

## **BSAC Joint WG (Pelagic and Demersal)**

**13<sup>th</sup> June – 14<sup>th</sup> June 2023**

**Axelborg, Axeltorv 3, 1609 Copenhagen V, Denmark**

**and online via Zoom**

### **Report**

#### **13<sup>th</sup> June 2023**

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

**The Pelagic WG Chair, Teija Aho** chaired the meeting on 13<sup>th</sup> June. She welcomed all the participants, including Dorleta Garcia, ICES/ACOM vice-chair invited to present the 2023 ICES advice for the Baltic stocks and to answer questions on specific issues. She also welcomed the European Commission and the representatives of the Member States. Teija Aho informed that the task of the Working Group was to discuss the ICES advice and to start preparing comments and recommendations from the BSAC. The recommendations would be submitted to the Executive Committee for approval. The BSAC would submit the recommendations on 2024 TACs to the European Commission in early July 2023.

The agenda was adopted without changes. A participants' list is on the website<sup>1</sup>.

##### **2. The 2023 ICES advice for the Baltic**

- a. **Presentation of the ICES advice by Dorleta Garcia, ACOM Vice-Chair**
- b. **Questions on the ICES advice to Dorleta Garcia, ACOM Vice-Chair**

**Dorleta Garcia, ACOM Vice-Chair** explained the 2023 advice by stocks (cod, flatfish, pelagic stocks, sprat, salmon), and gave a power point presentation<sup>2</sup>. She explained the principles of the advice. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions and comment at the end of each category of stocks.

#### **Demersal species**

##### **Eastern cod**

Dorleta Garcia pointed to the fact that 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. These developments indicate that the stock is distressed and is expected to have reduced reproductive potential. Natural mortality has increased and is estimated to be considerably higher than the fishing mortality in recent years. The size of the largest fish in the population has shown a decline

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<sup>1</sup> [BSAC - BSAC Joint Working Group](#)

<sup>2</sup> [BSAC - BSAC Joint Working Group](#)

since 1990. Spawning sites have shrunk, and some have disappeared due to oxygen depletion and the spread of anoxic waters.

ICES advises that when the precautionary approach is applied, there should be zero catch in 2023. This advice applies to all catches from the stock in SDs 24–32. She underlined that the assessment reflects the stock dynamics and is consistent from one year to another.

### **Western cod**

The stock was downgraded from category 1 to category 3 of the ICES framework. The reason for this downgrading is the very uncertain fishing mortality estimated in the assessment model. The effects and order of magnitude associated with these different potential drivers of mortality cannot be quantified. 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.

ICES provides conservation advice for eastern and western cod stocks: for both stocks 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.*

### **Questions/ comments**

**A fisheries representative from Denmark** regretted that ICES had not been able to deliver a less rigid advice with relation to western Baltic cod. He underlined that the impact of climate change on the ecosystem and the resulting development of the cod stocks cannot be regulated by a decrease in the fishing opportunities. However, this decrease in the western cod TAC will have severe implications on the fishing industry.

**The ACOM Vice-Chair** underlined that it is of the highest priority for ICES to provide in the future an ecosystem-based advice to re-build and safeguard stocks as far as possible. To this end, ICES is developing a framework to assess and advise on cumulative effects and multiple management objectives.

**A fisheries representative from Poland** reiterated the question he had asked at several occasions in the past on why ICES does not taken into account the results of recent projects on cod such as TABACOD<sup>3</sup> in the stock assessment methodology. He underlined that the data obtained in TABACOD could be used, among others to estimate time series of growth of the eastern Baltic cod stock and contribute to a more precise assessment of the stock. He stated that the advice is incomplete without such data.

**A fisheries representative from Germany** referred to the need to improve the quality of the research and assessment. Fishers are not always satisfied with the quality of scientific advice. Since scientific advice is the basis for supporting and establishing appropriate

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<sup>3</sup> <https://tabacod.dtu.dk/-/media/institutter/aqua/publikationer/rapporter-352-400/368-2020-tabacod-final-report.pdf?la=da&hash=4DF4FBB19AAF550990485E72C06E435F09F135E9>

management decisions, more funding should be provided to research institutes in the Baltic Member States to carry out studies to better understand the Baltic ecosystem.

