17th June 2025 09:00-16:00

Radisson Collection Royal Hotel and online on Zoom

Report

1. **Welcome by the Demersal WG Chair Teija Aho and Pelagic WG Chair Lise Laustsen**
   Apologies, AOB, and adoption of the agenda

The Demersal WG Chair, Teija Aho chaired the meeting in the morning. She welcomed all the participants in the room and online, including Dorleta Garcia, ICES/ACOM vice-chair, invited to present the 2025 ICES advice for the Baltic stocks in 2026. She also welcomed the European Commission and the representatives of the Member States.

2. **Update on letter to ICES regarding the presentation of the advice and response from Colm Lordan.**

The ExCom Chair referred to the letter sent to the ACOM Chair, following the discussions held at the ExCom in May, requesting ICES to reconsider the format of the advice presentation, to improve the process by which BSAC develops its own advice. He recalled that the BSAC askes ICES to deliver the presentation within two weeks of the publication of the advice. Furthermore, it was suggested that the experts directly involved in the individual stock assessments participate in presenting their respective findings. The reply was received on 11th June. The ACOM Chair stated that ICES could reach out to *the "relevant experts and explore their capacity and willingness to attend BSAC meetings. We could review and have further dialogue before the advice release next year."*

The ExCom Chair thanked the ACOM Chair for this constructive response. He requested the BSAC members to propose specific stocks that could be presented by relevant experts after the advice release next year. This matter could also be dealt with by the Focus Science Group. The BSAC could then prepare a concrete request to ICES to improve the recommendation development process within the BSAC and enhance the quality and relevance of the BSAC's recommendations for the benefit of decision-makers.

A small-scale fisheries representative drew attention to the need to improve synchronicity between the scientific advice and the Council decision on fishing limits for the coming year. In the cases of Baltic salmon and sprat, the most recent scientific data is not being made available to the Council when quotas are decided upon, leading to unnecessary levels of uncertainty. He proposed to invite an expert responsible for sprat assessment to present the results of the latest survey at a BSAC meeting before the Council in October.

The ExCom took note.

3. **The 2025 ICES advice for the Baltic**[1]

[1] *see ICES website*

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a. Presentation of the ICES advice by Dorleta Garcia, ACOM Vice-Chair

The ACOM Vice-Chair presented the 2025 advice for the Baltic published by ICES on 28th May 2025. She explained the principles of the advice. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions and comment at the end of each category of stocks..

She underlined that the Baltic Sea ecosystem is suffering from the combined impacts of many human induced pressures. One of the main pressures is eutrophication, its effects being accelerated by climate change. Achieving sustainable fisheries management or recovering depleted fish stocks would in some cases also require ecosystem restoration actions. She informed on some changes to the reference point framework, to better fit into the management objectives. ICES also revisited the guidelines for mixed stocks, to provide advice for the stocks that have an overlap. In February 2025, ICES replied to the EU request on overview of the possible spawning grounds of the central Baltic herring stock and the seasonality of the spawning[2]. In October 2024 ICES also replied to the EU special request: Multiannual advice for EU only and Baltic Stocks[3]. ICES concluded that shifting from annual to multi-annual advice, could be implemented with minimal impact on catches, a slight increase in the risk of falling below B_{lim}, and improved catch stability.

With reference to the Russian catches, the ACOM Vice-Chair informed that catch data is taken from the AtlantNiro webpage. Stock dependent assumptions for biological data (age and length distribution) are derived from previous years Russian data and data from other countries.

Eastern cod

Dorleta Garcia stated that the advice for this stock had been delivered last year: 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.**

Western cod

The ACOM Vice-Chair stated that the latest biomass index from 2025 is below B_{lim}, and even with zero catch the stock is not expected to recover above B_{lim} in the short term. Therefore, ICES advises that when the precautionary approach is applied there should be zero catch in 2026 and 2027.

Catches and effort data show that fishing mortality has been significantly reduced in recent years. Current catches do not explain the high overall mortality, much of which likely results from unaccounted for natural mortality. Sources of the presumed additional natural mortality are presently unclear but could include increased predation from seals and cormorants and/or decreased condition linked to heat stress and hypoxia. However, the effects and magnitudes associated with these different potential drivers cannot presently be quantified and are therefore not included in the assessment.

