

BSAC Joint WG (Pelagic and Demersal)

12th June 2024 09:00-16:30 CEST

Axelborg 8th floor, Axeltorv 3, 1609 Copenhagen V, Denmark

and online on Zoom

Report

1. Welcome by the Demersal WG Chair Teija Aho and Pelagic WG Chair Lise Laustsen

Apologies, AOB, and adoption of the agenda

The Demersal WG Chair, Lise Laustsen chaired the meeting in the morning. She welcomed all the participants in the room and online, including Dorleta Garcia, ICES/ACOM vice-chair invited to present the 2024 ICES advice for the Baltic stocks in 2025. She also welcomed the European Commission and the representatives of the Member States.

Under AOB was noted 3 points by **the Executive Secretary** on the Commission's questionnaire on the landing obligation, fitness check on the trade in seal products regulation and the dates of upcoming BSAC meetings.

The agenda was adopted without changes. A participants' list is on the website¹.

2. The 2024 ICES advice for the Baltic²

a. Presentation of the ICES advice by Dorleta Garcia, ACOM Vice-Chair

Dorleta Garcia, ACOM Vice-Chair presented the 2024 advice for the Baltic published by ICES on 31st May 2024. She explained the principles of the advice. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions and comment at the end of each category of stocks. She explained that the advice for herring in SDs 30-31 was delayed until September 2024.

The ACOM Vice-Chair underlined that the Baltic Sea ecosystem is suffering from the combined impacts of many human-induced pressures. One of the main pressures is eutrophication, its effects being accelerated by climate change. These pressures have led to degradation of essentially benthic habitats, changes in food webs and other ecosystem process. Achieving sustainable fisheries management or recovering depleted fish stocks would in some cases also require ecosystem restoration actions.

She referred to the conservation advice for some stocks affected by other anthropogenic pressures than by fishing.

With reference to the advice basis, **a fisheries representative from Poland** asked whether species interdependencies are included in the ICES advice.

The ACOM Vice-Chair replied that ICES provides a single-stock advice for the Baltic that does not take into account species interactions. The main reason for the lack of mixed fisheries advice is the lack of experts in the relevant ICES Working Group.

¹ <https://www.bsac.dk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Participants-list-JWG-12062024final2upload-1.xlsx>

² [Latest advice \(ices.dk\)](#)

The ExCom Chair recalled that the BSAC had already appealed to the Member States and their scientific institutes to consider the problem of the lack of expertise with regard to mixed fisheries in the Baltic.

The Pelagic WG Chair drew attention to the fact that a multispecies model used by ICES for the assessment of the Baltic pelagic stocks includes natural mortality.

Eastern Baltic cod

Dorleta Garcia explained that the assessment of this stock was downgraded from a Category 1 assessment to a Category 3 assessment because of limited input data and inconsistencies in model estimates. Insufficient sampling, non-reliable catch information, and uncertainties in modelled estimates of biological parameters are affecting the quality of the present assessment. The poor status of the eastern Baltic cod is largely driven by biological changes in the stock during the last decades. Growth, condition (weight-at-length), and size-at-maturation have substantially declined. Natural mortality has increased and is estimated to be considerably higher than fishing mortality. The size of the largest fish in the population has shown a decline since 1990. At the current low productivity, the stock is estimated to remain below B_{lim} in the short term, even with no fishing. The low growth, poor condition, and high natural mortality of cod are related to changes in the ecosystem that include poor oxygen conditions, reduced availability of fish prey, high levels of parasite infections. The contributing factors are interrelated and cumulative. ICES advises **that when the precautionary approach is applied, there should be zero catch in 2024.**

Replying to a question asked by a **small-scale fisheries representative**, **Dorleta Garcia** stated that the decline in the length has been confirmed by survey data.

A fisheries representative from Poland asked about the Russian catches of eastern cod, where the length composition data came from and whether ICES assessed the number of individuals in this stock.

Dorleta Garcia stated that a major part of the catches of eastern cod stock (approximately 79% per year since 2020) have been taken by the Russian Federation since the closure of the directed cod fishery in the EU waters in 2019. The age and length data comes from surveys, however it is not considered as relevant due to low sampling. There are no estimated of the absolute number of individuals in this stock.

A fisheries representative from Denmark stated that problems in the age reading from otoliths in eastern cod had been documented long time ago and increasing inconsistencies led to the failure of an age-based assessment.

A small-scale fisheries representative asked whether the DNA analysis³ used to assess the species composition in pelagic catches could also be used to identify cod bycatches. **Dorleta Garcia** replied that she will consult the experts on this issue.

³ https://www.bsac.dk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Is-DNA-testing-the-future-of-species-control_een3.pdf

A fisheries representative from Germany expressed disappointment at the quality of assessment of Baltic, as a result of limited insufficient sampling, non-reliable catch information, and uncertainties in modelled estimates of biological parameters.

Dorleta Garcia explained that sampling is limited due to very low catches of cod. She underlined that the stock assessors use the best available knowledge and data in the advice.

A fisheries representative from Poland stated that the assessment is missing two basic biological parameter such the abundance-at-age.

Dorleta Garcia explained that the stock has been downgraded to category 3 because of limited input data and inconsistencies in model estimates.

Western cod

Dorleta Garcia stated that the advice for this stock had been delivered last year: ICES advises that when the precautionary approach is applied, catches should be no more than **24 tonnes** in each of the years 2024 and **2025**.

Conservation aspects for both cod stocks:

ICES provides conservation advice for eastern and western cod stocks: for both stocks *cod conservation should be considered within the context of degradation of ecosystem status, resulting from cumulative anthropogenic pressures and climate change. Habitat restoration efforts, with a focus on reducing eutrophication to improve bottom oxygen content, are recommended.*

Flatfish stocks

Plaice in 21-23 and 24-32

ICES advises that when the MSY approach is applied, catches in 2025 in SD 21-23 should be no more than **20 062 tonnes** and in SDs 24-32 no more than **5 303 tonnes**. For both stocks, the fishing pressure is below F_{MSY} , and spawning-stock size is above $MSY B_{trigger}$, B_{pa} , and B_{lim} . Recruitment in 2023 was the highest in the time series.

