

First Science Focus Group Meeting
Monday, 17th March 2025
11:30 – 14:00 (CET) by Zoom
Report

Participants:

BSAC members: Cathrine Pedersen Schirmer (Fisheries Secretariat), Gaëtane Le Breuil (EFFOP), Michael Andersen (DFPO), Matti Ovaska (WWF and EBM WG Chair), Aimi Hamberg (CCB), Amanda Öberg (BalticWaters), Thomas Johansson (Baltic Salmon Fund), Krzysztof Stanuch (Polish National Chamber of Fish Producers).

Observer: Kim Stobberup (MSC),

BSAC Secretariat: Alexander Ben Embarek, Klavs Skovsholm, Ewa Milewska (rapporteur)

Apologies: Christian Tsangarides, Teija Aho

1. Welcome by the BSAC secretariat, introduction of chair (Alexander Ben Embarek)

The Executive Secretary welcomed all participants. He chaired the meeting.

2. Formalities for the start of the meeting

The agenda was adopted.

3. Presentation of the context, tour de table of expectations, election of a Chair

The Executive Secretary referred to the fact that the BSAC Executive Committee¹ had decided in June 2024 to set up a focus group in order to prepare a “BSAC science workshop” and encouraged members to join this Focus Group (FG). This workshop’s objectives would be to allow BSAC membership to reach more consensus on any outstanding questions referring to fisheries science, in order to make better use of science in fisheries management. The Executive Committee held in Helsinki on 29th October asked the BSAC members to join the Focus Group. It was presented again to both the Demersal Working Group and the Pelagic Working Group in February 2025, where members were again encouraged to join.

He informed that originally the objective of the Focus Group was to prepare a BSAC science workshop. The FG will present the results of its work to the BSAC the ExCom for a final decision regarding convening such a workshop. It is up to the ExCom to decide whether the work on science should be continued in the framework of a BSAC Working Group on science.

A representative of the OIG pointed out that the main goal for the Focus Group should be to discuss how to improve the science. To this end the BSAC should carry out a dynamic and active dialogue with ICES. The Focus Group should discuss whether the group should evolve into a permanent working group on science or a BSAC science workshop.

A fisheries representative from Denmark underlined the need to make a clear differentiation between science and policy. In his view, the discussions should be more related to how scientific knowledge is translated into the advice for fisheries management as the advice from ICES is determined by questions/requests raised by a political body.

He agreed that it is up to the ExCom to decide whether this Focus Group should become a permanent Working Group. In his view, the BSAC members should avoid formalising and building artificial divisions between the existing working groups.

A fisheries representative from Poland stated that the objectives of the Focus Group should be clearly articulated as the first step, taking into account the overarching objective of the fisheries sector to provide food security and jobs for people. This can only be secured by keeping the best possible structure of the fish stocks. In his view, there should be an open, unlimited approach to science in order to improve scientific advice.

¹[\[Modtagerfelt\]](#)

A representative of the OIG underlined that the Baltic ecosystem is suffering from different impacts, and therefore it is important that the best available science, including stock structure and MSFD descriptors should be used in fisheries management. The Focus Group on science should invite the ACOM Chair as well as other experts on particular topics to feed into the discussions and should closely cooperate with the EBM Working Group.

An observer from MSC underlined that, as highlighted during the 2025 MIACO meeting, stakeholder engagement is increasingly important in the work of ICES. For the BSAC to actively engage with ICES, the Focus Group should aim at a better understanding of the advisory process, especially with regard to the reference points and rebuilding plans. He also pointed to the need to explore the possibility for revising the Baltic MAP, to better incorporate the EBM approach in the context of the regime shift in the Baltic.

The EBM WG Chair agreed that the Focus Group should closely cooperate with the EBM WG and at the same time should focus on science to avoid overlapping with topics on the agenda of the EBM WG. He underlined that the BSAC members have the expertise and knowledge that could feed into the ICES advice.

The Focus Group agreed that making better use of science in fisheries management should be the main objective of the Focus Group.

Election of Chair

The Focus Group decided to ask Glenn Douglas, the Vice-Chair of the BSAC Executive Committee if he would be willing to be the Chair of the Focus Group.

4. Presentation of the draft Terms of reference (ToR) for adoption.

The Executive Secretary presented the draft ToR and asked the participants to submit their comments. The members of the FG will be given time to comment after the meeting. The ToR need to be adopted by the Executive Committee. A written procedure for adoption must be launched at least 5 working days before the next meeting of the FG as per Rules of Procedure².

The FG agreed.

5. Agree on objectives of the science focus group and refine them

The Executive Secretary invited the participants to discuss and refine the objectives of the FG. He reminded the FG that the main objective is to prepare a science workshop as well as to discuss topical issues submitted by the FG members referring to fisheries science, in order to improve the current scientific advice for the Baltic Sea fish stocks, and to improve the interpretation and use of the science in EU fisheries management. The work of the FG can, in addition to practical aspects of the organisation of a workshop, such as venue and invitation of scientists, also include discussions on how to prepare and present the science to the workshop participants.