[2] EU request on overview of the possible spawning grounds of the central Baltic herring stock and the seasonality of the spawning

[3] EU request on identification of EU-only and Baltic Sea stocks eligible for a multiannual advice

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The commercial fishery has evolved from being a directed cod fishery to an unwanted bycatch fishery. There are gears available that successfully reduce cod bycatches in flatfish fisheries; however, these gears were not in use up to quarter 1, 2025. Reducing the bycatch of cod in flatfish fisheries may enhance the recovery of cod stocks.
ICES advises that western Baltic cod conservation should be considered within the context of a degraded ecosystem resulting from cumulative anthropogenic pressures and climate change. Habitat restoration efforts, focused on the reduction of eutrophication to improve bottom oxygen content, are recommended. These are expected to have both direct and indirect effects on mortality and individual condition.

A representative of an environmental NGO from Sweden asked the ACOM Vice-Chair to elaborate on the mixed stock guidelines. **The ACOM Vice-Chair** ICES has just started developing the guidelines and they have not been applied to all stocks with fisheries that catch a mix of stocks. The advice for individual stocks should be set according to the ICES advice rules including if the stock is below B_{lim}. In such situations, advice should be for zero catch where there is no fishing mortality that will bring the stock to above Blim with > 50% probability in the year after the year for which the advice applies.
A representative of an environmental NGO from Sweden asked about concrete measures recommended by ICES for habitat restoration.
The ACOM Vice-Chair stated that habitat restoration measures are described in the Baltic ecosystem overview[4].
A fisheries representative from Poland regretted that ICES had not changed its approach in producing the advice for cod. In this context, he 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[5] in the stock assessment methodology, among others age-reading results obtained through chemical methods. He stated that the advice is incomplete without such data. He also stated that according to the observations made by fishers, there is a lot of small cod in different areas of the Baltic.
The ACOM Vice-Chair replied that sampling is carried out by national institutes, independently of ICES. Chemical age reading methods could have been used in some studies. She underlined that large quantities of small cod observed in the sea do not grow further. There is a very high overall mortality of cod, much of which likely results from unaccounted for natural mortality.
A small-scale fisheries representative expressed concern that despite the measures of recent years, scientists estimate that the condition of the stock has not improved. He drew attention to very high cod discard rates in trawl fishery that are not mentioned in the advice sheet but referred to in the Baltic Fisheries Assessment Working Group (WGBFAS) report[6].

[4] Baltic sea ecosystem overview
[5] https://tabacod.dtu.dk/-/media/institutter/aqua/publikationer/rapporter-352-400/368-2020-tabacod-final-report.pdf?la=da&hash=4DF4FBB19AAF550990485E72C06E435F09F135E9
[6] Baltic Fisheries Assessment Working Group (WGBFAS)

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The ACOM Vice-Chair stated that new gears that have been introduced to the Baltic flatfish fishery will hopefully contribute to decreasing the discard rate. She will bring the fact that that discards have not been mentioned in the advice sheet to the attention of experts engaged in the assessment group.

Plaice SDs 21–32, Kattegat and the Baltic Sea

The ACOM Vice-Chair informed that the recent benchmark on selected plaice stocks (WKBPLAICE held in)[7] made the decision to merge the two stocks resulting in one stock, plaice in subdivisions 21-32. The reference points have been revised. There was rather high uncertainty in assumptions made regarding future productivity. The current stock has no history of assessments to which it may be directly compared. In 2025, recruitment is assumed to be equal to the median of resampled recruitment from the whole time-series, while in recent years recruitment estimates have been well above those observed in the historical period. However, the recruitment assumed for 2025 has been substantially lower than that estimated by the assessment in the following year. Substantial and consecutive decreases in stock weight-at-age and condition have been observed in the last five years.

A small-scale fisheries representative regretted that ICES had not invited the BSAC members to participate in the benchmark workshop on plaice. He expressed his dissatisfaction with the benchmark process and results. He referred to the ICES stakeholder engagement strategy aimed at producing a better advice through proactive engagement of stakeholders and in this context asked the ICES representative to make sure that the stakeholders in Advisory Councils are informed on such important meetings,
He referred to the fact that the some assumptions made during the studies on discard survivability[8], indicating high survival rate in discards in trawl fishery, had been rejected by STECF. This fact could have an implication on the legitimacy of the results. He asked how stakeholders should react when noticing such problems in the assessment.
The ACOM Vice-Chair took note of the need to inform the BSAC in due time about important ICES workshops. Regarding the data on discard survivability, she commented that ICES had found the data reliable. According to its basic principle, ICES always bases its advice on the best available data. Experts involved in ICES are more directly involved in stock assessments than STECF experts. She encouraged the stakeholders to provide comments to the results of benchmarks and on the advice provided by ICES. ICES is open to consider these comments.
A fisheries representative from Poland agreed that stakeholder should be informed about benchmark workshops in advance to be able to actively participate in the discussions. He underlined that data on discard survivability for different species exists but is not taken into account by ICES.