Plaice in SDs 21-23

A small-scale fisheries representative drew attention to the mismatch between the advised TAC for plaice and the TACs for cod, as both species are caught together. The advice does not take into account the bycatches of cod.

Dorleta Garcia explained that ICES is aware of the inconsistencies in the advice, but unfortunately can only provide a single stock advice at the moment. As explained before, there is no mixed fisheries advice for Baltic and this matter will hopefully be resolved in the future.

A fisheries representative from Poland proposed to consider alternative sources of scientific advice, in order to fill in the gaps in the available scientific advice for Baltic fish stocks. He underlined that the ICES advice is incomplete without data on species interactions.

A fisheries representative from Denmark expressed the view that the task of ICES is to provide stock assessment and not to produce mixed fisheries scenarios. Other for a, such as the BSAC should discuss possible management scenarios.

A representative of the OIG underlined that in his view the strength of the ICES advice lies in providing different catch scenarios.

Plaice in SDs 24-32

A representative of the Estonian administration asked why in the catch scenarios ICES had not recommended a F_{MSY} catch option, but instead 35th percentile of predicted catch distribution under F_{MSY} .

Dorleta Garcia explained that a catch option based on 35th percentile of predicted catch had already been included in the advice in 2023. This approach accounts for uncertainty in the assessment

A fisheries representative from Poland asked whether the lack of data on the age structure of the stocks results from the lack of human resources at ICES.

Dorleta Garcia explained that it is rather a question on how the available data fits the assessment model. In this case, experts decided to use the production model based on catch data rather than the age structure model.

A fisheries representative from Denmark referred to the similar developments of the two plaice stocks (SDs 21-23 and 24-32) and asked whether ICES had considered to merge the two stocks in the advice.

Dorleta Garcia stated that the next benchmark will probably discuss if merging the two stocks in the advice is advisable.

Flounder SDs 24 and 25, 26 and 28

The ACOM Vice-Chair referred to the two flounder species that occur in the Baltic Sea, both of which are present in the management area. The shares of offshore spawning *Platichthys flesus* and the newly described coastal spawning species *Platichthys solemdali* in these management areas were estimated at approximately 85% and 15%, respectively. ICES has not been requested to provide advice on fishing opportunities for this stock for 2025 or 2026.

Flounder 27, 29-32

The ACOM Vice-Chair stated that two species occur in this area: *Platichthys flesus* and *Platichthys solemdali*. Baltic flounder (*Platichthys solemdali*) is the predominant flounder species in this area, although mixing occurs between these two species in the catches. Catches have decreased since 2000. ICES has not been requested to provide advice on fishing opportunities for this stock for 2025.

Turbot

A small-scale fisheries representative asked why is there a decreasing biomass trend of the stock despite good recruitment.

Dorleta Garcia replied that the reason behind a decline in biomass is due to natural mortality sources, that prevent turbot from growing to larger sizes.

Pelagic stocks

Central Baltic herring

The ACOM Vice-Chair stated that ICES advises that when the EU multiannual plan (MAP) for the Baltic Sea is applied, catches in 2025 that correspond to the F ranges in the plan are between **95 340** (corresponding to $F_{MSY\ lower} \times SSB_{2025}/MSY\ B_{trigger}$) and **125,344 tonnes** (corresponding to $F_{MSY} \times SSB_{2025}/MSY\ B_{trigger}$).

Referring to the stock assessment, Dorleta Garcia stated that the recruitment in 2023 and 2024 are uncertain, and this uncertainty will be propagated into the forecasted catch in 2025 and SSB in 2026. Several factors are contributing to the increased catch advice for 2025. The overall reason is a combination of an increase in SSB and an upward revision of SSB since 2022. The increase in SSB is the result of the decreased fishing mortality in the most recent years and the relatively large incoming 2022 year class. In last year's assessment the 2022 year class was underestimated. This, in addition to an increase in weight-at-age in 2023, has led to an upward revision of the SSB. The increased catch advice (of 129% as compared to previous year) is due to the combination of the increase in recruitment, upscaled stock size, increase in weight-at-age in 2023, and increase in advised F as a result of a higher ratio between SSB and $MSY\ B_{trigger}$. The stock status in the coming years will depend on the further development of the incoming stronger year class of 2019. It is predicted that the 2019 year class may contribute to a greater extent to the yield in 2021, and also to the SSB in 2021 and 2022.

With reference to non-fisheries conservation considerations, **Dorleta Garcia** stated that the herring stock in the management area consists of several different spawning components that have been shown to be genetically distinct. Differences in genetics should be accounted for to maintain resilience and sustainability of the stock, but for the time being, ICES has not identified any further conservation actions.

A representative of the OIG underlined that the drastic increase of the advice in herring TAC for 2025 comes as a surprise. He pointed out that, contrary to the advice sheets on some other herring stocks, this advice does not refer to specific conservation measures. He also asked to clarify whether the uncertainty related to the recruitment in 2023 and 2024, that will be propagated into the forecasted catch in 2025 and SSB in 2026, is worse than usual.

Dorleta Garcia stated that there is no consistency in communicating the conservation considerations in the advice. At the same time, further work on a model is needed in order to include specific measures into the advice.

A small-scale fisheries representative referred to the uncertainty related to the recruitment. Contrary to the recruitment estimated by a stock recruitment function, the observations (BIAS survey) show a weak recruitment of herring. He expressed the view

that an increase of the TAC by 129% carries a huge risk for the managers. He flagged the BSAC recommendation from 2015⁴ for herring in SDs 30-31, stating that given the uncertainty in the assessment, the BSAC advised that an increase of the TAC by 15% will be precautionary and will help to stabilise the fishery. He recommended to use the same logic for the 2025 TAC for central herring and sprat.