The participants put forward the topics that could be subject to discussions in the FG.

A representative of the OIG stated that in her opinion the proposed objective to prepare and present the science to the workshop participants is too narrow. Creating a permanent Working Group on science should one of the main objectives. Such group should prepare recommendations in dialogue with ICES on how to improve the scientific advice.

A fisheries representative from Poland reminded the group that the main objective set for the Advisory Councils is to advise on the formulation and implementation of fisheries management measures, in order to achieve a successful running of the CFP. This can only be achieved by maintaining the best possible structure of the fish stocks. In his view, this should be the main objective of the FG.

² Rule 57 BSAC Rules of Procedure

The EBM WG Chair stated that one of the reasons for setting up a FG on science is to better understand the ICES advice on fishing opportunities and therefore this should be one of the main objectives of the FG.

A representative of the OIG supported the proposal to put the issues that might appear advice on fishing opportunities on the agenda of the FG while leaving room for other topics that may arise in the future. She underlined that the group should conclude its work in relation to different topics in the form of draft recommendations to be presented to the ExCom for adoption. She supported the idea of establishing a permanent Working Group on science.

Other representatives of the OIG agreed that new issues for discussion may appear in view of the changing environmental conditions in the Baltic and therefore the objectives of the FG should not be carved in stone. EBM and reference points should be high on the agenda of the FG. The work of the FG should be concluded with a draft recommendation. In their view, a workshop on science should not be the main objective of the FG, but it is up to the ExCom to decide whether to organise such workshop. They asked whether the duration of the Focus Group is any way limited.

The Executive Secretary stated that according to the Rules of Procedure³ focus groups are temporary and exist only for the period needed to develop the basic draft they are working on. Should the FG decide to change the current goal of preparing the science workshop, a new end goal needs to be presented in the ToR. The time line for the FG could be included in the revised ToR.

Another member of the Secretariat clarified the mandate of the FG. The first meeting is to explore what the goal of the FG should be and whether the FG is to become a permanent Working Group. The ExCom is to validate the revised ToR.

A fisheries representative from Denmark stated that in his view the group dealing with science should remain open to new issues that should be discussed. He noted, however, that some elements of the EBM cannot be included in the assessment models because of the lack of data. He remained reluctant to the establishment of a permanent Working Group on science due to the fact that most of the issues are dealt with by the existing working groups.

A fisheries representative from Poland proposed to include discussion on the basic principles used by ICES in the assessment and advice process, as some of them such as for example age reading do not work properly. He underlined that the recommendations produced as a result of discussions in the FG should include a critical review of ICES advisory process, pointing out what should be improved.

An observer from MSC asked whether the recommendations will be addressed to the Commission or ICES.

A fisheries representative from Denmark underlined that according to its mandate the BSAC provides the European Commission and EU countries with recommendations on fisheries management matters. However, a dialogue with ICES should be maintained by the BSAC in order to feed in the expertise of fishers into the assessments.

A representative of the OIG stated that the BSAC could recommend to the Commission what should be the priorities for scientific requests addressed to ICES. **Another representative of the OIG** underlined that the BSAC recommendations should point out what is missing in the ICES headline advice.

The FG decided to revise the Terms of Reference to include:

- The work of the FG will be finalised in the form of a recommendation subject to approval by the ExCom.
- The FG should explore the need to set up a permanent Working Group on science.

³ Article 57

- The topics for discussion should not be carved in stone. Other relevant topics could be added if need arises.

6. Discussion of what issues to be tackled by the science focus group for a preliminary work plan.

After some discussion, **the Focus Group** decided to include the following topics in the ToR (listed by priority).

- Ecosystem and food web considerations
- Quality of science – what needs to be improved?
- ICES advice on fishing opportunities
- Changes in the stock structure (size, age and sex) in the assessments
- Interspecies relations and stock dynamics
- Cod recovery plan
- Mixed fisheries advice
- Risk assessment in relation to scientific advice (highlighting uncertainties in the advice)
- Approach to the selectivity
- Reference points

The FG proposed to discuss the work plan for the group at the next meeting of the FG.

7. Next steps

The FG discussed the possible next steps. **The participants** noted that the FG should meet possibly before the release of ICES advice on Baltic fish stocks and fishing opportunities for 2026. The work plan for the group will be produced at the next meeting.

The Focus Group decided to ask the Secretariat to draft a revised ToR and distribute it to the members of the FG for comments. The draft ToR will be submitted to the Executive Committee for adoption through written procedure. The date of the next meeting of the FG will be decided by correspondence (tentatively end of April 2025).