[7] Benchmark Workshop on Selected Plaice Stocks (WKBPLAICE)
[8] P. 40 benchmark report Benchmark Workshop on Selected Plaice Stocks (WKBPLAICE)

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A small-scale fisheries representative from Germany asked about the reasons for the poor condition of plaice. He referred to the fact that due to the poor condition of plaice, only 3-5% of the catch can be sold.
The ACOM Vice-Chair replied that the decreases in stock weight-at-age and condition of the plaice stock have caught the attention of experts. The reason behind the declining condition and weight-at-age might be a combination of environmental pressure and population increase.
A fisheries representative from Poland asked whether there is any data proving that discard survivability of flatfish is similar to the survivability of plaice, as both species are very similar.
The ACOM Vice-Chair stated that she will consult the experts and come with an answer after the meeting.
A representative of an environmental NGO from Sweden referred to the advice given in 2019 to the EU request on immediate measures to safeguard eastern Baltic cod[9], where it states that a potential closure of SD 26 for demersal fisheries would protect a substantial part of the eastern cod stock, while having limited implications for EU flatfish fisheries. ICES recommended a closure of SD 26 for demersal fishery where the proportion of cod in the landings was highest. She asked whether this recommendation still stands.
The ACOM Vice-Chair stated that she will consult the experts and come with an answer after the meeting.

Brill
The ACOM Vice-Chair informed that ICES has been requested to provide information on the status of the stock. The stock status is unknown.
A small-scale fisheries representative asked whether weight-at-age of brill is also declining as for other demersal stocks.
The ACOM Vice-Chair stated that the stock development and condition of brill is most probably similar to plaice. A declining condition is related to ecosystem conditions and food availability.
A fisheries representative from Denmark agreed that the worrying trend of declining condition and weight-at-age affects most flatfish except for turbot. The reason for this situation could also be oxygen depletion.
A fisheries representative from Poland agreed that cod as well as other species show a continued decline in weight-at-age and condition. He appealed to ICES to recognise the substantial impact of selectivity on the stock dynamics and consider the results of different well-documented studies in the advice. In his opinion, research using different mesh sizes, to investigate the stock structure (age, size and sex) should be carried out. He referred to

[9] EU request on immediate measures to safeguard eastern Baltic cod, on mixing with western Baltic cod and bycatches in different fisheries EU request on immediate measures to safeguard eastern Baltic cod, on mixing with western Baltic cod and bycatches in different fisheries

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the consequences of directional (or targeted) selectivity[10] should be studied. He asked the representative of DG MARE why such studies are not commissioned by the Commission.
The ACOM Vice-Chair stated that selectivity is a management issue that ICES does not in principle address. However, ICES advises on selectivity when requested.
The representative of DG Mare stated that a discussion between ICES and the Commission on what should be part of the advice has been ongoing for some time. This includes such complex issues as the inclusion of the age-size distribution in the advice. Discussions with ICES are framed by the management framework and the main management tool is the F_{MSY}. He invited the BSAC to submit these comments to the ongoing CFP evaluation.

Dab

The ACOM Vice-Chair informed that the stock had been benchmarked in 2024. ICES has not been requested to provide advice on fishing opportunities for 2024. Fishing pressure is below the F_{MSY} and SSB above MSY Btrigger. Most catches are discarded. Management should be considered within the context of a degraded ecosystem resulting from cumulative anthropogenic pressures and climate change. Habitat restoration efforts with a focus on improving bottom oxygen content are recommended. These are expected to have indirect effects on individual condition.
A small-scale fisheries representative asked whether there are mechanisms to integrate smaller species into the models by the ICES working group on multispecies assessment methods (WGSAM)[11].
A fisheries representative from Denmark stated that the task of ICES is to provide stock assessment, including multispecies models and not to produce mixed fisheries scenarios. Multispecies models and mixed fisheries should not be linked together in the advice.
The ACOM Vice-Chair highlighted capacity and data limitations with regard to both multispecies assessment models and mixed fisheries advice.

