

**BALTFISH Forum**  
**Hybrid meeting: Gdansk and online**  
**18<sup>th</sup> June 2024, 12:00 - 17:00 CEST**

**Report**

The BSAC was represented by Jarek Zieliński, the ExCom Chair (in person), Glenn Douglas, BSAC Vice-Chair (in person), Nils Höglund, EBM Working Group Chair (in person) and the secretariat (in person and online).

**1. Opening of the meeting**

**Filip Podgórski, Vice-Director of the Fisheries Department** chaired the meeting. He welcomed all participants to the second forum meeting held under the Polish Presidency in Gdańsk.

The Forum meeting was well attended by several Baltic Member States, the European Commission, stakeholders from the fisheries sector and environmental NGOs.

**2. Adoption of the agenda**

The agenda was adopted.

**3. Approval of the minutes from the Forum meeting on 5 September 2023**

The minutes were approved.

**4. Update on the work program of the Polish BALTFISH Presidency – presentation**

**The BALTFISH Presidency** gave an update on the work programme of the Polish BALTFISH Presidency. The TACs were adopted for the fishery in 2024. A series of bilateral meetings were held before reaching a compromise on Baltic TACs at the AGRIFISH Council meeting in October. The Presidency dealt with the eel and harbour porpoise. The issue of additional measures for harbour porpoise will be dealt with by the HLG. The Control Expert Group met to consider the report on the evaluation of the landing obligation. Stickleback and salmon management plan will need to be dealt with in the future.

**5. Presentation of ICES advice for the Baltic Sea 2025 - presentation by National Marine Fisheries Research Institute and exchange of views**

**Professor Jan Horbowy, National Marine Fisheries Research Institute in Gdynia**, member of the ICES Baltic Fisheries Assessment Working Group (WGBFAS), presented the ICES advice for 2025 for selected stocks. He presented the basis of ICES advice, as well as elements of the management plan in the Baltic. The ICES advice was presented for sprat, central Baltic herring, Gulf of Riga herring, plaice, eastern cod and western herring. He referred to the changes in weight at age of several species. The weight-at-age of all stocks has declined, reaching 40 to 50% of the weight in 1992.

**The participants** had the opportunity to ask questions related to the advice.

**The BSAC EBM WG Chair** asked about the discrepancies in the recruitment of central herring in the assessment and surveys. He asked about misreporting of pelagic fisheries mentioned in the ICES advice.

**Professor Jan Horbowy** replied that the data on the recruitment in 2023 and 2024 are uncertain, and this uncertainty will be propagated into the forecasted catch in 2025 and SSB in 2026. If poor state of the incoming year class is confirmed, the situation could be worse than predicted.

With reference to misreporting, he stated that in the past, this problem had been mentioned mainly with reference to industrial pelagic fishing. Misreporting undermines the data quality used in the assessment and introduces a level of uncertainty in the assessment and advice that cannot be quantified. However, simulations indicate that the effects of misreporting on the fishing mortality are not serious.

**A small-scale fisheries representative** expressed the opinion that the 41% increase of SSB under the MAP  $F_{MSY}$  catch option could not be reached. In his view, providing a range of different recruitment values would provide a more informed decision on the TAC.

**Professor Jan Horbowy** explained that the recruitment values had been derived from predictions and are in line with surveys. However, if the forecasts on higher recruitment were too optimistic, biomass could decrease below biomass reference points, resulting in a more dramatic effect for fisheries in 2026.

**A small-scale fisheries representative** asked whether there would be a potential benefit if year classes 4 and 5 would be harvested less and saved for the future?

**Professor Jan Horbowy** replied that recruitment of sprat has been highly variable in the long term. Saving year classes 4 and 5 would save the fish for fishing but not necessarily lead to a better recruitment. He underlined that SSB should be kept below  $B_{lim}$ .

**A representative of environmental NGO** referred to the sprat advice highlighting low year classes in the last 3 years, but at the same time high recruitment. If this assumption were too optimistic, biomass could decrease below biomass reference points. Would  $F_{MSY}$  lower catch option be more advisable?

**Professor Jan Horbowy** stated that this could lead to a decrease of biomass below  $MSY B_{trigger}$ . He confirmed that  $F_{MSY}$  lower catch option would be a preferred solution.

**A small-scale fisheries representative** referred to the provision in the MAP<sup>1</sup>, specifying that the fishing opportunities should be set in such a way as to ensure less than 5% probability of SSB falling below  $B_{lim}$ . He asked why is the ICES advice includes  $F_{MSY}$  upper option if only  $F_{MSY}$  lower is in line with this provision.

**Professor Jan Horbowy** explained that this provision of the MAP will probably be revised.

**A representative of the Latvian administration** asked if ICES is investigating the factors influencing recruitment of several Baltic stocks that are in dramatic state. In this context, he also asked what could be the reasons for good condition of Gulf of Riga herring. He underlined that the stability in the fishing opportunities promised by the MSY approach had not been achieved in the case of pelagic stocks.