**The ACOM Vice-Chair** explained that the stock assessors use the best available knowledge and data in the advice. Results of any research go through benchmarks and external reviews before being included in the assessment. Data could be rejected if considered not mature enough by experts who take part in the assessment working groups. **The ACOM Vice-Chair** underlined that ICES provides advice based on the best available knowledge, however, there are many factors influencing the quality of the advice such as natural variability and uncertainty in the ecosystem. Financing is not the only issue. Even with more research it will be difficult to provide better advice.

**A small-scale fisheries representative** drew attention to the fact that higher, 9% discard rates had been estimated for western Baltic cod in 2022. He underlined that measures should be taken to enhance full enforcement of the landing obligation and eliminate such unaccounted mortality.

**The ACOM Vice-Chair** stated that that fishing does not really have an impact on cod population dynamics. The cod stocks are driven by other pressures.

**A representative of recreational fishers** underlined that as protectors and users of the stock, anglers have made their contribution to the recovery of the stock and will continue to do so in the future. Every year they propose a combination of management measures that ensures equivalent protection. Therefore, representative of recreational fisheries should be included in the dialogue between the interest groups, science, and politics.

### Flatfish

**The ACOM Vice-Chair** stated that plaice in SDs 21-23 and 24-32 are experiencing very high recruitment. Fishing pressure on the stocks is below FMSY and spawning-stock size is above MSY  $B_{trigger}$  and  $B_{lim}$ .

### Questions/comments:

**A fisheries representative from Denmark** stated that fishers observe a starving effect causing reduced growth of plaice. Lack of cod is the real problem for fishers, not the abundance of plaice. In his view, fishers should be given the liberty to exploit the plaice stocks.

**A small scale fisheries representative** agreed that small scale fishers also observe a decrease in growth rate of plaice and lack of large fish, probably from density dependent competition.

### Pelagic stocks

#### Central herring

**The ACOM Vice-Chair** explained that following a benchmark in February 2023, a new assessment model used to produce catch advice. As a result of the updated SSB and fishing mortality reference points, the catch advice for 2024 was reduced by approximately 45% as compared to the advice for 2023. Species misreporting of herring and sprat has

occurred in the past, and there is evidence that this is an ongoing problem.  $B_0$ , defined as the unexploited SSB at current conditions in the assessment of  $B_{lim}$ . Following the benchmark, the spawning-stock size is below  $MSY B_{trigger}$ ,  $B_{pa}$ , and  $B_{lim}$

### **Herring Gulf of Riga**

**The ACOM Vice-Chair stated that following the benchmark**, the 17% decrease in advice is largely due to the decrease in estimated biomass.

### **Herring SDs 30-31**

**The ACOM Vice-Chair** stated that the updated assessment has revised down SSB in recent years. It is likely that this downward revision in SSB is related to the downward revision of recruitment and stock numbers in 2021–2022 and (in particular) the lower body condition of the older herring. The reasons for the decline in weight-at-age are not understood and it is partially accounted for in the forecast.

### **Western herring**

Under the advice on conservation aspects, ICES advises that measures to protect and restore known spawning habitats and nursery areas are needed. There should be zero catch in 2024 as the trend in the SSB and recruitment is still decreasing.

### **Sprat**

The stock was benchmarked in 2023, resulting in a change in the assessment model. Natural mortality estimates and reference points were also updated. Due to natural fluctuations, the two most recent recruitment estimates are among the lowest in the time series. If such poor recruitment continues, the declining trend in SSB will continue.

### **Questions/ comments:**

**A small-scale fisheries representative** referred to the mixed fisheries of sprat and herring (with a 60:40 ratio between the species) and questioned the mismatch between the advised TAC for sprat of more than 240,000 tonnes and the advised TAC of herring is approximately 40,000 tonnes.

**A representative of the OIG** asked whether any options for spatial management for sprat are being considered by ICES.

**The ACOM Vice-Chair** replied that ICES does not provide a mixed fisheries advice in the Baltic and does not consider options for spatial management.

**A fisheries representative from Poland** asked whether the mortality of sprat escaping from fishing gears is included in the assessment. He asked what value of selectivity factors was used in the assessment and who is responsible for decisions which data should be included in the assessment.

**The ACOM Vice-Chair** replied that inclusion of any new data into the advice process is done through benchmarks. Referring to the value of selectivity for sprat, she stated that it has not been included in the summary of the assessment presented in the advice as it was considered irrelevant for the advice or the data was not good enough.