Dorleta Garcia noted that the recruitment values for 2022 and 2023 are in line with the observations. As in every case, ICES is providing the best available advice. However, if the values are corrected downwards, this could result in a considerable decrease of the catch advice for the following year.

A representative of the OIG drew attention to the fact that recruitment in 2022 and 2023 is not the highest over a longer timeframe than 10 years and the stock is not at historically high level. Higher fishing pressure will probably result in a decrease of the recruitment and will not be beneficial for the environment and the industry. She underlined that the conservation measures should also be part of the advice.

Gulf of Riga herring

According to the advice, the fishing pressure on the stock is below F_{MSY} and spawning-stock size is above $MSY B_{trigger}$, B_{pa} , and B_{lim} . ICES advises that when the EU multiannual plan (MAP) for the Baltic Sea is applied, the catches in 2025 that correspond to the F ranges in the plan are between 30,394 tonnes and 45,235 tonnes.

In reply to a question asked by the WG Chair on recruitment estimates, **Dorleta Garcia** replied that the recruitment estimate for 2023 is considered uncertain, but the uncertainty perceived by scientists is lower than for the Central Baltic herring.

Several fisheries representatives asked whether ICES has a better understanding of positive developments of the Gulf of Riga herring stock. Some fisheries representatives underlined that more favourable environmental conditions in this area, as well as a smaller mesh size used in herring fishery could have a positive effect on the stock.

Dorleta Garcia stated that she will consult the experts and come with an answer after the meeting.

Dorleta Garcia replied to the comments of a **fisheries representative from Poland**, regarding the impact of selectivity used in the fishery targeting small pelagic species in the Baltic⁵. She underlined that the ICES advice presented to the BSAC quoted by ICES during

⁴ https://www.bsac.dk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/BSACLetter_RECstoDGMareJuly2014FIN.pdf

⁵ Krzysztof Stanuch submitted his comments to the BSAC Secretariat before the WG meeting. The ICES ACOM Vice Chair presented the ICES advice on improving age/size structure for central Baltic and Gulf of Bothnia herring during the ExCom meeting on 15th May 2024. https://ices-library.figshare.com/articles/report/EU_request_to_establish_a_roadmap_for_possible_conservation_measures_for_central_Baltic_and_Gulf_of_Bothnia_herring/25435741

the presentation⁶ referred only to improving age/size structure for central Baltic and Gulf of Bothnia herring. The impact of selectivity on demersal stocks was not mentioned. She confirmed the opinion of the STECF experts that the use of gear-based technical measures for the size selection of small pelagic species is unlikely to offer an effective means of adjusting the exploitation pattern. She stated that if more evidence becomes available, herring size and age structure selection could be included in the models and its impact could be evaluated.

A representative of the OIG referred to the fact that at several occasions, the BSAC had raised the need for a reduction of selectivity by implementing a smaller mesh size in pelagic fisheries, to avoid unaccounted high underwater mortality of fish escaping the meshes.

Dorleta Garcia noted that the Commission's request to ICES referred to the impact of selectivity improving age/size structure for central Baltic and Gulf of Bothnia herring. In view of the scientists, increasing the mesh size is one of the easiest way to improve the selectivity of any gear and reduce bycatch of young fish. In her opinion, there is no scientific evidence to state that a smaller mesh size will have a positive impact on the herring population.

A fisheries representative from Poland expressed satisfaction with the fact that ICES recognises the substantial impact of selectivity on the stock dynamics. In his opinion, research using different mesh sizes, to investigate the stock structure (age, size and sex) should be carried out.

Western Baltic herring SDs 22-24

ICES advises that when the MSY approach and precautionary considerations are applied, there should be zero catch in 2025 for western Baltic spring-spawning (WBSS) herring. In the last 5 years, the fishing mortality has decreased sharply. The population size has smoothly increased, but it is still below the B_{lim} target. ICES advises that measures to protect and restore known spawning habitats and nursery areas are needed.

Sprat

When the EU multiannual plan (MAP) for the Baltic Sea is applied, catches in 2025 that correspond to the F ranges in the plan are between 130,195 tonnes and 169,131 tonnes. The advised catches for 2025 are 32% lower than those for 2024. This is due to very low 2021 – 2023 year classes and a downward revision of the 2022 year class giving a smaller stock size in 2025. Forecasts for 2026 assume a much higher recruitment than has been observed in these three years, resulting in an expected increase in biomass in 2026. If this assumption were too optimistic, biomass could decrease below biomass reference points.

A small-scale fisheries representative drew attention to the need to take into account species interactions. He pointed to the uncertainty in the forecasts and stated that in his view a 41% increase of SSB under the MAP F_{MSY} catch option will not be possible.

⁶ Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) – Technical Measures part III (STECF-15-05). 2015. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, EUR 27223 EN, JRC 95832:
<https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC95832/lb-na-27223-en-n.pdf>

Dorleta Garcia stated that all forecasts are based on assumptions. In the case of sprat, there is no strong evidence that recruitment will continue to be low. For the time being, the SSB is above the limit values.

A representative of recreational anglers noted that it would be prudent to provide a short term historical recruitment rates to better estimate the catches next year and give a clear advice to the managers. He underlined that if recruitment falls again, this key fishery will close.

Dorleta Garcia stated that the ICES **Baltic Fisheries Assessment Working Group** (WGBFAS) had not found strong evidence to change any assumptions related to forecasts. However, the advice includes warnings addressed to managers on possible implications of these assumptions and leaves room for them to decide to be more or less precautionary. ICES will revise the advice if recruitment falls.

A fisheries representative from Poland asked whether the additional one-month closure for pelagic fisheries in SDs 25-26 will also apply in 2025.

Dorleta Garcia replied that it is up to the managers and decision-makers to decide on the closures. ICES had not given advice on this additional closure applied in pelagic fisheries.