Pelagic stocks

Central herring

The ACOM Vice-Chair stated that the increased catch advice for 2026 is due to a combination of an increase in SSB and an upward revision of SSB since 2022. The increase in SSB is the result of decreased fishing mortality in the most recent years, the relatively large incoming 2022 year class, and an increasing trend in the last years' weight-at-age. ICES advises that when the EU multiannual plan (MAP) for the Baltic Sea is applied, catches in 2026 that correspond to the F ranges in the plan are between 120 378 (corresponding to $F_{MSY\ lower} \times SSB_{2026}/MSY\ B_{trigger}$) and 157 996 tonnes (corresponding to $F_{MSY} \times SSB_{2026}/MSY\ B_{trigger}$).

[10] A fisheries representative explained that **targeted or directional selectivity** is used to source specific specimen, according to weight or size and set minimum mesh sizes.
[11] WGSAM

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A representative of an environmental NGO from Sweden asked why the headline advice does not take account of the legal obligation required under Article 4.6 of the Baltic Sea MAP [12]. The so-called '5 % rule' in the multi-annual management plan for the Baltic Sea ensures that fishing pressure is reduced if the biomass of the fish stock is too low and should be included in the headline advice, because managers should take this provision into account when setting the TACs.
The ACOM Vice-Chair stated that ICES had not been requested by the Commission to include this legal obligation in the advice. In the case of central herring stock, the advice, based on the FMSY ranges used in the management plan, is considered precautionary.
The representative of DG Mare confirmed that the provision in Article 4.6 of the MAP is not part of the recurrent request to ICES, since there is difference in understanding between the Commission and Members States with regard to this Article. He also referred to the on-going legal case launched by one of the BSAC members asking the Court for the annulment of the Council's decision not to review the 2024 Baltic fish quota decision.[13] The ruling of this case is expected next year. Therefore, for the time-being the Commission cannot ask ICES to include this provision in the headline advice. However, the Commission asked ICES to add this catch option in the catch scenario table.
A small-scale fisheries representative drew attention to the fact lower catch opportunities set in 2022-24 had had a positive effect on the herring SSB. He expressed disappointment with the Council decision on the herring TAC for 2024. He drew attention to the changes in the dynamics between herring and sprat, with a clear increase of the sprat contributing to an increase of the weight of herring. The increase of the SSB is not due to a higher number of herring but to the increase of individual weight. There is also a clear indication that the extent of the spatial overlap between herring and sprat is changing, with sprat moving more to the east and this fact could have a negative effect on the condition of the herring. He asked if ICES takes account of the changes in the spatial overlap changes and their potential negative effect in the advice.
The ACOM Vice-Chair stated that these considerations are looked into in the ecosystem working groups and are not directly included in the stock assessment. The increase in SSB is the result of decreased fishing mortality in the most recent years, the relatively large incoming 2022 year class, and an increasing trend in the last years' weight-at-age. The contribution of these factors to the increase of SSB has not been quantified.
A fisheries representative from Estonia confirmed that according to the observations made by fishers, herring is getting fatter and this has contributed to a higher SSB level.
A small-scale fisheries representative asked the Commission to what extent the Commission's proposal will take into account the legal obligation to ensure a rapid return of the stock concerned to MSY $B_{trigger}$ level. This would imply a much lower TAC than the ranges proposed in the headline advice.

[12] Article 4.6 of the Baltic MAP: fishing opportunities shall in any event be fixed in such a way as to ensure that there is less than a 5 % probability of the spawning stock biomass falling below Blim.
[13] Coalition Clean Baltic - Plea For The Sea

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The representative of DG Mare explained that it is up to the managers to decide collectively and within the legal framework at which level to set the TAC and to find the best balance between different interests based on the three pillars of sustainability.
In reply to a question asked by **a representative of an environmental NGO from Sweden, the ACOM Vice-Chair** replied that there is some mixing of western herring spring and central herring in SDs 24 and 26. ICES is discussing how to deal with this issue in the context of stock assessment. In reply to a question of a **representative of an environmental NGO from Finland** on spatial distribution of central herring stock, **the ACOM Vice-Chair** replied that she will consult the experts and come with an answer after the meeting.