**A fisheries representative from Germany** underlined the need to improve knowledge on the western herring stock, in particular with respect to the reference points and the productivity of the ecosystem. He referred to the reduction of the fishing opportunities in Skagerrak and Kattegat discussed by Norway and Sweden and possible effect of such reductions and whether a decreased target value of SSB is expected.

**The ACOM Vice-Chair** replied that the research on western herring is ongoing and a new framework for reference points could probably be expected in the near future.

With reference to western herring, **a fisheries representative from Denmark** asked what there is scientific evidence for the effect of habitat degradation on western herring stock. She also asked how the B0 is calculated in the case of central herring.

**The ACOM Vice-Chair** confirmed that according to scientific evidence eutrophication and spawning habitat degradation have negative effects on the early life-stage survival and the productivity of western herring. With reference to B0, she replied that data from last 10 years was used in the calculations and adapted to most recent conditions of the stock.

With reference to bycatch of herring in sprat fisheries, **a fisheries representative from Denmark** underlined that fishers apply different methods to avoid by-catch and affect the catch composition.

**Another fisheries representative from Denmark** expressed a strong reservation with regard to the use of B0, defined as the unexploited SSB at current conditions in the assessment. He considered the B0 rather as a far-from-reality “guestimate” that should not be used in the assessment of central herring. With regard to western herring, he underlined a small increase in the SSB in recent years and drew attention to the fact that if the MAP option were to be included in the advice, a TAC of almost 20,000 tonnes could be considered. He stated that a zero TAC advice could be considered as a political option.

**The ACOM Vice-Chair** stated that B0 is widely used for stock assessment in the US and Canada. ICES assessment working group had different views with regard to the use of B0. She underlined that ICES bases its advice on the best available science.

**A fisheries representative from Sweden** stated that according to the official landing data Swedish fishers are able to reach high selectivity in pelagic fisheries. She underlined that development of offshore wind farms has had a substantial impact on the degradation of spawning habitats of western herring. She asked the ACOM Vice-Chair whether regime shifts had been included in the assessment models for central herring and sprat.

**The ACOM Vice-Chair** replied that regime shifts will be included in the assessment models next year. Replying to a question from a representative of the OIG on the inclusion of Russian catches in the advice, she stated that the Russian catch data had not been provided directly to ICES due to the temporary suspension of Russia from ICES. The catch data had been taken from the website of the Russian scientific institute Atlantniro and included in the calculations.

**A fisheries representative from Poland** proposed to hold a meeting with ICES to discuss, among others, the interspecies relations between cod and sprat and other outstanding issues related to the advice.

## Salmon in the Main Basin

### Salmon in the Gulf of Finland

#### Sea trout

The **ACOM Vice-Chair** presented the advice for Baltic salmon in SDs 22-31 and SD 32 as well as sea trout.

The **Working Group** took note.

The **WG Chair** thanked Dorleta Garcia, the ACOM Vice-Chair for her presentations and for answering the questions.

The **Working Group** took note of the presentation.

#### ICES consultation meeting on 12<sup>th</sup> June<sup>4</sup>

The **BSAC ExCom Chair** referred to the ICES Baltic consultation meeting held on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2023. The meeting concluded that ICES will organise a workshop in 2024 picking up the recommendations of the previous workshop and explore what can be done. ICES will also work on a draft proposal for a scientific project potentially funded by EMFAF to transfer knowledge to effective fish stock management in the Baltic. The meeting also referred to the fact that many species and habitat are not in good condition. This affects food web, functionality, reduces resilience and resistance against environmental changes and diminishes prospect of socioeconomic benefit including fishing opportunities. The Chair summarised the main conclusions:

- One challenge is that current single stock advice does not consider the changes in the environment. Other drivers of stock development apart from fisheries are not considered.
- ICES could improve the way it includes the environment in the current framework.
- there is a need for more science in some areas: connectivity between coastal and open science, influence of climate change on growth and recruitment. The impact of predators should be better included in the advice.

During the meeting, the **ExCom Chair** presented the BSAC position on species interactions and need for mixed fisheries advice. He invited ICES to participate in the BSAC workshop on predators in the autumn. He explained that the 12<sup>th</sup> June ICES meeting had been organised at short notice and the invitation was addressed to BSAC representatives. He expressed hope that BSAC members will be able to undertake a dialogue with ICES during the next workshop planned in 2024.

