

BSAC General Assembly

20th May 13:30 – 16:00 CEST

Luleå, Sweden

Report

1. Welcome by the Chair of the General Assembly

Apologies, quorum, AOB, and adoption of the agenda

Vesa Karttunen, the Chair of the General Assembly, welcomed all participants. In his opening speech, he underlined the importance of the Bothnian Bay area for coastal fisheries in Finland and Sweden. Environmental conditions in the area are harsh, as freezing starts in October and the last ice melts in May. He underlined that coastal fisheries in the Bothnian Bay is heavily affected by seals. There are attempts to manage the seal populations and to minimise seal-induced damage in fisheries with seal-proof gears and hunting.

The Executive Secretary presented the agenda.
A quorum was present, and the agenda was adopted.

2. Presentation of annual BSAC report

The Executive Secretary presented the nineteenth annual BSAC report, highlighting the achievements and activities carried out during the 2024-2025 period. This report outlines the key focus areas, working group outputs, and collaborative efforts with stakeholders across the Baltic region. The BSAC held 6 WG meetings, one of which was held as joint WG meeting, 4 Executive Committee meetings, 1 General Assembly, 1 Extraordinary General Assembly (to vote on the revised Rules of Procedure), 1 workshop on predators and one webinar (on climate change). The first kick off meeting of the Focus Group on science was also organised. The BSAC followed the recommendations of the external performance review. In terms of horizontal issues, the BSAC produced recommendations on the fishing opportunities for 2025 and the recommendations on the CFP in response to the call for evidence launched by the Commission in the framework of Commission's evaluation of the Common Fisheries Policy the Commission, to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). In November 2024, the BSAC organised a workshop on monitoring and enforcement of the Landing Obligation with European Fisheries Control Agency and BALTFISH, to discuss the results of the report on the implementation of the landing obligation in the Baltic Sea in 2019-2021 published by EFCA. There was also a follow-up on the webinar on Climate Change organised in May 2023. The second webinar held on 29th August 2024 focused on the adaptation aspect of

the climate-ocean nexus by presenting new perspectives on the impacts of climate change that can be expected on the Baltic Sea fish stocks and fisheries.

Following on the successful workshop on predators in the Baltic in October 2023 (focused on current management regime and scientific knowledge), BSAC organised a follow-up workshop on 30th October 2024 focuses on an exchange of views around conservation and management of these seals and cormorants. The BSAC recommendations on seals and cormorants were adopted by consensus. The BSAC provided input to the NSAC – BSAC workshop on predators. A special session on recreational fisheries was held during the General Assembly on 16th May 2024. The BSAC maintained close cooperation with the BALTFISH Polish and German Presidencies, endeavouring to align the timing of its work and its outputs with the BALTFISH work programs. The BSAC continued its new habit of organising January Executive Committee meetings in the same location as the BALTFISH Presidency to ensure smooth communication. The BSAC representatives participated in two BALTFISH Forum meetings (in June 2024, under the Polish Presidency and in September 2024, under the German Presidency), but more importantly to streamline work, the BSAC Management Team has been meeting with BALTFISH Presidency regularly online through several structured “Virtual Coffee Meetings” following agreed agendas. Throughout the year, the BSAC meetings featured presentations of many scientists from research institutes from around the Baltic (ICES, CEFAS, SLU, DTU, NMFRI, LUKE, Thünen Institute) and from ICES. Finally, the BSAC representatives took part in several external meetings organised by the European Commission, other organisations as well as other advisory councils,

The General Assembly adopted the BSAC annual report.

3. Final report for DG Mare

The Executive Secretary informed the General Assembly that the Annual Technical Report for DG Mare follows the same lines as the BSAC Annual Report.

The General Assembly adopted the report for DG MARE. The report will be sent to DG MARE by the deadline of 31st May.

4. Financial statement for 2024-2025

The Executive Secretary reported that on 31st March 2025 the BSAC had ended the second year under the new system of lump-sum where the grant allocated from one year to another is fixed but where there is more flexibility to move money around in the budget as long as the work programme is followed, in order to fit the ongoing changes. The financial statement for 2024-2025 indicates that the BSAC is close to achieving its budget (93%). A small overspent is noted in some categories, i.e. preparation of meetings. The financial statement will be sent to the Commission on 31st May.

The Chair asked the General Assembly to adopt the Financial Statement so that it could be sent to the Commission by the deadline of 31st May.

The General Assembly adopted the financial statement.

