salmon $L = 60$ cm, for both recreational and professional fisheries.

Estonia has adopted legislation that obliges the owners of dykes and dams to guarantee the passage of fish in all salmon rivers by 2013.

5. FISH and the Finnish Association of Nature Conservation recommend following the scientific advice from ICES.