

BALTFISH Forum Meeting 8th June 2020

The meeting was held through a web conference. Representing the BSAC: Esben Sverdrup-Jensen BSAC chair, Michael Andersen, chair of the demersal WG, Mart Undrest, chair of the pelagic WG, Nils Höglund chair of the EBM WG and the BSAC Secretariat. Several Baltic Member States took part at the **Forum**, as well as stakeholders from the fisheries and anglers sector and environmental NGOs.

Risto Lampinen from the BALTFISH Presidency opened the 2nd and last meeting of the BALTFISH Forum under the Finnish Presidency. He chaired the meeting.

The BSAC chair informed that the BSAC working group will meet 9-10 June 2020 to discuss and formulate the BSAC recommendations on the 2021 fishing opportunities. He thanked the BALTFISH presidency for providing the opportunity for all BSAC members to participate in the BALTFISH Forum meeting and for the opportunity to provide input to the agenda.

ICES advice on fishing opportunities in the Baltic Sea 2021

Colm Lordan, ACOM vice chair presented the ICES advice on fishing opportunities in the Baltic in 2021. He noted that due to COVID-19, ICES presented an abbreviated advice for most stocks. He presented the advice by stocks. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions and to comment as the presentation went along.

On the **western Baltic cod**, Colm Lordan gave the basis for the advice. The 2016 year class remains the only strong year class in recent years.

The chair of the BSAC Demersal Working Group stated that the BSAC was only just starting its work on the advice and did not yet have an opinion. Speaking as fisheries representative, he expressed concern with the fact that ICES keeps downgrading the SSB every year. In his view, the stock modelling is not done properly. According to fishermen, recent catches of western cod indicate an improvement in the state of the stock.

Replying to a question put forward by one participant on the downscaling of the SSB, he noted that ICES provides the best available assessment. However, the retrospective bias problem is driven by conflicting information in data. Experts will continue to explore the problem. A representative of ENV NGOs drew attention to the fact that the SSB of western cod has not reached the expected level and is dependent on one year class. He asked the BALTFISH presidency for a precautionary approach in advising the TAC for 2021.

A representative of the Finnish administration stated that Finland will follow the ICES advice in setting the TAC for western cod for 2021 (lower FMSY figures). Denmark and Sweden stated that they found the advice worrying and had not yet developed a position on it.

On the **eastern Baltic cod**, Colm Lordan noted that there had been a dramatic decrease in mean size and a decline in the condition of fish. Cod are getting smaller and maturing much earlier. The natural mortality is substantially higher than the fishing mortality. ICES advises

a zero catch for 2021. This would result in 10% increase of SSB. There is a low probability of increase of the stock above Blim in the short term.

Replying to a question asked by a representative of ENV NGOs on the lack of inter-relations between the eastern cod, and the sprat and flatfish stocks in the advice, Colm Lordan replied that ICES is working hard to include mixed fishery interactions in the advice. ICES presents the multispecies interactions and mixed fishery interactions in the fisheries overview.

Replying to a question asked by the BSAC chair on bycatch limit and the effects of spatial and time closures on the SBB of eastern cod for 2021, the ACOM vice-chair stated that these effects have not been included in the predictions.

Commenting to a remark from a fisheries representative on the need for the fishermen to be able to fish on other resources, Colm Lordan noted that according to the 2019 estimates, natural mortality of eastern cod is 0.7, whereas the fishing mortality is estimated at 0.2. Therefore different catch options given by ICES in the advice have a relatively low impact on the SSB.

A fisheries representative asked whether the fish with a very low growth rate should be caught in order to improve the quality of stock dynamics for future fish generations.

Colm Lordan replied that scientific evidence for the impact of fisheries on the genetic structure of fish stocks is not sufficiently developed at the moment to comment on it from an ICES perspective. For stock assessment based on age structure, the average rate for each year class is based on sampling.

Finland and Latvia noted their concern about the advice and commented on the need for a bycatch TAC to cater for other fisheries,

On western Baltic herring, the ACOM vice-chair stated that the SSB of this stock shows a decreasing trend and is well below Blim. The zero catch advice will result in a 23% increase of SSB in 2022, still far below the Blim target. He referred to the workshop on the rebuilding plans, with western Baltic herring being one of the case studies. Further work is planned on the rebuilding plan for WBH.

The BSAC chair commented that the medium-term possibilities for stock was a helpful addition to the advice. He asked about the perception of the western Baltic cod and how it impacts the western Baltic herring. Colm Lordan replied that a benchmark would be required to look into that.