5. Amendment to the Rules of Procedure concerning the appointment of the Vice-Chair of the Executive Committee - adoption

The Chair explained that shortly after the adoption of the BSAC Rules of Procedure (RoP) by the General Assembly on 17th April 2024, the Secretariat noticed that in rule 14 the Vice-Chair of the Executive Committee is appointed by the *Executive Committee* whereas the Chair of the Executive Committee is appointed by *the General Assembly* according to rule 13. The Secretariat suspected that, there could be a mistake and by double-checking the underlying regulations, notably delegated Regulation 2015/242 as amended latest by delegated Regulation 2022/24, the error was confirmed. In the light of the above, the BSAC General Assembly is in line with rule 21 (a) of the RoP invited to adopt the following amendment to rule 14, first sentence (by adding General Assembly): *“The Vice-Chair of the Executive Committee is appointed by members of the **General Assembly** for a term of three years from another member category than the one of the Chair of the Executive Committee.”*

The General Assembly adopted the amendment to the Rules of Procedure.

6. Reports from the working groups for the year 2024 - 2025

The Chair gave the floor to the WG Chairs to present the work done under the Working Groups in 2024-25.

a. Pelagic Working Group

The Pelagic Working Group Chair reported that the Working Group met in October 2024 and February 2025. In October 2024, the Working Group dealt with the Commission’s evaluation of the CFP and revisited three chapters of the White Paper (on scientific advice, regionalisation and subsidies) and discussed what additional remarks might be relevant with a view to preparing the BSAC recommendations on the CFP. The Working Group discussed the ICES advice for herring in SDs 30-31, published by ICES on 16th September 2024. Questions and discussions followed. A representative of ProSea Marine Education presented the “Catching the Potential” project, as the first step in the discussions foreseen by the BSAC on how to attract a new generation of fishers in the industry. She underlined that this topic should be part of the work programme for the current year. An update of stickleback trial fisheries carried out in Denmark was presented.

In February 2025, the WG discussed the implementation of the revised Control Regulation and decided to send a letter to the Commission and BALTFISH asking for better stakeholder engagement in the implementation of the Control Regulation. The letters were sent to DG MARE and BALTFISH. A reply from the German BALTFISH Presidency was received on 17th March 2025 and a reply from DG MARE on 30th April 2025. Following an update from projects – DNAMIX and DNACATCH the Working Group discussed the use of DNA analysis to monitor and manage species composition within mixed catches from mixed pelagic fisheries.

b. Demersal Working Group

The Demersal Working Group Chair informed that the Working Group met in October 2024 and February 2025. In October, the Working Group dealt with the Commission's evaluation of the CFP and revisited three chapters of the White Paper. The WG focused on three chapters of the White Paper (Ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management, MSY and social dimension). The representative of DG MARE presented an update on the Delegated and Implementing Acts, regarding the obligation to use new flatfish gear in SDs 22-26. The Working Group will continue the work on selectivity. The Working Group decided to recommend to the ExCom that a joint BSAC WG could meet in person in the autumn 2025 to discuss the cod recovery plan. The structure and components of such plan could first be discussed in the Focus Group on Science. The Working Group included salmon to its agenda in 2025-26, together with the EBM Working Group. In this context, in February 2025, the Working Group hosted a presentation on the impact of climate change on salmon stocks in February 2025.

c. EBM Working Group

The EBM Working Group Chair gave a short report on the activities of the WG in 2024-2025. He informed the General Assembly that he had appointed new chair of the Working Group in October 2024.

The Working Group met on 24th September 2024. The main item on the agenda of EBM Working Group was the Commission's evaluation of the CFP, COM launched evidence in June 2024 to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). The Working Group revisited two chapters of the White Paper (on climate adaptation and recreational fisheries) and discussed what additional remarks could be made with a view to preparing the BSAC recommendations on the CFP. The HELCOM Secretariat presented the ongoing work on the revision of the HELCOM Recommendations on salmon. The BSAC members were asked to submit any further input to the HELCOM draft recommendation on salmon after the meeting. New draft available, not final, still time to give input.

The study "Invasive species in the Baltic Sea and their impact on commercial fish stocks" was also presented. A general update on the eel was presented, including the ongoing work in the Joint Special Group and HELCOM. The BSAC Secretariat followed the work of HELCOM (EG Fish-M group) on HELCOM Recommendation 32-33/1 focusing on salmon and the implementation of BSAP action S50.

The BSAC decided that salmon will be on the agenda of the Demersal and EBM WG in 2025-26 (HELCOM recommendation, Baltic Salmon Management Plan). Eel was discussed in the WG meeting in September 2024 in the context of the EU actions in the framework of the Marine Action Plan and planned HELCOM research proposal.