Salmon

Gulf of Finland

ICES advised to apply a precautionary approach because smolt production has declined. Therefore, a precautionary buffer was applied, consisting of a 20% reduction in the advice.

Main Basin

A representative of the OIG supported the advice for lower catches of 40,000 salmon in SD 31. A declining number of spawners returning to rivers is a matter of serious concern. All mixed stock salmon fishing in the Baltic should be stopped to protect several very weak stocks, including SDs 29 north and 30, where it is currently allowed.

A representative of recreational anglers drew attention to the fact that the current advice is strongly based on smolt production. Rivers are still producing smolts, however, last year 80% less spawners had returned to the rivers. This will result in a smaller smolt production in 4 years. He called for a more adaptive management of salmon, in order to avoid a disaster in the future and return all Baltic salmon populations to positive trends.

Questions by Member State representatives

A representative of the Estonian administration referred to the salmon in the Gulf of Finland where there are 3 wild salmon rivers, all located in Estonia. According to ICES, the smolt production in the Vasalemma river has decreased after a dam was removed. According to the Estonian experts, the number of smolts coming from newly opened area should be taken into account as this surely positively affects the stock status. Estonia will seek advice of ICES experts why it is recommended to reduce Gulf of Finland salmon quota from 11800 specimen to 9449 specimen considering that in three rivers where wild salmon populations exist smolt production is stable (Kunda, Keila, Vasalemma) and within

or above the Rmsy range if not taken into account dam removal on river Vasalemma in 2023⁷.

Another representative of the Estonian administration asked whether ICES had investigated the reasons behind good condition of herring in the Gulf of Riga. With reference to salmon in the Gulf of Finland, she could not understand why the advised 2025 TAC is lower than in 2024, despite an increase in the smolt production in the longer time frame.

The ACOM Vice-Chair took note of all the questions asked during this session and promised to consult relevant experts and return with replies.

The WG Chair thanked the ACOM Vice-Chair for the presentation and asked the BSAC members to submit questions addressed to ICES in writing to the Secretariat.

b. Questions on the ICES advice to Dorleta Garcia, ACOM Vice-Chair

Participants asked questions during the presentation of the ACOM Vice-Chair. *Additional questions were submitted by the BSAC members after the meeting and will be answered by the ACOM Vice-Chair at a later stage.*

Teija Aho, Demersal WG Chair chaired the meeting in the afternoon.

3. Presentation of the ICES advice on spatial trade-off analysis between reducing the extent of mobile bottom-contacting gear (MBCG) disturbance to seabed habitats and potential costs to fisheries.

Simon Jennings, ACOM Vice-Chair

Simon Jennings, ACOM Vice-Chair presented the advice⁸ on spatial trade-offs analysis between reducing the extent of mobile bottom-contacting gear disturbance to habitats and potential costs to fisheries, published in April 2024 in reply to the EU special request. ICES was requested to provide analyses of the economic value of fisheries using mobile bottom contact gears (MBCG), linked spatially to their distribution, define the distribution of fishing value and distinguish 'core' and 'peripheral' fishing grounds per métier, determine the spatial variation in 'core fishing grounds' over time and provide a trade-off analysis of the potential costs to fisheries of when various proportions of each MSFD broad habitat type per MSFD subdivision are not fished with MBCG. Advice was provided for EU marine

⁷ Request to ICES was provided by Estonia after the meeting: Estonia will request the response from ICES why it is recommended to reduce Gulf of Finland salmon quota from 11800 specimen to 9449 specimen considering that in three rivers where wild salmon populations exist smolt production is stable (Kunda, Keila, Vasalemma) and within or above the Rmsy range if not taken into account dam removal on river Vasalemma in 2023

⁸ https://ices-library.figshare.com/articles/report/EU_request_on_spatial_trade-off_analysis_between_reducing_the_extent_of_mobile_bottom-contacting_gear_MBCG_disturbance_to_seabed_habitats_and_potential_costs_to_fisheries/25601121/1

waters of the Baltic Sea, Greater North Sea, Celtic Seas, and the Bay of Biscay and the Iberian Coast.

Fishing with MBCG was spatially aggregated into core areas accounting for most of the total landings weight and value, and peripheral areas accounting for a small proportion of total landings weight and value.

On average, for the years 2017–2022, 90% of MBCG landings value came from less than 50% of the fished area. The picture for the Baltic is different.

Advice includes tables and figures showing core fishing grounds, extent of persistently unfished areas, and reductions in landings value associated with increases in unfished areas by MSFD Broad Habitat Types.

The formulation of advice followed the usual ICES framework. The formal advice has 5 components: the main advice + 4 interactive documents, including one on the Baltic.

This main advice document should be read in conjunction with the interactive documents and vice-versa. The interactive documents describe the distribution, intensity, impacts, and landings weight and value of MBCG fisheries in the four areas and associated subdivisions and BHTs, the estimated consequences and costs (loss of landings weight and value) of limiting the relative extent of MBCG fisheries, and assessment of the effects of reducing the depletion rate of fauna through gear modification. ICES provided the key definitions, among others of the mobile bottom-contacting gears (MBCG): mobile gears that contact the seabed during deployment, including bottom otter trawls, bottom seines, dredges, and beam trawls.

ICES conducted trade-off analyses to estimate the potential costs to MBCG fisheries in terms of reductions in MBCG fishing intensity, landings weight, and landings values to achieve a defined percentage of each Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) Broad Habitat Type (BHT) that is unfished (range of percentages 10–90%, in increments of 10%). For the Baltic Sea area, ICES advises that maintaining a persistently unfished state in 70% of the extent of all BHTs within the overall area leads to an estimated reduction of less than 7% of the annual mean MBCG landings value. This is much lower than for the Greater North Sea and Celtic Seas areas, consistent with the absence of MBCG fishing in much of the Baltic Sea. In the Baltic, only 7.8% of the area is fished with MBCG.

A fisheries representative from Denmark drew attention to the fact that the area swept by mobile bottom-contacting gears indicated as “swept area” (c square) could in reality correspond to a much smaller area.