The ACOM vice chair presented **the advice for the central Baltic herring and sprat**. During the discussion, some NGO representatives mentioned problems with misreporting, as well as food supply for cod. Colm Lordan explained that misreporting was discussed; a full benchmark will be carried out in 2022. The NGO representatives recommended setting the TAC at lower FMSY range for **central herring stock**. Some Member States indicated their support or setting the TAC for central herring at FMSY level (112.000 tonnes). The representative of the Latvian administration expressed concern with the changes in the ICES assessment of the SSB for this stock from one year to another. The representatives of ENV NGOs referred to the spatial management of **sprat** fishery, to secure food for cod. The BSAC chair referred to an inter benchmark carried out on herring and sprat and asked whether predation by cod on these stocks was carried out. The ICES representative confirmed this: it was greater for herring than for sprat. The BSAC chair also referred to the special request to ICES on the likely impact of spatial management measures for sprat.

ICES representatives underlined that spatial management measures are a challenge for the future and require dedicated work, for which funding is lacking.

Gulf of Riga herring did not give rise to comments.

With respect to **Gulf of Bothnia herring**, Finland informed that there will be a workshop with the purpose of producing a full analytical assessment for the stock.

With respect to the advice on **plaice**, Colm Lordan explained the rationale for the change in PA to MSY advice for SDs 21-23. In reply to questions from ENV NGOs, he informed that there is no updated information on by-catch of eastern Baltic cod in the plaice fishery; nor is it possible to provide information on mixed fisheries interactions between the advice for plaice and the zero advice for eastern Baltic cod.

A decrease in misreporting was noted with respect to the **salmon** fishery in the Main Basin. The ICES representative explained that the large decrease was due to a change in regulations in the reported catch of sea trout with longlines in the Polish offshore fishery. Representatives of ENV NGOs and a representative of the anglers expressed their surprise and asked for clarification as to how a large scale misreporting could disappear from one year to another. They also asked why ICES does not consider a more precautionary approach, since the advice clearly states that current fishing on mixed stocks is making it impossible to reach MSY.

The ICES ACOM chair referred to the relevant table in the ICES advice and pointed to the need to trust the veracity of the figures and the data.

ICES advice on the draft multiannual plan for the Baltic salmon stock¹

The ACOM chair Mark Dickey-Collas, noted that the evaluation of the draft multiannual plan for the Baltic salmon stock had been done at the request of the European Commission. ICES provided information on river size and potential productivity of wild stocks included in Annex I to the draft multiannual plan and proposed alternative options for stock productivity. ICES also provided an analytical evaluation of the recovery rate of individual wild salmon stocks under alternative fishing scenarios and to propose candidate definitions for “MSY salmon”. ICES provided information on the likely impact that alternative time limits, with associated F values, would have on the stock projections to achieve MSY-targets and the future ICES advice on the fishing possibilities.

The Forum had an exchange of views and took note of the advice provided by ICES. The representatives of the Member States as well as other participants underlined the importance to have the salmon management plan implemented. The Chair informed that

¹ ices.dk/sites/pub/Publication%20Reports/Advice/2020/Special_Requests/eu.2020.02.pdf

the next steps concerning the draft salmon multiannual plan will be discussed in the BALTFISH High Level Group.

The chair of the BSAC EBM Working Group noted that the BSAC is ready to discuss and give input to the plan and asked for a signal on whether there is a need for the BSAC to work on this.

Mitigation measures concerning Baltic harbour porpoise populations²

Presentation of the main findings in the ICES working group report on harbour porpoise

The ACOM Chair Mark Dickey-Collas presented the main findings of the ICES working group report on harbour porpoise. ICES concluded that the emergency measures proposed by NGOs in July 2019 for both the common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*) in the Bay of Biscay and the Baltic Proper harbour porpoise are appropriate to reduce the bycatch. However, several spatio-temporal and technical amendments were recommended.

If the Baltic Proper harbour porpoise management unit is to meet the management objective of achieving bycatches below the potential biological removal (PBR) limit (< 0.7 individuals per year), all fisheries of concern should be closed. ICES recommends a combination of spatial-temporal closures and the application of pingers in static net fisheries, as well as enhanced monitoring to assess the effectiveness of management measures and make more precise the population abundance and bycatch mortality estimates. Development and implementation of fishing gears that have a low bycatch risk for harbour porpoises also deserves high priority.

The Forum had an exchange of views on the advice. Several NGO representatives welcomed the advice and underlined the need to implement the emergency measures as a package. They looked forward for the next steps by BALTFISH. In their view, the SAMBAH project should be continued. The representatives of the Swedish and Danish administrations were ready to supply data in order to assess population abundance. They supported the proposed long-term measures. The representative of the Estonian administration stated that pingers should only be mandatory in areas of high abundance of harbour porpoise. Finland advised to avoid disproportionate measures.