Gulf of Riga herring

The fishery for Gulf of Riga herring includes fish from central Baltic herring, which is below MSY $B_{trigger}$. To be consistent with ICES advice, catches of central Baltic herring should be no more than 157 996 tonnes. The above advice corresponds to catches of herring in subdivision 28.1 of no more than 34 367 tonnes (corresponding to F_{MSY}) in 2026, assuming the same proportion of the Gulf of Riga herring and central Baltic herring stocks is taken in subdivision 28.1 as was estimated for 2020–2024.

Herring SDs 30-31

The ACOM Vice-Chair stated that the recruitment is relatively low in recent years. The biomass continues to decrease despite lower fishing mortality. This trend is worrying. If this trend continues, ICES will look at reference points. The advice for 2026 implies a 16% decrease in the catch as compared to the advice for 2025. The current target fishing mortality will most likely not lead to an increase in the proportion of older fish in the stock if implemented.
A small-scale fisheries representative questioned the reference points defined in 2024 during a benchmark. He pointed to the fact that the stock is currently underfished and nevertheless the SSB continues to decline. Therefore, it could be assumed that the F_{MSY} value is still too high. The stock assessed at record low level and is expected to decline even further. The incoming year classes are low. He asked whether ICES could organise a fast-track benchmark to revise the reference points.
The ACOM Vice-Chair replied that ICES has taken a precautionary approach in setting the F_{MSY} level. Given the fact that the stock continues to decline, there is a need to examine the situation in depth.
A representative of an environmental NGO from Sweden pointed out that the advice sheet mentions that the mean abundance and biomass of age 5+ individuals of the stock have for the last eight years been significantly lower compared to the mean of the previous years. She asked how this trend could be prevented.
The ACOM Vice-Chair stated that increasing selectivity is one of the options to change the proportion of older individuals in the stock.
Another representative of an environmental NGO underlined that the age and size structure of the stock is unlikely to be changed by increasing selectivity because of high

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mortality of pelagic fish escaping through meshed. She asked how the survivability of older fish could be increased.
The ACOM Vice-Chair replied that the use of gear-based technical measures for the size selection of small pelagic species is more a theoretical perspective.
A fisheries representative from Poland drew attention to wrong assumptions that increased selectivity would allow to improve the stock structure. He underlined high mortality of pelagic fish escaping through meshes. The mortality of escapees will increase with the increased selectivity. He underlined that the ICES advice does not take into account the existing data on the mortality of fish escaping through meshes. The lack of these data makes the advice incomplete. He called on ICES should open up to alternative sources of scientific data, in order to fill in the gaps in the available scientific advice for Baltic fish stocks. Only then ICES could say how to improve the structure of fish populations.
A fisheries representative from Denmark agreed that increasing selectivity in pelagic fisheries only to target large fish will not allow to increase the abundance of larger fish, unless the fishing pressure is reduced. He underlined that fish stocks cannot be manipulated through selectivity. He also agreed that a constant decline of the Bothnian herring stock is a worrying trend.
A representative of an environmental NGO from Sweden stated that ICES advice should say clearly that if to increase the abundance of older fish, the fishing pressure should be reduced.
A representative of an environmental NGO from Finland agreed that several scientific papers point to high underwater mortality of pelagic fish. He emphasised that different sizes of fish can be targeted by altering the fishing methods, for example fishing higher or lower in the water column of lower. He drew attention to the alarming situation of this stock and further risk of SSB decrease even if the advice is followed.
A small-scale fisheries representative asked whether the Commission is looking into harmonising the mesh size regulation for all herring fisheries in the Baltic, to set the mesh size at 32 mm for the entire Baltic.
A fisheries representative from Poland pointed out that the mesh size used in pelagic fishery in SDs 30-31(16 mm) is 4 times smaller as compared to the mesh size used elsewhere. In his opinion, the mesh size in the Gulf of Bothnia should not be changed, as the mesh size of 16 mm permits to keep a better stock structure, closer to the natural structure.
The representative of DG Mare stated that the mesh size in pelagic fisheries could be changed through a joint BALTFISH recommendation which the Commission would submit to the STECF for evaluation in view of a possible modification of the Technical Measures Regulation.
A fisheries representative from Sweden stated that the use of a 32 mm mesh size in pelagic fisheries, as compared to 16 mm, results in 10 -15% higher fishing mortality. However, fishing for consumption is not possible with 16 mm mesh size, because a water column is created in front of the trawl and all big fish escape. Catching big herring for consumption requires the use of 32 mm mesh.