### **3. Discussion on Cod area closures (draft recommendation)**

The **Demersal WG Chair** referred to the BSAC recommendation on the effectiveness of cod spawning area protection measures<sup>5</sup>, The draft had been consulted with the BSAC

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bsac.dk/getattachment/BSAC-Resources/Documents-section/BSAC-Newsletter-latest/BSACreportICESmeetingBaltic12062023.pdf.aspx?lang=en-GB>

members and several comments/amendments were received. She asked the Working Group for approval of the text of the recommendation.

**Some participants** proposed some further corrections to the text.

**The Working Group** decided to endorse the text of the draft recommendation with the proposed amendments. The draft recommendation was sent to the ExCom for adoption.

#### **14<sup>th</sup> June 2023**

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

**Lise Laustsen, the Pelagic WG Chair** chaired the meeting.

The floor was opened for discussion stock by stock and the initial development of draft BSAC recommendations for the fishery for 2024.

#### **Cod stocks**

**Fisheries representative from Denmark, Sweden, Germany and Estonia** were of the opinion that the 2024 TACs for the eastern and western cod stocks should be set as a rollover of the 2023 TACs. They took note that according to the advice both stocks have not deteriorated further and underlined that a bycatch quota is needed for both cod stocks to allow for the exploitation of abundant flatfish resources. They expressed the view that the process of developing and providing advice can be further improved to ensure appropriate management decisions. This view was also supported by a **representative of recreational fishers**.

**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 interspecies dependence. In his view, without the information on 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 representative of the OIG** stated that, due to the degraded state of the stock and high uncertainties in the assessment 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 representative of recreational anglers** was in favour of reserving 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. He expressed strong support for selective gears aimed at avoiding bycatch of cod and underlined the need for management measures for cormorants. Different methods to improve survivability should be discussed.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.bsac.dk/getattachment/Meetings/BSAC-meetings/BSAC-Executive-Committee-\(5\)/6-DraftBSACCOMMeasurescodspawning2023-2024-15062023.doc.aspx?lang=en-GB](http://www.bsac.dk/getattachment/Meetings/BSAC-meetings/BSAC-Executive-Committee-(5)/6-DraftBSACCOMMeasurescodspawning2023-2024-15062023.doc.aspx?lang=en-GB)

**A small-scale fisheries representative** supported a rollover of the 2023 TAC for western cod (595 tonnes), on the condition that the quota is allocated to fishers who use passive gears in order to preserve the stock following the first good recruitment since 2016. In his view, active gears are not compatible with the landing obligation and account for high discard rates. He drew attention to the need to prioritise full implementation of the landing obligation.

### **Plaice**

**A fisheries representative from Denmark** stated that discards in trawl fishery are negligible and have no impact on the cod stocks. The stocks are driven by natural mortality. He expressed support for the introduction of new, selective gear but underlined that its mandatory use should be postponed by at least one year, to allow for testing and adapting the gear to different areas and to different vessels.

He proposed to set the TAC for plaice at a realistic level, sufficiently high to allow exploitation of this abundant resource. He also expressed the view that the effectiveness of the current closed area in SD 24 should be evaluated, in view of the fact that the area is close for fishing when it is possible to catch plaice without cod bycatch. He underlined that ICES should be requested to update the assessment and advice on western cod stock also in 2024 (advice for 2025), in order to take account of any new developments of this stock.

**A fisheries representative from Sweden** agreed that some seasonal and spatial closures have not demonstrated to have any measurable positive impact on stock development and therefore ICES should be asked to evaluate their effectiveness.

**An OIG representative** stated that given the bad state of both cod stocks, the large increase in the TAC for plaice must therefore not be taken. In his view a rollover TAC would be acceptable.

**A fisheries representative from Latvia** stated that the management of the Baltic cod stocks has not proved to be effective and other solutions than a zero catch should be sought. Despite a zero catch quota for targeted fishery of the eastern cod the stock shows no evident signs of improvement. A zero catch advice has severe consequences for the fisheries sector and prevents the exploitation of other resources.

**An OIG representative** underlined that a mixed fisheries and ecosystem-based advice and management, taking account of species interrelations and environmental factors driving fish stocks need to be introduced as soon as possible.

**Fisheries representatives** agreed that the 2024 TAC for plaice in SDs 22-32 in accordance with the ICES MSY approach at 17,947 tonnes.

