

European Parliament, PECH Committee hearing, 23rd January 2023

State of play of the implementation of the Multiannual Plan (MAP) for the Baltic Sea

The video recording of the PECH to our report:

https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/webstreaming/committee-on-fisheries_20230123-1500-COMMITTEE-PECH

The BSAC ExCom Chair and the Executive Secretary attended the meeting on behalf of the BSAC.

On 23rd January 2023, the Committee on Fisheries held a hearing on the implementation of the State of play of the Multiannual Plan (MAP) for the Baltic Sea, which has been the first MAP adopted back in 2016.

Pierre Karleskind, PECH Committee chair opened the meeting.

The chair of the PECH Committee welcomed everyone to the hearing on the state of implementation of the Baltic MAP. He underlined that the EU multiannual plan (MAP) for cod, herring and sprat fisheries in the Baltic Sea was the first EU multiannual plan when it entered into force in July 2016. The aim was to create better conditions for complying to the CFP and the objectives of environmentally, economically and socially sustainable fisheries and aquaculture. In September 2020, the European Commission presented an evaluation of the first four years with the MAP. The development has not gone exactly according to plan, looking at the health of the fish stocks. Fishing is one of the factors that is having an influence on the stocks. Several other challenging developments in the environment are occurring at the same time.

Henrik Svedäng, associate professor in marine biology, Stockholm University, Baltic Sea Centre.

Changes in Baltic fish stock productivity, status and drivers.

He presented his views on the changes in the productivity of Baltic fish stocks and the drivers behind these changes. He said that there are several challenges in the Baltic related, among others to steep gradients in salinity, temperatures and oxygen due to stratification of water column. The productivity of fish stocks is caused by overfishing (due to wrong stock assessment or political optimism) and natural fluctuations and degradation of the environment. Overfishing can result in loss of subpopulations and stock biomass. 3 out of 7 species included in the MAP have collapsed (western and eastern cod, western herring). The central Baltic herring and Bothnian herring suffer from overfishing and reduced growth. In the case of western cod, too much emphasis

had been put on positive signs caused by good recruitment. Herring in the Gulf of Bothnia dropped in growth at the turn of century. Climate change disturbs the food web. The decline of the eastern cod stock has been going on for decades. In order to secure fish productivity in a fragile ecosystem fishing pressure must be kept well below FMSY.

Vesa Tschernij, Marine Centre of the municipality of Simrishamn, Sweden.

Presentation: A proposal how to amend implementation of the Baltic MAP to achieve better its objectives.

Vesa Tschernij presented his view on the effects of the current management policy on the local fishing communities in Sweden. He pointed to the fact that the number of licences for fishermen does not reflect the reality as much less fishers are active. Fishers in Simrishamn are in severe crisis. Landings decreased by 2/3. 90% of herring is landed abroad for fish meal and there are only 2 pelagic trawlers left. Several coastal communities experience worries about future. There is less large herring in coastal areas because industrial trawlers operate in these areas. They catch 85-95% of quota. The reform of the allocation system to ITQ had led to larger vessels operating in coastal areas, also during the spawning season. These vessels fish large herring. The MSY reference points are incapable to react to the changes in the fish populations. The stock assessment should be based on the CFP and MSFD. In consequence, there will be more large fish.

Katarzyna Stepanowska, Polish small scale fishers, Darłowska Group of Fish Producers and Shipowners and Low Impact Fishers of Europe.

Katarzyna Stepanowska was invited to the PECH hearing as an expert to discuss the impact of the MAP on small scale fisheries. She referred to the LIFE platform created by fishers to support small scale fisheries. According to the STECF data, the small scale sector accounts for 76% of the EU fleet and 5% of total catches. In the Baltic, small scale vessels account for 92% of all fishing vessels, 77% of total employment, 8% of landings in weight and 21% of the value. 80% of Polish vessels are below 12 metres in length. The STECF report highlights that the Baltic small-scale fleet is in crisis. She stated that the Baltic MAP has not delivered positive results with regard to the small-scale sector. Between 2016-21, almost all Baltic fish stocks decreased. Over 80% of Baltic catches go to industrial reduction (fishmeal, fish oil), not to human consumption, and this generates less value. In her view, species interrelations and the Baltic food web should be taken into account and the decision makers should pay more attention to small-scale fisheries. A more holistic approach is needed to the management of Baltic fisheries and recommended that the Baltic MAP is revised and updated to include a cod recovery plan.

Michael Andersen, Danish Fishers Producer Organisation.

The functioning, achievements and difficulties in the MAP in regards of targeted fish stocks in the eastern and western Baltic waters.

He presented the opinion of DFPO, DPPO and EAPO on the Baltic MAP. He underlined that in the opinion of Danish fishers the MAP has not delivered the expected results with respect to the fish stocks. In this opinion, the main reason is that it is a rigid plan applied in a dynamic environment. Many factors impact the fish stocks, including eutrophication, seals, cormorants. Fishing is not the only factor. It is important to apply a more flexible approach in the management. Fishery is a source of low carbon food. He underlined that we need both fish and fishers. The socio-economic factors cannot be ignored. The targets of the MAP need to be adapted every year. He stated that decision makers should follow the science, also when it recommends an increase of the TAC.

Catherine Pedersen Schirmer, Danish Society for Nature Conservation.

The state of the sea, vulnerable stocks (cod, salmon and eel), land and sea based pollution.