---

<sup>1</sup> Article 4.6 Fishing opportunities shall in any event be fixed in such a way as to ensure that there is less than a 5 % probability of the spawning stock biomass falling below the limit spawning stock biomass reference point ( $B_{lim}$ ) set out in particular in Annex II, column B

**Professor Jan Horbowy** referred to the fact that ICES provides a range of catch options in the advice. If requested, ICES could provide catch advice options including fixed TACs, but in consequence the TAC would be lower. With reference to the Gulf of Riga herring, he stated that this stock is in a better state because good year classes appear every two years. More research is needed to find out why this stock is doing better.

**The BSAC ExCom Vice-Chair** asked whether the Gulf of Riga herring is less affected by anthropogenic factors.

**Professor Jan Horbowy** stated that warm winters have had some positive effects on the Gulf of Riga herring leading to high recruitment. At the same time, warm winters had a negative impact on the recruitment of some other herring stocks, for example western herring. On the contrary to Gulf of Riga herring stock, the central herring stock is composed of several populations with different dynamics.

**A representative of the Latvian administration** underlined that on the contrary to central herring, there is no Russian fisheries in the Gulf of Riga<sup>2</sup>.

**A representative of the Finnish administration** asked whether ICES advises to continue with the additional closure for pelagic fisheries introduced by the AGRIFISH Council in October 2023.

**Professor Jan Horbowy** stated that the basic management measure is the TAC and closures are not the main instruments.

**The BSAC ExCom Vice-Chair** underlined that the 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. In his view, an update of data on returning spawners is needed before taking any management decisions.

On herring in SDs 30-31, **Professor Jan Horbowy** informed that the experts are revising reference points for this stock. Hopefully, the advice will be released in mid-September

**A representative of the Estonian administration** informed that Estonia will seek advice of ICES experts why it is recommended to reduce Gulf of Finland salmon quota from 11,800 specimen to 9,449 specimen considering efforts that had been taken to restore river connectivity in 2023 and stable smolt production in three Estonian rivers.

**The BSAC EBM WG Chair** underlined that the reference points used to assess the stock status should not penalise Member States that work on river restoration. Alternative or additional reference points are needed to monitor the stock developments and promote habitat restoration. He also referred to the fact that ecosystem considerations, including remedial measures, should be addressed to all Baltic stocks. He referred to the problems related to negative trends in food availability for cod, as small cod cannot eat larger sprat and herring. He asked whether any alternative scenarios on how to help the cod by managing other fisheries are discussed in ICES?

**Professor Jan Horbowy** that the lack of food for cod starts at early age, with the lack of benthos organisms on which cod feeds before switching to sprat. There was a discussion

---

<sup>2</sup> The publicly available information from a Russian Institute indicate that the Russian catches account for around 25% of the total catches.

on spatial management of pelagic stocks consisting of moving the fishing effort to the north, to save food for cod. ICES was not in a position to advise on how to implement such management. In his view, such spatial management would not help much to improve the cod stocks, as sprat is available in some SDs where the cod stocks have not improved. With reference to a question on high discards of cod in the flatfish fishery, **Professor Jan Horbowy** replied that a new flatfish gear allowing to fish flatfish without catching cod would be an opportunity.

## **6. Evaluation of Compliance with the Landing Obligation Baltic Sea 2019 - 2021 – presentation by the Control Expert Group Chair**

**Konrad Patyk, the chair of the BALTFISH Control Expert Group** presented the report on the evaluation of compliance with the Landing Obligation in the Baltic 2019 – 2021. The methodology used in the report was the same as for previous reports. The report presents the findings of the evaluation of the compliance of cod, herring, plaice, salmon and sprat fisheries. The reports presents the trends in infringements. Method 1 consisted of last-haul analysis. Information from inspectors is sent to EFCA by species and category. Method 2 consists of scientific estimates (STECF). Methods 3 include infringement trends. There were very low number of detected infringements that were hard to detect. This method did not provide information on compliance. The report includes recommendations to increase the level of last haul samplings and use the REM systems that will facilitate enforcing of the landing obligation. Other tools such as remotely piloted aircraft systems could also help to detect illegal discarding and to obtain a more reliable picture of compliance. There is a need to look into the scientific data for additional insights on discarding patterns and to obtain catch data based on haul-by-haul recording. This will facilitate the gathering of discard and other catch data. In addition, it could have a deterrent effect on non-compliance.

The BALTFISH HLG will be asked to adopt the report.

## **7. Bycatch mitigation measures for the Baltic Sea harbour porpoises (Baltic Proper & Belt Sea populations)**

**The representative of the Polish BALTFISH Presidency** informed on the BALTFISH work on harbour porpoise bycatch mitigation measures in the framework of the technical group. The group met in January, April and June 2024. Sweden presented information on high bycatch risk areas in Swedish waters, including information on fishing effort in static nets. BALTFISH believes that additional bycatch mitigation measures could be considered in this area. The last meeting discussed the third BALTFISH recommendation on harbour porpoise. The next steps will be carried out by the German BALTFISH Presidency.