**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 and the impact of selectivity on population structure. He emphasised that the predation of sprat on cod eggs and other food species dependency are not included in the advice. Another **fisheries representative from Poland** added that scientific surveys should be carried out on commercial vessels because fishers have the necessary



knowledge to find migrating fish stocks. He strongly opposed to a zero TAC for eastern cod and proposed not to decrease the TACs for central herring and sprat as compared to last year.

**An OIG representative** underlined that there is a need to consider alternative management rather than alternative science.

**A small-scale fisheries representative** underlined that in addition to the gaps in the advice, the Baltic MAP has not delivered the expected results and is not fit for purpose of stock management

**The ExCom Chair** stated that the BSAC had already requested the European Commission to consider the problem of the lack of expertise on species interactions and mixed fisheries in the Baltic and in consequence, lack of mixed fisheries advice. He drew attention to the fact that the lack of this advice results in the application of a precautionary approach in stock management.

### **Pelagic stocks**

With reference to herring in SDs 30-31, **the fisheries representatives from Finland** proposed to set the 2024 TAC at FMSY upper value, in view of some signs of positive stock development and in order to avoid too drastic decrease of the TAC from one year to another.

**A representative of the OIG** underlined that the state of herring in the Bothnian Bay is frustrating. He recognised that the decrease in the SSB is driven by food dynamics and there are no positive signals on getting back on track. In his view, there is a need to rebuild the stock and the fishing mortality should be minimised. Low impact coastal fisheries should be prioritised. **Other representatives of the OIG** underlined the dramatic situation of the stock and called for minimising the fishing pressure.

**A fisheries representative from Denmark** stated that the TAC should be set at a responsible level advised by science. He underlined that fishery is not the only factor regulating the stock development. **A fisheries representative from Sweden** agreed with the proposed TAC level as advised by science. She underlined the need to improve the stock assessment due to several shortcomings. Reasons for the decreased body condition and size of herring are unclear and need to be investigated.

**A fisheries representative from Estonia** confirmed the observations of some positive developments with regard to herring in SDs 30-31. In his view there is no need to apply dramatic management measures.

**A small-scale fisheries representative** proposed to set the TAC at 0.2 FMSY (approx. 12,000 t) and to allocate the quota only to the low-impact coastal fishers.

**The representatives of recreational anglers** expressed their concern by herring in SDs 30-31 and underlined the need to get the stock back on track. They agreed with other representatives of the OIG that the fishing pressure should be minimised.

With reference to the herring in the Gulf of Riga, **fisheries representatives from Latvia and Estonia** recommend a rollover of the 2023 TAC. In their opinion, the fishery is stable

and fishers observe an increased amount of herring in this SD. Latvian fishers draw attention to the fact that the impact of seals on fisheries in the Gulf of Riga needs to be evaluated. Fishers are compensated for the damages caused by the seals, but this does not reduce their impact.

**A representative of the OIG** stated that cautious decisions with regard to the TAC for the Gulf of Riga herring are needed, in order not to damage the stock and to allow the stock biomass to increase more substantially.

**A small-scale fisheries representative** recommended setting the TAC for this stock at **27,696 t** ( $F_{MSY}$  lower), in order to allow stock biomass to increase and build ecosystem.

With reference to the central herring, several fisheries representative drew attention to the dramatic decrease of the advised TAC for 2024, following a benchmark in February 2023 and shared their concern about the consequences that such radical changes have on management. In their view, there are no indications of a dramatic changes in the stock condition and the decrease in the advised TAC is a consequence of the revision of reference points and the use of different assessment model. The new model has changed the perception of where the critical level of the stock is. Nevertheless, **the fisheries representatives** agreed to follow the ICES advice and set the TAC at 52,549 tonnes, which is in accordance with the MAP  $F_{MSY}$  scenario in the ICES advice, and allows for an increase in SSB.

**Some fisheries representatives** expressed their reservations with regard to the use of B0 in the stock assessment, defined as the unexploited SSB at current conditions.

**Fisheries representatives from Poland** underlined that they do not support the ICES advice for central herring. They draw attention to the fact that the ICES advice does not take account of selectivity and mortality of fish escaping through meshes, that have a substantial influence on the stock dynamics and are well documented in the relevant literature. They called for the use of alternative advice, including all available knowledge on species interactions and selectivity.