Simon Jennings noted that the scale of the fishing activity is mapped using VMS transmission and that the scale use for the analysis would automatically impact the results.

Replying to a question asked by a representative of the OIG, **Simon Jennings** stated that the effects of COVID on the fishing effort had been included in the advice. On the contrary to the Baltic, the fishing effort had been remarkably stable in the core fishing grounds during COVID.

A fisheries representative from Poland asked whether different seabed types had been included in the advice. He underlined that every region differs in seabed types. He asked for the full context and the aim of this request.

Simon Jennings replied that the advice is based on world-wide studies on the effects of bottom gears on seabed. Fishing activity is placed in 10 **métiers**. Within **métiers**, there are variations in the design of fishing gears. Sensitivity analysis is based on mathematical models. Habitat mapping comes from the EU sea map process.

ICES was requested to build upon their 2021 ICES advice (eu.2021.08), with a particular focus on extending the established approaches to the EU waters of the Mediterranean and Black Seas, and further developing the approaches and updating the data for the Baltic and North-east Atlantic regions.⁹ To answer the request, ICES worked with the best available data and information.

A fisheries representative from Germany referred to the advice on the fishing opportunities and stated that it is a good example of how performance models can be insufficient to reflect the real situation in the Baltic Sea. Stronger evidence based on reality checks should also be the basis of any advice that could result in additional closures or bans imposed on fisheries. He pointed out that the impact of mobile bottom-contacting gears can be of various intensity, in some cases without any tracks left on the seabed. He also remarked that at a time of fuel crisis, fishers make efforts to avoid any heavy contact with the sediment.

Simon Jennings replied that specific management issues are not in the competence of ICES. He referred to Table 7 in the advice, presenting the estimates of depletion rates for the métiers adopted in this advice. Thorough studies in the Baltic on the impact of gears have been taken into account in the advice. He agreed that in the cases of firm substrate and fairly light gear deletion rates are very low.

A fisheries representative from Denmark underlined that vulnerable seabed is also disturbed by other pressures besides bottom-contacting gears.

Simon Jennings stated that the seabed is exposed to a whole range of different pressures. The advice only considered the impact of bottom-contacting gears.

4. The Working Group will start drafting its recommendations on fishing opportunities to send to the Executive Committee

The Executive Secretary referred to relevant provisions of the Rules of Procedure¹⁰ on consensus, dissenting opinions and the adoption procedure of recommendations. He stated that after consulting the WG Chairs, the recommendations on the fishing opportunities will have a similar structure than in previous years.

⁹ ICES Advice 2021. sr.2021.08. <https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.advice.8191>

EU request on how management scenarios to reduce mobile bottom fishing disturbance on seafloor habitats affect fisheries landing and value

¹⁰ Rules of Procedure point 31, 59, 60:

<https://www.bsac.dk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/BSACROP-adopted17.04.2024.pdf>

Eastern and western cod

Fisheries representative from Denmark was of the opinion that the 2025 TACs for the eastern and western cod stocks should be set as a rollover of the 2024 TACs. He could not agree that Baltic cod would recover by banning fishing. He underlined that the lack of recruitment is caused by cormorants.

A small-scale fisheries representative underlined that both cod stocks are classified by ICES as category 3 stocks, characterised by uncertainty of data and the assessment models. He agreed with the need for management measures for cormorants. In his view, additional, wider management measures are needed for cod. The closure of the eastern cod fishery for the last 5 years has not resulted in SSB increase. Taking into account the species interactions, one of such additional measures aimed at restoring the cod stocks would be to reduce sprat and herring fisheries in the main cod distribution area.

A small-scale fisheries representative from Germany pointed to the need to study all factors that impact the condition of the cod stocks. Such factors as the increasing amount of natural predators and widespread parasite infestation, like liver worms, affecting the already weak cod stocks of the Baltic Sea should be included in the advice.

A representative of the OIG stated that the perception of both cod stocks has not changed since last year and therefore there should be no targeted fishery for eastern and western cod. A zero TAC for both stocks should be combined with setting the plaice TAC well below the respective single-stock headline advice in order to prioritise cod protection. A wider discussion on the need for scientific advice on spawning periods is needed.

A representative of recreational anglers was in favour of preserving some fishing opportunities for recreational anglers and implementing alternative management measures such as increased minimum landing size, a maximum landing size to protect the biggest cod and combine both with seasonal closures and bag limits, targeted management of recreational fishing, intensification of the dialogue between the interest groups, science, and politics. The impact of cormorant predation on cod stocks should be investigated and considered.

A fisheries representative from Poland did not support the ICES advice for the cod stocks. In his view, the advice does not reflect all factors and changes affecting the stock, such as the population structure and species interactions. In his view, without the information on the number of individuals and the age structure of the cod stocks, the advice is incomplete and leads to protecting the weakest cod individuals, thus making the population structure weaker.

A small-scale fisheries representative from Poland pointed out that according to Danish researchers¹¹, cormorants in the Baltic could eat the entire annual recruitment of cod.

¹¹ [til Niels Jepsen \(bsac.dk\) Presented at the BSAC workshop on predators, October 2023](#)

Plaice

A small scale fisheries representative referred to the huge mismatch between the advised TAC for plaice and the TACs for cod, as both species are caught together. He appealed to the managers to take into account this huge mismatch when setting the TAC for plaice for 2025.

A representative of the OIG stated that similarly to last year, they will recommend prioritising protection and recovery of eastern and western Baltic cod by setting plaice TAC well below single-stock headline advice. The plaice advice does not reflect the impact on cod bycatch. Given the dire state of both Baltic cod stocks, the proposed increase in the single-stock headline advice for plaice must therefore not be taken. Alternative management measures such as closed area are needed to protect cod.