She referred to the main aim of the MAP is to create better conditions for complying with the CFP objectives of environmentally, economically and socially sustainable fisheries. She presented the views on the state of the Baltic and underlined that the three main Baltic fisheries have collapsed. The recruitment of Baltic stocks is low. The Baltic marine environment not in a good state. Fish are becoming smaller and smaller. The MAP should aim more at achieving EBM and GES (descriptor 3 of MSFD) and move away from single species to multispecies management. Species interactions should be taken into account. Cod eats sprat and herring. Cod is distributed in the south, pelagic fish more in the north. A spatial management for sprat should be introduced, with the aim to improve feeding conditions for cod. She pointed to ICES ecosystem overviews which should be considered by decision makers, together with the fisheries overviews.

She referred to the need to introduce trawling bans in the Baltic. The only cod stock that is still healthy is the one in Øresund, an area which has had a ban on bottom trawling since the 1930s. The MAP is the right framework, containing ambitious goals, but focus needs to be placed now on their implementation.

In the course of discussion, the MEPs underlined the need for more holistic approach to fisheries management. They took note of the need to introduce EBM and take account of species interactions. They also underlined the need to revise the MAP. The landing obligation should be fully implemented.

Jarosław Zieliński, the BSAC ExCom Chair presented the points from the BSAC position on the Baltic MAP¹; the BSAC members were not satisfied with the general performance of the MAP. The MAP had not facilitated the process of setting of TACs for the relevant stocks. Several BSAC members were of the opinion that the MAP had been counterproductive in this process. It has also been ineffective in implementing the EBM. Moreover, the MAP does not take into consideration the importance of species interactions. In the view of fisheries stakeholders, the lack of socio-economic considerations is one of the main shortcomings of the MAP.

In the opinion of the BSAC, the MAP should be revised in order for it to be more adaptive in the following years. The BSAC is the right platform for discussing the revision of the MAP. He informed that the issue will be put on the agenda of the BSAC ExCom in May 2023 and invited MEPs, and all interested parties, to engage with the BSAC on this topic.

Maja Kircher, DG Mare stated that DG Mare shares the frustration of stakeholders with the performance of the Baltic MAP. As mentioned by a representative of small scale fishery, it has failed to deliver results with regard to the small scale sector.

However, the rules of the Baltic MAP are fit for purpose and are the same as on the North Sea and Western Waters MAPs, where the stocks are in better condition. Therefore, the problem lies in environmental factors. Revision of the MAP will not necessarily solve the problem.

Decades of the lack of implementation of environmental directives caused this situation.

In 2020, the Commissioner organised Our Baltic conference. The Ministers agreed to improve regional co-operation and continue the work on selective gears to reduce by-catches and to protect harbour porpoise by additional by-catch mitigation measures such as deterrent devices and improve data collection. She informed that a similar event will be held in 2023 to see what has been implemented.

Wrap up by the PECH Chair

The PECH Chair stated that the environmental factors seem to be behind the problems in the Baltic. He asked whether actions should be taken at macroregional level with regard to minimising the nutrient load in the Baltic? Synergies should be sought between the CFP and the EU environmental policies.

Henrik Svedäng underlined that we cannot negotiate with nature. He presented the opinion that fishery should be reduced under reduced productivity of fish stocks. In his

¹ <http://www.bsac.dk/getattachment/477f89e7-788f-412c-8ecf-73fc69ce7694/BSAC-position-EP-Hearing-BalticMAP-Jan-2023FINAL-2.pdf.aspx?lang=en-GB>

view, some problems are more difficult to solve because we do not know all the reasons behind the collapse of the cod stocks.

Katarzyna Stepanowska underlined that in her view measures should be taken to save the collapsing small scale sector. Environmental factors should be taken into account in a more holistic approach to management.

Michael Andersen stated that in his opinion the division of the sector into small and large scale is artificial. The MAP has failed for all fishers. Most of all, there is a need to take into account the socio-economic dimension to enable the entire fishing industry, small and large vessels, to survive.

Catherine Schirmer stated that there is no need to revise the MAP, but rather to properly implement it by Member States. She further stated that fishing is one of the main pressures and needs to be reduced, in order to rebuild the stocks, taking account of the fragile Baltic environment. Alternative measures and new policies should be considered, aiming at low impact fishery, increased selectivity, lower bycatches.

Jarosław Zieliński brought up to the attention of the PECH the recent discussion at the MIACO meeting held by ICES. ICES informed that it is not capable of producing any advice on mixed fisheries, also in relation to the species interaction (and the taking into account of mortality due to predators such as seals), in the Baltic, because of the lack of human resources, in concrete terms: lack of experts - scientists. In the name of the BSAC, he requested ICES and the Commission to help in resolving this issue.

Maja Kirchner DG Mare admitted that this problem occurs and stated that it is up to the scientific institutions in the Member States to provide experts, the expertise and data to ICES.

She underlined that regional management has not failed in the Baltic and pointed to the new, more selective gear that will help to reduce the bycatch of cod. With regard to the Bothnian herring, Sweden and Finland could introduce national measures. With regards to the misreporting in pelagic fishery in the Baltic, she noted that the provision of a 10% margin of tolerance by all species onboard has resulted in substantial misreporting of herring and sprat. Therefore, the Commission proposed to go back to the rule of a 10% margin of tolerance applied by species.

The PECH Chair thanked all participants for good presentations and discussions.