**A group of OIG members** did not provide a quantitative catch recommendation, due to the degraded state of the stock and high uncertainties flagged by scientists and recommended to minimise the fishing pressure. In their view, there is a need to introduce spatial management for pelagic stocks. They also drew attention to the fact that herring is taken in mixed fisheries with sprat and this fact should be considered in the management decisions.

**A small-scale fisheries representative** underlined that since the fishing mortality of herring is driven by sprat fishery, the sprat TAC must be set at such level as to ensure the central herring TAC at the level below  $F_{MSY}$ . He drew attention to the high level of species misreporting in pelagic fisheries. In his view, there is a need for thorough analysis of catch data.

**A fisheries representative from Denmark** underlined that fishermen apply different methods to avoid by-catch of herring in sprat fishery. Areas of high concentration of herring are avoided by fishermen targeting sprat.

With reference to western herring, a **representative of the OIG** underlined that the stock has not improved and the targeted fishery on this stock must be closed. He drew attention that measures to protect the stock should also be taken in the areas outside the Baltic. Additional measures recommended by ICES to protect and restore known spawning habitats and nursery areas should be implemented.

**Several fisheries representatives** could not support setting a zero TAC for 2024 for herring in SDs 22-24. They underlined the need to take into account the socio-economic consequences of a zero advice on the fishing industry. Any continued reduction should be reflected in all management areas where western herring is targeted. They pointed to several measures taken in Division 3a to minimise the catch of western herring in other management areas. They reiterated their view that the MAP should be used by ICES as its headline advice and a management tool. They proposed to set the TAC as the rollover of the 2023 TAC for this SD. They also underlined the need to improve knowledge on the herring stocks, in particular with respect to the reference points and the productivity of the ecosystem, in order to improve the management.

With reference to sprat, **several fisheries representatives**<sup>6</sup> presented rationale for using the upper  $F_{MSY}$  option. The stock is stable and the SSB is high. Setting the TAC at upper  $F_{MSY}$  option would still allow for a 16% increase of the SSB. They pointed to the rationale behind the TAC option related to species interactions between sprat and herring as well as sprat and cod. Sprat competes with both herring and small/juvenile cod for food, and a lower sprat biomass may therefore be positive to allow both the central Baltic herring to recover from its current low biomass levels as well as help the cod stocks recover. Sprat predation on cod eggs is well known and scientifically documented, and with the current situation for the cod stocks all measures should be taken to reduce the natural mortality of the cod, including using the higher range for sprat to reduce egg predation as well as food competition between sprat and juvenile cod for plankton.

According to **some fisheries representatives from Sweden and Denmark**, fishers apply different methods to avoid by-catch of herring in sprat fishery. Areas of high concentration of herring are avoided by fishers targeting sprat, to keep the fishery “clean” of herring bycatch.

**A fisheries representative from Latvia** underlined that fishers had observed large amount of herring in sprat fishery this year and had to stop fishing to prevent bycatch of herring. He could not agree to another 10% decrease of the sprat TAC advised by ICES for 2024. He drew attention to the fact that Latvian fishers had invested a lot of money into the MSC certification of sprat fishery. The certificate has been suspended this year. In his view, ICES advice should aim at stabilising the long-term management of this stock.

**A fisheries representative from Sweden** stated that fishers observe massive migration of sprat into the Bothnian Bay. Taking into account the fact that sprat competes with herring for food, she underlined that this is another reason to set the 2024 TAC at upper  $F_{MSY}$

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<sup>6</sup> DFPO, DPPO, Swedish Pelagic Federation, Swedish Fishermen PO, Union of German Cutter Fishery, Fish Producers' Organisation Bałtyk

option. Swedish fishers have no problem with mixing of herring and sprat as they can direct fishing to the chosen species.

**A fisheries representative from Poland** presented the view that the sprat fishery should be maximised to limit the predation of sprat on cod eggs and other species dependency. He underlined that taking into account such interspecies relations is in line with the ecosystem management. He also referred to the fact that the problem of mixing of herring and sprat in the catches could be eliminated by resolving selectivity issues. He proposed to organise a meeting with ICES to discuss the species interactions and other outstanding issues related to the advice.