Other flatfish

A small scale fisheries representative stated that active gears used in flatfish fisheries are not compatible with the landing obligation and account for high discard rates. In general terms, the compliance with landing obligation is decreasing. He referred to the relevant comment in the ICES WGBFAS 2024 report.¹²

A representative of the OIG stated that the growing problem of discards should be addressed with utmost urgency, as they undermine the entire stock structure.

A fisheries representative from Poland underlined that focus should be put on factors directly influencing the structure of all fish stocks.

Pelagic stocks

A representative of recreational anglers asked the ICES ACOM Vice-Chair to explain the reason for a delay in providing the advice for herring in SDs 30-31. He underlined that this herring stock has direct influence on the salmon smolt survival. In this context he emphasised the need for strong scientific advice on mixed fisheries.

The ACOM Vice-Chair indicated that the reference points for this stock had raised concern among the experts in the assessment working group, so they decided to revise them. Hopefully, the advice will be released in mid-September.

Gulf of Riga herring

A representative of the OIG underlined that this stock should be considered as a model and an example to follow with respect to other Baltic fish stocks. He proposed a prudent approach with respect to TAC setting, that translates into a slightly lower TAC for 2025 than recommended by ICES, within or below the lower F_{MSY} range (32,796 t - 41,635 t) in

¹² ICES WGBFAS 2024: [Baltic Fisheries Assessment Working Group \(WGBFAS\) \(figshare.com\)](#) From the WGBFAS report 2024 p. 158 "The change towards flatfish-directed fisheries in both active and passive gears resulted in higher discards due to smaller mesh sizes (90 mm flatfish gears instead of 105 mm cod directed gears).

order to build ecosystem resilience by allowing the stock biomass to increase more substantially.

A fisheries representative from Estonia supported the scientific advice with respect to the 2025 TAC for the Gulf of Riga herring. With respect to the mesh size used for herring fishery in the Gulf of Riga, he stated that both 16 mm and larger mesh sizes are used.

Central herring SDs 25–29 and 32

A representative of the OIG drew attention to the high uncertainties flagged by scientists in the advice and recommended to minimise the fishing pressure. He underlined that the SSB in 2024 is just above B_{lim} , but still below $MSY B_{trigger}$. He noted that B_{lim} is identified by ICES as the stock size below which there may be reduced recruitment. In his opinion, B_{lim} is a catastrophic level, where the ability to manage the stock with a TAC is limited and additional conservation measures may be recommended. Therefore, he proposed to establish a rebuilding plan for the stock, in line with the criteria established by ICES WKREBUILD2¹³, to ensure rapid recovery of the stock above B_{MSY} . Such plan would require a reduction of the fishing pressure for a number of years. According to WKREBUILD a stock is considered to be rebuilt when it has been above $MSY B_{trigger}$ for at least three consecutive years.

A fisheries representative from Poland supported the ICES advice for the central herring stock. In addition he proposed a reduction of the mesh size to 16 mm for the central herring to increase the recruitment. He called for more research and asked ICES to use the available research in the assessment, especially in the case of small pelagic fish.

A fisheries representative from Estonia underlined that fishers observe larger quantities of herring at sea both in the Main Basin as well as in the Gulf of Riga.

A fisheries representative from Germany pointed to the need to improve the understanding of the challenging developments occurring in the Baltic ecosystem. The Baltic seems to be more affected than other sea basins. He underlined that these shifts, including oxygen depletion, low salinity have already resulted in lower productivity of the ecosystem. There is a need for additional research to understand the reasons for the current situation and to set the right, achievable targets for the future with respect to the fish stocks.

A representative of the OIG agreed that there are a number of additional measures that should be taken to allow the Baltic to survive. Large infrastructure investments with huge impact on the sea bottom should be avoided such as dredging, sand and gravel extraction. He pointed to the fact that Member States are allowing some destructive activities while trying to save the fish stocks at the same time.

The ACOM Vice-Chair stated that scientists put a lot of effort and research to understand the impact of changes occurring in the Baltic ecosystem. There are many factors influencing the quality of the advice such as natural variability and uncertainty in the

¹³ [Workshop on guidelines and methods for the design and evaluation of rebuilding plans for category 1-2 stocks \(WKREBUILD2\) \(figshare.com\)](https://www.figshare.com/projects/WKREBUILD2)

ecosystem. The debate on why the productivity of some stocks has changed is taking place, but so far with no decisive conclusions. It is difficult to find strong evidence for these developments and to acknowledge that good days will not come back.

A small scale fisheries representative referred to the uncertainty related to the recruitment in 2023 and 2024. He pointed out that contrary to the estimated recruitment, the observations at sea show a weak recruitment of herring. He expressed the view that an increase of the 2025 TAC by 139% carries a huge risk for the managers. If SSB falls to B_{lim} , the TAC will be set at zero. The last two years with lower TAC for herring in the Main Basin have resulted in SSB increase. Therefore, he proposed to set the TAC at a level that will allow an increase of SSB.

A fisheries representative from Finland stated that the significant reduction of the herring TAC for 2024 had been very difficult for the fishing industry. Strong fluctuations in the advice regarding the TAC levels for pelagic fish species from one year to another are troubling. These fluctuations in the advice are significantly greater than the simultaneous changes in the fish stocks. The fish stock assessments do not reflect the current situation at sea. The state of the herring stock in the northern parts of the TAC area has been found to be significantly better than in the southern parts of this area. The fishing opportunities in the northern parts are greatly affected by the poorer conditions in the southern Baltic Sea. Since the state of the herring stock appears to be improving, the TAC should reflect this development and be set within the ranges provided in ICES advice, that is between 95,340 and 125,344 tonnes.

A fisheries representative from Poland referred to the additional one-month closure for pelagic trawl fishery introduced in SD 25-26 in 2024. He referred to the earlier statement by the ACOM Vice Chair that ICES had not advised on this closure. He asked the Commission to reply what had been the basis for this decision.