The WG will meet on 21st May to discuss, among other, the EBFM definition.

d. Science Focus Group

The ExCom Vice Chair, also acting as the new Chair of the Focus Group on Science informed that the first exploratory meeting of the group took place on 17th March 2025. The meeting discussed the objectives of the Focus Group and appointed the Chair. The next meeting will take place in June 2025.

The General Assembly took note. **The General Assembly** approved the reports presented by the Working Group Chairs

7. Presentation of Work Programme 2025 – 2026

The Executive Secretary informed that the BSAC work programme for 2025-2026 had been approved by the ExCom in January 2025. On 1st February, the work programme was sent to the Commission to apply for the new grant money.

The Executive Secretary informed that the work programme for 2025-26 follows the same approach as in previous years, which includes taking account of recommendations of the external evaluation of the BSAC, and the comments of the members received during the year. It also sets out the work priorities, among others fishing opportunities, fisheries management, ecosystem approach, species interactions and environmental policies, climate change and fisheries, fisheries and food security, recreational fisheries, socio-economic dimension of the CFP, regionalisation, cooperation, and communication. The Baltic Sea Advisory Council (BSAC), established and operational in 2006 with the revision of the Common Fisheries Policy (EC) 2371/2002, has entered its 20th year of operations in 2025/2026. The 20th Anniversary event is planned in January 2026. In 2025-2026 the BSAC plans to hold 1 General Assembly in person/hybrid, 4 Executive Committee meetings in person/hybrid, one of which will be held on the day before the General Assembly, 6 Working Groups (2 Pelagic, 2 Demersal, 2 EBM), one Joint Working Group. Some Working Groups might be held in person back-to-back with Executive Committee meetings, some online and Joint WG will be in hybrid format, 2 Focus Group meetings on science, usually online. The BSAC will also continue its engagement with the EFCA, BALTFISH and HELCOM.

A small-scale fisheries representative underlined that a systematic overview of relevant ICES work is important for the BSAC, especially in the context of benchmark workshops, such as the most recent one on Baltic plaice. He also stated that the work programme should give priority to monitoring of the effectiveness of the new flatfish gear. He asked for explaining what is meant in the work programme under contributing to the collection, supply and analysis of data necessary for the development of conservation measures.

The Executive Secretary replied that that this task is one of the main tasks of the BSAC, in line with tasks of the Advisory Councils mentioned in the Basic Regulation¹. With reference to the overview of ICES work, he stated that the BSAC will ask ICES to inform on all relevant meetings. The members will be informed on the outcome of important ICES meetings.

The General Assembly approved the Work Programme 2025-2026.

8. Operating budget 2025-2026

¹ See Basic Regulation Articles 43, 44 and 45 and Annex III: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A02013R1380-20190814>

The Executive Secretary informed that the estimated operating budget for 2025-2026 had been approved by the ExCom in January 2025. On 1st February, the budget was sent to the Commission to apply for the new grant money. The budget was increased by 1.9%, in line with the allowed inflation rate (2%) as compared to the previous one and there were no major re-allocations between the budget lines.

A small-scale fisheries representative asked to consider a possible revision of the compensation for small-scale fishers². The current compensation (125 EUR) has been put in place in 2017 and should be increased significantly to ensure small-scale representation and compensate for loss of earnings.

The ExCom Chair indicated the readiness to discuss in the future meetings a possible increase of the compensations for small-scale fishers. He asked the representatives of small-scale fisheries to come forward with proposals. He referred to the performance review planned for the beginning of 2026 and asked the BSAC members to participate actively.

The General Assembly approved the operating budget for 2025-2026.

9. Small Fish with a Big Impact – “A Review of the Importance of Forage Fish for a Healthy Baltic Sea” presentation by Fisheries Secretariat

Representatives of the Fisheries Secretariat presented the report “*A Review of the Importance of Forage Fish for a Healthy Baltic Sea*”. The aim of report is to provide an overview of the current scientific knowledge on forage fish in the Baltic Sea and offer recommendations for improved management. The report is a follow up on “*The Decline of Cod in the Baltic Sea*” prepared by the Fisheries Secretariat in 2022³. The review part is a summary of existing, current scientific research. A range of topics are being or have been researched in published scientific studies of Baltic forage fish. The report is part of the project “*Small fish – Big impact*” which started in 2023, focusing on the importance of forage fish in the Baltic Sea and the need to manage these fish through an ecosystem based approach. Forage fish are small pelagic species, in the Baltic Sea examples of forage fish are European sprat (*Sprattus sprattus*) and Atlantic herring (*Clupea harengus*). These fish are preyed on by larger predators and play a key role in the Baltic Sea ecosystem as a food source for larger fish including cod and salmon, as well as for marine mammals and seabirds. Baltic sprat is managed in one single management unit. After the decline of cod in the 1990s, sprat increased and became an important planktivorous fish. Majority of landings are used for industrial processing. Herring has several genetically distinct populations and subpopulations. In the Baltic herring is