**A fisheries representative from Poland** presented the view that the sprat fishery should be maximised to limit the predation of sprat on cod eggs, food competition (Copepoda) and other species dependency. These are important factors that ICES did not include in assessment. He said that without knowing the age of cod (data is available in the TABACOD project), it is not possible to set appropriate management measures. He gave an example of a 20cm cod with roe, considered by some scientists during the benchmark as a young individual. Young individuals should be protected, but old ones should be caught, in order not to transfer weal genetic pool. He underlined that taking into account such interspecies relations is in line with the ecosystem management. He underlined that the ICES advice does not take into account the mortality of fish escaping through meshes. The lack of these data makes the advice incomplete. In his view, discussing concrete quantitative catch recommendations legitimises this incomplete advice.

**A representative of the OIG** underlined that any interspecies considerations between herring and sprat should be taken into account in management decisions. In his view, this topic should be further discussed by the BSAC Pelagic WG.

With reference to salmon in the Main Basin, **some representative of the OIG**<sup>7</sup> recommended that active and targeted salmon fishing should only take place in SD 31 within four nautical miles from the coast. If no spatial management can be agreed, the sea TAC needs to be set at zero.

**Fisheries representative from Sweden and Finland** stated that they could not accept the advice to allow salmon fishery only in SD 31. In their view, there is a possibility to continue salmon fishing in SD 30 and at the same time avoid the weak Ljungan river stock. **The fisheries representatives from Finland** underlined that salmon is an important commercial fish species in other areas than SD 31. In addition, they question the possibility to catch any salmon from to Ljungan river along the Finnish coastal line inside 4 nautical miles where the commercial salmon fishery is allowed. In their view, the Main Basin salmon should be managed the same way as in 2022 and 2023. Additional restrictions should be implemented in the near vicinity of Ljungan river where the probability to catch these rare salmon individuals is the greatest.

They were in favour of setting the same TAC and management measures as for 2023.

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<sup>7</sup> CCB, WWF Finland, Baltic Waters, FishSec and Baltic Salmon Rivers Association

**The representatives of recreational anglers** recommended the following regulations and actions concerning Baltic salmon for 2024:

- a bag limit of one salmon (excluding recent spawners) per angler and day for sea anglers south of latitude 59.30 N.
- recreational trolling north of 59.30 N should be subject to member state regulation and not be unnecessarily regulated by a 4 nautical mile boundary.
- a new study of mortality of Atlantic salmon released after being caught via trolling should be carried out.
- regulations demanding landing of whole un-filleted fish should only be for salmonids (salmon and sea trout), not for other species such as pike, perch and pikeperch.
- utilise more EMFAF funding for the removal of fish migration barriers in the rivers.
- a Europe-wide program should be initiated to achieve a balanced European management of cormorants.<sup>8</sup>

**A fisheries representative from Denmark** could not agree with the management measures introduced last year and further restrictions to limit the salmon fishing to SD 31 proposed this year. It has had a major effect on those who fish salmon in Denmark and prevented them from pursuing their traditional fishery, at the same time transferring the fish to fishers from other countries. They hope that a proportion of the TAC could also be allocated to the Danish fishers.

With reference to salmon in the Main Basin and in the Gulf of Finland, **a representative of the OIG** recommended that a new EU proposal for a multi-annual plan is developed. Referring to the Gulf of Finland salmon, he stated that measures to focus the fishing effort on reared salmon should be maintained. He underlined that salmon from Gulf of Finland mix with Main Basin salmon stocks at sea. The mixed stock sea fishery must be stopped to safeguard the Gulf of Finland stocks.

With reference to sea trout, some members of the OIG referred to high bycatch rates of sea trout in some areas of the Baltic and recommended to reduce bycatch of sea trout in fisheries targeting other and well as introduce local management measures for sea trout. They drew attention to the problem of misreporting of salmon (reported as sea trout) which had been only reduced on paper. They proposed to take this issue up when discussing the salmon management plan in the future.

**Another representative of the OIG** expressed the view of his organisation<sup>9</sup>. All mixed stock salmon fishing in the entire Baltic Sea should be stopped, including SD 31, where there are several very weak stocks. Salmon should be managed in small management areas. This would permit better management of commercial fishing against primarily farmed stocks but also the few strong stocks that would withstand commercial fishing. In their view, recreational anglers should be allowed to keep not more than one farmed salmon per person per day. All mixed stock fishing, commercial or recreational, must cease

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.eaa-europe.org/positions/baltic-salmon-2023.html>

<sup>9</sup> Salmon Baltic Rivers Association

to give the weak stocks a chance to recover.

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**The WG Chair** thanked the participants for good discussions. All the caveats will be included in the BSAC recommendations.