The representative of DG Mare replied that the additional closure of pelagic trawl fishery had been decided by the Council of Ministers in October 2023. Prior to proposing the fishing opportunities for 2024, the Commission had analysed thoroughly Article 4.6 of the Baltic MAP¹⁴ and came to conclusion that the targeted fisheries for central and Bothnian herring should be closed on these legal grounds. The Member States decided to set a TAC for herring. Since according to ICES, the stock was under B_{lim} , additional remedial measures had to be introduced and the Council decided on the additional closure. He reminded that the Commission had addressed a special request to ICES to advise on this closure, but ICES was not in a position to give a reply.

A representative of the Estonian administration informed that in view of the need for remedial measures to set a TAC, Estonia had proposed the additional ban for pelagic fishery in the Main Basin following a discussion with BALTFISH member States. Such ban

¹⁴ [REGULATION \(EU\) 2016/ 1139 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL - of 6 July 2016 - establishing a multiannual plan for the stocks of cod, herring and sprat in the Baltic Sea and the fisheries exploiting those stocks, amending Council Regulation \(EC\) No 2187 / 2005 and repealing Council Regulation \(EC\) No 1098 / 2007 \(europa.eu\)](#)

had been implemented in the past in the Gulf of Riga, to protect the spawning aggregations.

A fisheries representative from Poland underlined that spawning of **herring** occurs mainly in **coastal regions, and therefore herring should be protected there and not in the open sea where the closure had been introduced.**

A fisheries representative from Denmark recommended setting the 2025 TAC for central herring at F_{MSY} higher.

Western herring

A small scale fisheries representative referred to the derogation for small-scale vessels adopted by the Council in 2023¹⁵ for herring in SDs 22-24 and proposed to continue with this derogation in 2025.

A fisheries representative from Denmark proposed to set the TAC as the rollover of the 2024 TAC for this SD.

The Pelagic WG Chair underlined that this was part of the advice in 2023 and should again be included in the recommendations in 2024.

A representative of the OIG highlighted the need to develop a rebuilding plan to ensure rapid recovery above B_{MSY} as well as implement additional measures recommended by ICES to protect and restore known spawning habitats and nursery areas. He drew attention that measures to protect the stock should also be taken in the areas outside the Baltic. He asked the ACOM Vice-Chair how is this going to be addressed in the advice.

The ACOM Vice-Chair replied that ICES acknowledges the fact that the western Baltic spring spawning herring is caught across three different management areas, including two areas outside the Baltic, in the North Sea. She informed that this year ICES has developed new guidelines for mixed fisheries. However, there are no further developments concerning the advice for the herring outside the Baltic.

Sprat

A small scale fisheries representative pointed to the uncertainty in the forecasts. If the forecasts on higher recruitment were too optimistic, biomass could decrease below biomass reference points, resulting in the closure of this fishery in 2026. As an example, he referred to the record low recruitment of western herring for three consecutive years that has led to the closure of fisheries. He appealed to the managers to ask ICES for additional scenarios based on different recruitment values and while awaiting these options, he proposed to set a half-year TAC at the October Council.

¹⁵ By way of derogation from the first paragraph, fishing this quota is permitted for Union fishing vessels of less than 12 meters length overall fishing with gillnets, entangling nets, handlines, pound nets or jigging equipment. Masters of those fishing vessels shall ensure that their fishing activity can be monitored at any time by the control authorities of the competent Member State. [Council Regulation \(EU\) 2023/2638 of 20 November 2023 fixing the fishing opportunities for certain fish stocks and groups of fish stocks applicable in the Baltic Sea for 2024 and amending Regulation \(EU\) 2023/194 as regards certain fishing opportunities in other waters \(europa.eu\)](#)

A representative of recreational anglers agreed that the advice is clear enough about the risks that would be taken with relation to the stock. Under the present situation, there is a need to be extremely careful with the key species.

A fisheries representative from Poland did not support the decrease of the sprat TAC proposed by ICES. In his view, such decrease would have severe implications on the fishing industry, which is already at the verge of collapse. A decrease in the TAC and no changes in technical measures leads the fishing industry nowhere. He agreed that young sprat should be protected and therefore proposed to decrease the mesh size used in the pelagic fishery in the Main Basin.

A fisheries representative from Denmark proposed to follow the advice and set the TAC at the F_{MSY} upper (169,131 tonnes). He underlined that this would already be a considerable reduction, in line with the criteria set by ICES with regard to the SSB.

A fisheries representative from Estonia acknowledged the uncertainties related to the recruitment. In his opinion, the TAC reduction resulting from the ICES advice would be already be a significant decrease.

A representative of the OIG recommended a wise approach to TAC setting, as saving more fish would give more chances to the recruitment. Considering that the three most recent year classes (2021 – 2023) are among the lowest in the time series, mixed fisheries considerations of sprat and herring and the well documented misreporting issues, the TAC for sprat should be set well below F_{MSY} lower ($\leq 117,071$ t). He agreed that setting a half-year TAC while awaiting different recruitment options from ICES would be the right and cautious solution.

A fisheries representative from Denmark underlined that the sprat stock had been above $B_{trigger}$ for longer than 10 years and was fished at F_{MSY} and yet we see a decline. In his view, the MSY strategy has not proved functional as a management tool.

A small scale fisheries representative expressed the opinion that the 41% increase of SSB under the MAP F_{MSY} catch option will not be possible. In his view, providing a range of different recruitment values would provide a better picture of possible TAC options.

The ACOM Vice-Chair stated that ICES could provide such recruitment options if asked for. She underlined that recruitment is the corner-stone of all the projections and the dynamics behind is mainly unknown.

The Pelagic WG Chair reminded that recruitment for sprat has been really variable in the last 50 years. She supported the science behind the decision-making, however, the fact that recruitment is hard to predict should be taken into account.

A fisheries representative from Finland pointed to the significant uncertainty regarding young year classes of sprat. According to ICES advice, the recruitment is very low. Observations from fisheries do not support this view. According to the information received, there were plenty of young year-class individuals in the spring catch, indicating that significantly larger year classes were recruiting into the fishery than estimated. Based on this, the proposed sprat TAC reduction (24-42%) may be too large. In addition, a potential

reduction in the sprat quota will complicate the herring fishery, and lead to sprat being the limiting factor in herring and sprat fishery.