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A fisheries representative from Denmark stated that Danish fishers are not in favour of increasing the mesh size in pelagic fisheries in the Gulf of Bothnia to 32 mm, because more big fish will be targeted. Changing reference points would be a good alternative to recover the stock in SDs 30-31. He drew the attention to the severe impact of cormorants and seals on the stock that should be dealt with first. Any restrictions in the fishing opportunities should not result in making more fish available to the predators. The fisheries management should be adapted to the circumstances and managers should find a balanced solution for the stock.
A fisheries representative from Estonia agreed with previous speakers and underlined that an increase of the mesh size would increase underwater mortality of fish escaping through meshed.
The WG Chair pointed to the fact that seals also target big herring above 20cm. Lower temperature and salinity in the Gulf of Bothnia have an impact on the stock structure.
A fisheries representative from Poland underlined that with smaller mesh size, individual growth will be higher and will result in a higher number of big individuals. He asked the ACOM Vice-Chair what is the difference in individual growth of herring between Gulf of Bothnia and the Central Baltic? He suggested that maybe autumn cruises provide information on the stock structure. He referred to the discussions held in the BSAC on technical measures and stated that already in 2017, the BSAC had recommended to give up on selective pelagic fishing due to the high underwater mortality.
The ACOM Vice-Chair agreed that it would be relevant to look into this matter. She will come back with information after the meeting.
A small-scale fisheries representative referred to the on-going debate on underwater mortality implications among scientists. He stated that the small-scale fishers are fully supportive of increasing the mesh size to 32 mm in the Gulf of Bothnia. The estimates of young age classes indicate record low numbers of young fish in this population[14]. He drew attention to the fact that no one wants to lower the mesh size for the central Baltic herring. However, the mesh size regulations should be harmonised. In his view, the selectivity should also be improved to let the young fish grow.
Replying to a question by a representative of an NGO, **the ACOM Vice-Chair** confirmed that the predation by cormorants and seals is not included in the assessment models.
A fisheries representative from Sweden clarified his position by stating that Swedish fishers from his organisation are fully supportive to keep small mesh sizes of 16 mm, to eliminate any underwater mortality. However, the market demands big herring. It would be reasonable to change consumer patterns to ensure a more balanced stock exploitation.

The Pelagic WG Chair, Lise Laustsen chaired the meeting in the afternoon.

Western herring

[14] WGBFAS report Baltic Fisheries Assessment Working Group (WGBFAS)

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ICES advises that when the maximum sustainable yield (MSY) approach and precautionary considerations are applied, there should be zero catch in 2026 for western Baltic spring-spawning (WBSS) herring (subdivisions 20–24 and the eastern part of divisions 4.a and 4.b). All catch scenarios included in the advice, including zero catch, result in SSB remaining below Blim in 2027.
ICES advises on conservation aspects for this stock. Climate change–related effects have resulted in lower early life-stage survival and reduced productivity of the Rugen spawning component. Eutrophication and spawning habitat degradation have negative effects on the early life-stage survival and the productivity of WBSS herring. Measures to protect and restore known spawning habitats and nursery areas are needed.
A fisheries representative from Denmark expressed deep dissatisfaction with the quality of the ICES advice for this stock. Referring to the retrospective pattern, he could not agree with the downward revision of the SSB in the 2025 assessment. This coincides with the observations made by fishers, indicating that herring is extremely abundant in the Western Baltic. He drew attention to the fact that the western Baltic spring spawning herring is caught across three different management areas, and is composed of different stocks of which only one (Rügen herring) is being properly assessed.
The ACOM Vice-Chair informed that the assessment for 2026 will be updated during the benchmark planned in 2025.
A small-scale fisheries representative agreed that the SSB of this stock is constantly revised downwards, therefore the fishing mortality reference point is probably wrong. The advice does not take account of the fact that western herring is mixing with central Baltic herring in the eastern edge of distribution area. There is probably unaccounted mortality of western herring in the central part of the Baltic.
The ACOM Vice-Chair replied that ICES have recognised that the stock is mixing with different populations. In the coming years, ICES expects to include this mixing of different populations in the assessment.
The WG Chair stated that it would be interesting for the BSAC members to follow the benchmark for this stock. She asked whether ICES has any information about the spawning areas.
The ACOM-Chair referred to the ICES reply to special request[15] on overview of possible spawning grounds of the central Baltic herring spawning areas.
A fisheries representative from Sweden underlined that this stock is very important for recreational fisheries, which catch 3-4 times more than commercial fisheries. He asked to consider recreational catches in the assessment for the benefit of the stock.
The ACOM Vice-Chair underlined that recreational catches are not easy to account for. There is dedicated working group in ICES coordinating coordinates marine recreational fishery data collection for stock assessments[16].