**The Working Group** asked the Secretariat to produce, after the meeting, draft BSAC recommendations for the fishery in the Baltic Sea in 2024. Participants were asked to submit input to the recommendations. The draft would be sent to the WG and ExCom for comments and the recommendations would be adopted by the ExCom on 29<sup>th</sup> June 2023. 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 2024”**

**The Executive Secretary** informed that the Commission’s Communication Towards more sustainable fishing in the EU: state of play and orientations for 2024 will be published. The BSAC Secretariat will distribute it among its members. A presentation and discussion of the Communication is planned to take place at the ExCom at the end of June 2023.

#### **6. Starting discussion on a BSAC recommendation on management in relation with species interactions**

**The Pelagic WG Chair** stated that the BSAC plans to hold discussions on species interactions in the framework of WG meetings in September 2023.

**The Executive Secretary** noted that presentation of mixed fisheries management in other sea basin as well as presentation of the ICES Baltic ecosystem overview could also feed into these discussions.

**A fisheries representative from Denmark** stated that the mixed fisheries advice and management in the North Sea is not relevant for the Baltic.

**A fisheries representative from Poland** drew attention to the available literature and knowledge on species interactions in the Baltic. He also underlined that scientists with alternative approach to the issue should also be included in the discussions.

**A fisheries representative from Germany** underlined the need to include the impact of predators in the fisheries management. This issue requires frank discussions and decisions.

**The ExCom Chair** proposed to hold a meeting to discuss additional science needed for fisheries management purposes in the first quarter of 2024. A small focus group should be set to prepare this meeting.

**The Working Group** took note.

#### **7. Update from BALTFISH Presidency**

**The Executive Secretary** informed that the BALTFISH Presidency had submitted additional information regarding the draft Joint Recommendation on derogation from the landing obligation in the Baltic Sea establishing a discard plan as regards salmon in the Baltic Sea (ICES Subdivisions 22-32) for the consultations with the BSAC. The BSAC Secretariat received comments to this consultation from two organisations. A reply was sent to BALTFISH.

**The Working Group** took note.

## 8. AOB

**The Executive Secretary** referred to the proposed dates of the BSAC meetings planned in the second half of 2023. The meeting planner will be sent to the European Commission by 15<sup>th</sup> June 2023.

**The Working Group** agreed on the following meeting dates:

Tuesday 26 Sept 2023	Demersal WG	Online
Wednesday 27 Sept 2023	Ecosystem Based management WG	Online
Thursday 28 Sept 2023	Pelagic WG	Online
Thursday 26 Oct 2023	Executive Committee	Hybrid Gdynia
Friday 27 Oct 2023	Workshop on predators with BALTFISH	Hybrid and Gdynia
TBD	Workshop on implementation of the LO with EFCA-BALTFISH	TBD

**The Executive Secretary** informed that the European Commission has launched the consultation of the Implementing Act regarding selective gears<sup>10</sup>. He recalled that following the discussions in the Demersal WG in March 2023, the BSAC Secretariat had prepared a draft recommendation regarding the legal acts introducing a new mandatory trawl gear device. The draft will be circulated among the BSAC members. The deadline for comments is 28<sup>th</sup> June 2023. The recommendation will be sent to the Commission on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2023.

With reference to the format of the BSAC recommendation on 2024 TACs, **the Pelagic WG Chair** asked the participants to propose how to improve the recommendation.

<sup>10</sup> [Selective devices for fishing in the Baltic Sea \(new detailed rules\) \(europa.eu\)](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/en/press-communications/default.aspx?comp_id=111111)

**The participants** appreciated the discussions held in the Working Group. They underlined that despite the ambitions to reach consensus, there are fundamental differences between the BSAC members and different opinions that need to be reflected in the recommendations. One participant proposed to split the Working Group meeting on TAC recommendations in smaller groups to improve dialogue and quality of advice. A fisheries representative underlined that it is difficult to find common language among organisations which have substantially different objectives. Another fisheries representative praised the work of the chairs and the Secretariat and referred to the fact that at present the BSAC should deal with its advice under the crisis situation in fisheries. Concrete problems should be dealt with in the framework of focus groups, to allow for thorough discussions.

**The Pelagic WG Chair** thanked all participants for good discussions and good input to the BSAC recommendations. She thanked the Secretariat and the interpreters for their performance.