² At its meeting on 8th May 2018, the Executive Committee decided to continue to give additional compensation² to small scale fisheries representatives at meetings of the BSAC.

This is to compensate for loss of earnings. This will continue during the work programme year 2023-2024. The participant will be asked to provide a signed confirmation that he/she is an active fisher representing one of the BSAC member organisations and that in order to attend the meeting, is unable to fish. The per diem is 125 EUR per day of meeting.

³ [Press Release: New study presented on dramatic decline of cod in the Baltic Sea – FishSec](#)

assessed and managed as 4 stocks. Reduced availability of forage fish affect the whole food web. Forage fish are eaten by cod, salmon, marine mammals and stickleback.

Among the factors affecting forage fish are fishing pressure, climate change, eutrophication, competition sprat and herring, food availability and predation.

Policy recommendations with relation to forage fish were presented, including:

Precautionary fishing limits

- Reduce quotas well below F_{MSY} to account for ecosystem uncertainties, species interactions and catch misreporting to ensure there is no overfishing.
- Keep precautionary levels, even when stocks show signs of improvement, to ensure full recovery. Example Central Baltic Herring
- Implement Article 4.6 of Baltic MAP, ensuring reduced risk of SSB falling below B_{lim} to less than 5 %.

Initiate stock recovery plans there are weaknesses in ICES advice

- Prioritise Gulf of Bothnia, western herring & Central Baltic herring for immediate, time-bound rebuilding plans (ICES report)
- Adopt harvest control rule incl. “no-fishing” option that over the short term would improve stock biomass, age- and size-structure.
- Include interim targets & milestones.
- Address bycatch issue of western herring through area-specific and seasonal restrictions in the eastern parts of ICES Divisions 4.a, 4.b, and Division 3.a
- Increase trawl selectivity requirements to preserve abundance and biomass of age 5+ individuals

Preserve genetic diversity of sub-populations

- Shift from a single-stock to a sub-stock approach to protect vulnerable distinct spawning component
- Develop sub-stock strategies for Central Baltic and Gulf of Bothnia herring, such as dividing current TACs into multiple, spatially explicit management units that coincide with documented genetic population structure.
- Increase research into distinct stock structures

Protect and restore critical spawning habitats

- Implement habitat restoration in known spawning habitats and nursery areas
- Use spatial/seasonal closures during spawning periods
- Increase scientific research into spawning periods and areas
- Collect improved data on migration routes, growth, and maturity differences among the various spawning components and sub-populations to tailor local conservation measures

Improve compliance, monitoring and data quality

- Fully enforce the Landing Obligation and catch reporting rules
- Mandate Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM),
- Increase research into AI specie identifications and eDNA methods
- Independent port sampling & weighing with third-party inspectors for the pelagic fleet (e.g. Danish model)
- Integrate catch corrections into ICES stock assessments.

Improve knowledge on diet and stickleback interactions

- As availability, distribution and species composition of zooplankton affect the condition of herring, continuous zooplankton monitoring should be prioritised
- Further studies on diet preferences for herring (and sprat) and competition between them
- Continue to study the interaction with stickleback (as prey for large herring, as predators of eggs and as competitors)

Improve EBM integration to ICES assessment & address knowledge gaps

- Expand ICES advice request beyond single-species catch limits to incorporate multispecies ecosystem interactions
- Headline advice section should clearly state uncertainties & risks
- Increase research on climate-eutrophication effects on recruitment
- Improve and incorporate data on natural mortality

Forage fish management involves both short and long-term actions. Some measures, such as combating eutrophication, may take years to yield results. Meanwhile, climate change, especially when compounded by pollution, limited prey availability, and high fishing mortality, poses severe long-term risks to many Baltic fish populations, which are not fully explored and taken into account when setting fishing opportunities. These knowledge gaps should be addressed. The report will soon be published in Swedish.

The Executive Secretary thanked the Fisheries Secretariat for their presentation. With reference to the AI species identification, he recalled that one of the fisheries organisations in Denmark had encountered problems in using the AI to identify the catch composition in pelagic fishery in the framework of a fully documented fisheries project.