## **8. Update on Baltic Sea Advisory Council work and cooperation with BALTFISH - presentation by the BSAC ExCom Chair**

**The BSAC ExCom Chair** thanked for inviting the BSAC to the BALTFISH Forum. He informed that the BSAC Joint Working Group and presentation of the ICES advice took

place on 12th June. Members raised a number of questions to the ICES ACOM Vice-Chair on the methodology used to prepare the advice and on the status of the stocks. The BSAC members discussions this year touched upon the topics of species and fisheries interactions, reliability of models used and quality of the advice, impact of other human activities and other factors on the fish stocks. Some questions were still pending an answer and they have been sent to the ICES ACOM Vice-Chair in writing to get an answer before 27<sup>th</sup> June. The members will be consulted in writing on the draft BSAC recommendation in order to have a consolidated draft by the 27<sup>th</sup> June. The Executive Committee will meet on 27<sup>th</sup> June in Brussels (hybrid) and produce a final BSAC recommendation by early July. It will be sent to the BALTFISH members and Presidency along with the Commission and other relevant organisations.

In addition, BSAC members discussed 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.

He also referred to the report on **the evaluation of the landing obligation**, prepared by EFCA, to be endorsed by BALTFISH. The BSAC welcomes progress made towards the publication of this evaluation report that has been awaited since spring 2023. The BSAC work programme foresees a workshop to discuss this report in a Workshop together with BALTFISH and EFCA. This report will be useful to answer to the ongoing Commission's The BSAC work programme foresees a workshop to discuss this report together with BALTFISH and EFCA. The BSAC has advised its members to directly reply to the questionnaire of the Commission on the evaluation of the LO. In addition, the BSAC is preparing a joint answer to contribute to this evaluation.

The BSAC ExCom Chair referred to the **fitness check for the trade in seal products** regulation, launched by the Commission. The BSAC has been working on the question of seal in the last years. In October 2023, the BSAC organised a workshop that looked at the science and the knowledge available. The BSAC has advised its members to directly reply to the questionnaire of the Commission in addition, we intend to send a joint answer on the topic if possible. Further work on the topic of seals and cormorants will continue in a BSAC workshop planned on 30<sup>th</sup> October in Helsinki.

The BSAC ExCom Chair referred to **the evaluation of the CFP**, announced by the Commission. Advisory Councils will be consulted on the topic and the BSAC stands ready to contribute, based on the important work undertaken to produce the BSAC white paper in 2022-2023 and further discussions that will take place. Cooperation with the BALTFISH Member States on this topic will be important in the next months.

The BSAC hosted presentations from Germany and Denmark on the work of respective Fisheries Commissions that were set up to look **at the future of fisheries** in these countries. The BSAC members have shown a great interest in these recommendations proposed in the reports. The BSAC has reached out to the authors to discuss potential translation of the reports. The German Ministry has decided to proceed to the translation and BSAC will be translating the main conclusions of the Danish report and would like to encourage Member States to discuss these reports in BALTFISH.

The **BSAC ExCom Chair** thanked the Polish **BALTFISH** Presidency for excellent cooperation and expressed the hope to continue close cooperation with the German Presidency in the framework of virtual coffee meetings in the coming year.

## 9. AOB

### a) Recent HELCOM work on fish and fisheries – presentation by HELCOM

**Nils Höglund, Chair of the HELCOM Migratory FISH group** presented the recent HELCOM work on fish and fisheries, focusing on issues that overlap with the **BALTFISH** work plan. He referred to the ongoing work on acoustic deterrent devices to avoid detrimental impacts on the environment from underwater noise under HELCOM, the work on draft toolbox for bycatch mitigation and list of non-lethal mitigation measures and planned revision of the HELCOM salmon recommendation. He referred to the project on eel focusing on pan-Baltic eel management and expressed the hope that **BALTFISH** could endorse it.

### b) Draft concept note for ASCENT project - Towards pan-Baltic Eel management – presentation by HELCOM

**A representative of the project consortium** presented the background of the project in a concept note. The project would focus on identifying and addressing areas relevant for regional cooperation, e.g. consider appropriate management unit level, outlining joint research needs, harmonized data collection linking to the work of the DCF intersessional subgroup for diadromous species, identifying current natural recruitment to the Baltic Sea and evaluating the effect of restocking on silver eel escapement, as well as the Baltic Seas contribution to the effective spawning stock and relevant Baltic wide mortality targets. Evaluation of restocking is of great importance to the entire EU eel recovery plan from 2007. The expected outcomes are:

1. Development of regional models for freshwater regions around the Baltic Sea, describing the yellow eel population and assessing silver eel escapement from inland habitats while accounting for spatial differences.
2. Development of a silver eel model for the marine area, assessing the importance of different regions and marine waters for silver eel production and considering mortalities during spawning migration in the Baltic Sea.

The costs are approx. 2-2.5 million EUR.

**BALTFISH** was asked to endorse the project. The upcoming German Presidency supported the project.

### c) European Association of Fish Producers Organisations (EAPO) position on the ICES advice – presentation by EAPO

**A EAPO representative** presented the EAPO position on the ICES advice.

**The meeting** took note.

\*\*\*\*

**The Polish Presidency** thanked the Member States for good cooperation and the **BSAC** for holding regular exchange of information in virtual meetings.