Salmon SDs 22-32

Salmon in SD 32

A representative of the OIG stated that the forecast for this year overall is not looking positive, and if this trend continues over the summer no fishing should be allowed.

He proposed to wait until September with any management recommendations once the information on the spawning population collected over the summer is available.

Referring to salmon in SDs 22-32, **a fisheries representative from Finland** supported the ICES advice for at-sea fishing to be confined to existing coastal fisheries during the spawning migration (from the beginning of May until the end of August) in the Gulf of Bothnia and the Åland Sea, and the total at-sea catch (both commercial and recreational) in these areas of 40,000 salmon in 2025. Although salmon can only be fished in the areas of Finland and Sweden, a significant portion of the total salmon quota is still allocated to southern Member States. The size of Finland's annual salmon quota currently depends on the quotas transferred from the southern Baltic states, which cannot be utilised by them. Finnish fishers do not consider this a sustainable long-term solution. Regarding salmon in SD 32 (Gulf of Finland), she stated that they support the proposed advice of a total quota (EU) of 8,000 salmon.

A fisheries representative from Denmark asked for the reasons behind the current situation of declining numbers of returning spawners and very high levels of post-smolt mortality and what could be done to improve the situation.

A representative of recreational anglers stated that ICES is trying to investigate the reasons behind low post-smolt survival rates. The survival rate of smolt has fallen from 7% to 2-3%. The indications are that it could be a mixed fishery issue due to abundance of herring in the Bothnian Sea and the lack of food at sea. After years of positive trends the salmon stocks have gone the opposite way, which raises high concern. The current situation of poor and declining numbers of returning spawners, very high levels of post-smolt mortality fishery in the estuaries of weak rivers needs to be addressed in a structured way, through an ecosystem-based and adaptive management. The impact of cormorants should also be addressed. All mixed stock salmon fishing in the Baltic should be stopped to protect several very weak stocks, including SDs 29 north and 30, where it is currently allowed.

A fisheries representative from Estonia referred to the Gulf of Finland salmon and stated that it is hard to follow the logic in the advice to reduce the catches, despite measures taken to further improve the situation in the rivers. Natural factors such as starvation could affect the situation, but the main problem of the coastal fisheries is the predation of seals and cormorants.

A fisheries representative from Denmark asked about any indications of salmon smolt in pelagic fishery in the Bothnian Bay. **A representative of recreational anglers** answered that something is going on top of pelagic bycatch of salmon smolts.

A representative of the OIG emphasised that the increase of wild salmon population in the Baltic had happened along with the explosion of seal population, so seals cannot be the main reason of the problems with post-smolt survival. He proposed to ask the scientists at ICES to consider options how to better relate to improvements in the ecosystem, not spilling over the immediate effect in catch scenarios.

The Executive Secretary asked the participants to provide any further questions to the ACOM Vice-Chair as well their recommendation on the fishery in 2025 to the Secretariat. The Secretariat **will gather the input** from members until 17th June Monday, end of day.

The Working Group asked the Secretariat to produce, after the meeting, draft BSAC recommendations for the fishery in the Baltic Sea in 2025. Participants were asked to submit input to the recommendations. The draft would be sent to the WG and ExCom for comments and the recommendations further discussed by the ExCom on 27th June 2024, then adopted in writing. The final recommendations will be sent to the Commission in early July.

5. Discussion on the Commission Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: “Towards more sustainable fishing in the EU: state of play and orientations for 2025”

The Executive Secretary gave a brief overview of the document published on 10th June 2024. The Commission will present the Communication at the ExCom on 27th June. The Secretary invited the members to provide input. A draft reply will be prepared later in the summer in order to send a BSAC reply to the Commission.

A fisheries representative from Denmark referred to the statement in the communication¹⁶ referring to the tools provided Baltic MAP which should be implemented to recover fish stock. He drew attention that fishing is one of the factors that is having an influence on the stocks apart from other impacts, not mentioned in the Communication.

The WG took note.

6. AOB

From the secretariat:

- **Ongoing consultation on trade in seal products – deadline 7th August**

The Executive Secretary informed on the fitness check on the trade in seal products regulation. The BSAC Secretariat will prepare the first draft that will help the members to give feedback. The deadline for providing answers to the Commission is 7th August. The context of this fitness check will be presented by a representative of the Commission during the upcoming BSAC ExCom on 27th June.

¹⁶ The Baltic Sea multiannual plan provides many tools to help ailing fish stocks recover, including suspending target fisheries, setting TACs below the maximum advised levels, closing during spawning periods and limiting recreational fishing. But unless the Member States apply and implement EU legislation in full, fish stocks will not recover.

- ***Ongoing consultation on the evaluation of the LO – deadline 30th June***

The Executive Secretary informed on the Commission's questionnaire on the landing obligation. The BSAC Secretariat will prepare a draft answer to the evaluation and will ask the members for further input by the deadline of 30th June. Members informed. He also informed that once the BALTFISH HLG has validated the EFCA report on the implementation of the landing obligation on 19th June, the BSAC will plan a workshop to discuss the results of this evaluation.

Dates of future meetings

The Executive Secretary informed that the **tentative dates for the WG meetings** are: EBM WG 24th September, Demersal WG 2nd October, Pelagic WG 3rd October.

The Pelagic WG Chair proposed to hold the Pelagic and Demersal WGs in the port of Skagen, in hybrid mode.

The dates of these meetings will be confirmed at a later stage.

Under AOB, **the EBM WG Chair** informed on the draft proposal of the Swedish government to change the management of cormorants and seals. The draft includes limitation to bottom trawling in protected areas and hunting seals and cormorants. The official text will be presented at a later stage.

The WG Chairs thanked all participants and the interpreters.