A representative of the Fisheries Secretariat stated that problems in using the AI to estimate the catch composition have been noted. The report recommends to increase research into AI species identification to look in order to improve identification of the entire catch composition.

A fisheries representative from Denmark pointed out that some information used in the project on forage fish was not right. He underlined that it should be mentioned that despite restricting or closing some fisheries such as the western Baltic herring fishery, the state of some fish stocks has not improved and therefore there are other factors than fishing that are affecting the fish stocks and the environment.

A representative of the Fisheries Secretariat stated that the report summarises the existing literature from the past 10 years. She agreed that there are also other drivers, not just fisheries that affect the fish stocks.

A representative of the OIG thanked the Fisheries Secretariat for presenting an interesting report that could be an important input to national plans on nature restoration.

Another representative of the OIG praised the report for important compilation of the existing knowledge.

Replying to a question asked by **a representative of recreational fishers from Denmark**, **a representative of the Fisheries Secretariat** stated that round goby has been included in the report. Peer review has not been foreseen.

The Pelagic WG Chair asked for clarification on the recommendation regarding natural mortality of sprat.

A representative of the Fisheries Secretariat stated that natural mortality of sprat in the Baltic is dependent on the abundance of its main predator – cod. After cod abundance decreased, predation mortality caused by cod also decreased. The report recommends to improve and incorporate data on natural mortality of forage fish. ICES is looking at updating this.

A fisheries representative from Poland raised an objection regarding the recommendation to increase trawl selectivity in pelagic fisheries. He underlined that according to several studies increasing selectivity may be detrimental, due to potentially higher hidden underwater mortality of small pelagic fish escaping through the meshes.

A representative of the Fisheries Secretariat stated that at present the herring population is composed of small fish and lacks older specimen. Increasing selectivity will help to avoid small fish in the catches and help to preserve the pelagic stocks.

A fisheries representative from Estonia pointed out that according to several studies 90% of escapees are dead after going through the meshes.

A representative of the OIG asked whether there are any specific recommendations on how to preserve the spawning areas, especially for western Baltic herring.

A representative of the Fisheries Secretariat pointed out that the key threat for the spawning grounds is gravel and sand extraction, as well as occupation of marine space by other industries.

A small-scale fisheries representative referred to the fact that the sub-population of sprat seem understudied. Like in the North Sea, the Baltic TAC for sprat should be split into sub-populations to ensure there is no overfishing. In his opinion, different spawning times of sub-population should also be taken into account by managers when deciding on management measures. He expressed the opinion that scientists should further investigate how much food is needed to support cod recovery and why pelagic stocks are getting fatter and bigger and demersal fish thinner.

A representative of the Fisheries Secretariat agreed that more studies are needed on the sprat, including food availability for cod.

The General Assembly Chair thanked the Fisheries Secretariat for the presentation. He proposed to continue discussing forage fish in the Pelagic Working Group.

10. AOB

- **Ideas for 20th Anniversary of BSAC**

The General Assembly Chair asked the members for proposals how to celebrate 20th anniversary of the BSAC. The proposals should be sent to the BSAC.

The EBM WG Chair proposed to highlight the uniqueness of the Baltic during the celebration of the anniversary.

A representative of the OIG proposed to hold the celebration in the venue of the first meeting of the BSAC in Copenhagen. Another representative of the OIG proposed to visit the Vaasa Museum in Stockholm on the occasion of the celebration.

The ExCom Chair asked proposed to start the celebrations in November 2026, on the occasion of the visit of EFCA patrol vessel to the port of Gdynia. The final event could take place at the ExCom in May 2026 in Copenhagen.

- **Members will be asked to update their contact details, addresses, mails and phone numbers**

The Executive Secretary requested the members of the General Assembly to inform the Secretariat (em@bsac.dk) on any changes in their contact details.

- **BSAC meetings in the second half of 2025-26**

The Executive Secretary informed that in accordance with the work programme, the BSAC plans to hold online meetings of Demersal, Pelagic and EBM Working Groups, ExCom in October/November (hybrid), ExCom in January (hybrid), and Demersal, Pelagic and EBM Working Groups in March, as well as meetings of Focus Group on science. The dates and locations of these meetings will be decided by the ExCom by correspondence, before the end of June. The updated meeting planner will then be sent to the Commission.

11. Closing remarks by the Chair of the BSAC

The General Assembly Chair thanked all participants for good discussions.