The Chair thanked ICES for the presentations and noted that the BALTFISH recommendation on the 2021 TACs will be co-ordinated by the Estonian Presidency. He thanked everyone for the open and frank discussions. Discussions at the High Level Group followed the next day.

Regionalisation

Follow-up on Joint Recommendation concerning plaice

² www.ices.dk/sites/pub/Publication%20Reports/Advice/2020/2020/eu.2020.04.pdf

A draft Joint Recommendation derogating plaice from the landing obligation was submitted by Denmark to the HLG in April 2019. BALTFISH had consulted STECF which did not support the exemption. The representative of the Danish Ministry informed that the research on plaice will be continued next year.

The Forum took note.

Follow-up on alternative mesh sizes in T90/BACOMA (Danish proposal)

The representative of the Danish Ministry informed that the issue of alternative mesh sizes in T90/BACOMA will be dealt with at a later stage.

The BATFISH Presidency informed that it will follow up on this issue as it develops.

A representative of the fisheries sector expressed dissatisfaction with the way the joint recommendations are being dealt with by STECF.

State of play for amendment of Delegated Act 2028/147 – The Swedish Gear

The representative of the Swedish administration noted that the amendment of Delegated Act 2028/147 was rejected by the European Commission. She expressed disappointment by the fact that a purely technical amendment was rejected.

BALTFISH will discuss the issue in the HLG and will follow on this as it develops.

Follow-up on Joint recommendation concerning salmon

The Forum was informed that the STEFC is currently assessing the recommendation concerning the Landing Obligation.

Finland is conducting scientific research into the survivability of salmon.

Increasing selectivity of flatfish trawls for cod avoidance

The agenda item had been proposed by the BSAC.

A representative of the German administration informed that the Thünen Institute had carried out research on the selectivity of flatfish trawls for cod avoidance and had come up with promising results. Information on this research has been postponed due to COVID-19. Tests on commercial vessels will be carried out as the next step. The issue will be discussed in the HLG.

Several participants applauded the research done by Germany and encouraged its continuation, possible in co-operation with STECF.

Baltic seals and fisheries

Information on national measures concerning seals and fisheries

Discussion on possibilities for improved coexistence of Baltic seals and fisheries

The agenda item was originally proposed by the BSAC.

The Member States informed on national measures aimed at improving the co-existence of Baltic seals and fisheries.

The representative of the Finnish administration informed that Finland has introduced a premium system as part of the seal management. Compensation is paid for handling seal carcasses. The hunting quota is now 400 seals.

The representative of the Swedish administration informed that Sweden has a programme for improving the coexistence of seals and fisheries. The seal management plan is under revision.

The representative of the Estonian government informed that hunting of grey seals is allowed in Estonia and the hunting quota of 50 seals is not fully utilised due to the trade ban on seal products.

The representative of the Danish administration announced the publication of the new seal management plan.

The Forum was informed that BALTFISH will follow this issue closely.

AOB

Possible information from BSAC

The BSAC Chair thanked the Finnish Presidency for inviting all BSAC members to join the Forum meeting on-line. He referred to the measures aimed at the recovery of the eastern cod stock and underlined that the BSAC is fully committed to focus on this work together with BALTFISH. There is an urgent need to evaluate the emergency measures that had already been introduced.

He also referred to the stickleback and encouraged the Member States to consider the possibility to expand commercial exploitation of these resources. Stickleback fishery could have a positive impact on the Baltic ecosystem, because stickleback feed on larva of other fish. The BSAC will discuss this issue internally in the coming working group.

A representative of the Swedish administration referred to a research project on stickleback, carried out in Sweden, addressing the risk analysis of stickleback commercial fishery.

The BSAC chair of the Ecosystem-based working group referred to the co-operation between HELCOM and BALTFISH and underlined that the current revision of the Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) is a crucial moment to strengthen this co-operation. The BSAC is feeding into the revision process. He encouraged all relevant stakeholders to give input to the revision process for the benefit of the environment. The next BSAC EBM WG is planned for 21-22 September 2020 or 28-29 September 2020

Possible information from HELCOM

Markus Helavuori, HELCOM Professional Secretary informed that HELCOM is willing to further strengthen the co-operation with BALTFISH and the BSAC. This is particularly important during the revision of the BSAP. BALTFISH has already been invited to comment

on the proposed revisions to the plan. He also invited BALTFISH to give input to the fisheries roadmap produced by HELCOM.

Closure

Next meeting of BALTFISH will take place on **7th (Forum) - 8th (HLG) September** under the Estonian Presidency.

The Finnish Presidency wished Estonia good luck in their Presidency of BALTFISH.