[15] EU request on overview of the possible spawning grounds of the central Baltic herring stock and the seasonality of the spawning
[16] The Working Group on Recreational Fisheries Surveys WGRFS

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A representative of recreational anglers stated that ICES have reports on recreational catches in the Baltic. The German Thünen Institute came out with some figures on the total recreational catches of herring in the Baltic. According to the new Control Regulation, the anglers are obliged to report their catches.

Sprat

The ACOM Vice-Chair informed that the advised sprat catches for 2026 are 36% higher than those for 2025. This is due to the quite strong 2024 year class. However, the 2024 year-class estimate is currently based on this one survey, and the year-class strength is uncertain until confirmed by the next survey (conducted in May 2025).

A small-scale fisheries representative expressed serious concerns about the assumptions made in the ICES assessment working group (WGBFAS)[17]. ICES is predicting that the stock will increase by more than 88% from 2025 to 2026. This is the largest increase that has ever been predicted for this stock. In his opinion, this assumption is wrong as even bigger year classes (such as the 2015 year class) have not resulted in such level of growth. In his view, the density dependence effect should be properly integrated in the assessment, as it has always been integrated. Another problem is the mean weight-at-age for which the mean average was calculated using the previous 3 years, when recruitment was at record low levels. In his opinion, the reference years should cover 2013 – 2015, when the recruitment had been similar to current years. He proposed to the Commission to wait to base its proposal for sprat TAC on scientific advice that has taken into account the results of the 2024 year class from the May 2025 survey. This would mean that the uncertainty regarding the size of the 2024 year class would likely be reduced.

Salmon Gulf of Finland

ICES advises that when the precautionary approach is applied, commercial sea catches of Atlantic salmon in 2026 should be no more than 11,800 salmon corresponding to reported commercial landings of no more than 10,480 salmon.

Salmon Main Basin

ICES advises that when the maximum sustainable yield (MSY) approach is applied, no more than 30 000 Atlantic salmon should be caught within subdivisions (SDs) 22–31 in 2026. This catch should be taken during the time period of 01 May until 31 August and only in the area of sub-divisions SDs 29N–31. To protect the weak Atlantic salmon stocks in Assessment Unit (AU) 5, there should be no catches outside of SDs 29N–31 and time period.

A representative of an NGO underlined that commercial fishing should concentrate only on rivers with compensatory releases. **A representative of recreational anglers** agreed with this statement and stated that advice should be part of the headline advice.

A small-scale fisheries representative referred to the sentence in the advice sheet stating that there are substantial uncertainties regarding the level of bycatch of salmon in

[17] Baltic Fisheries Assessment Working Group (WGBFAS)

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fisheries targeting other species, such as the pelagic trawl fishery for herring and sprat, without giving any estimates, whereas the WGBAST[18] report mentions that the annual bycatch of salmon in pelagic trawls could have reached almost 200,000 salmon in the 2000s.
The ACOM Vice-Chair took note and promised to return with answers after consulting the experts.

Sea Trout
ICES advises that when the precautionary approach is applied, commercial and recreational fisheries for 2026 and 2027 should be reduced in SD 26, the southern parts of SDs 22 and 24, the western part of SD 29, and SD 31. ICES advises that when the precautionary approach is applied, commercial and recreational fisheries for 2026 and 2027 should be reduced in SD 26, the southern parts of SDs 22 and 24, the western part of SD 29, and SD 31.
The Pelagic WG Chair thanked the ACOM Vice-Chair for her presentation.

The ACOM Vice-Chair took note of all the questions asked during this session and promised to consult relevant experts and return with replies.

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A representative of an environmental NGO informed that Coalition Clean Baltic had decided to appeal to the EU Court to invalidate the Council's decision on the 2024 fishing quotas.[19] CCB requested the EU Council of Ministers to review its decision in the light of all applicable laws, i.e. not only the most obvious fisheries regulations but also the EU's and the countries' own environmental laws. When this request was rejected with the claim that nothing was incorrect in the Council's decision, CCB decided to appeal it and ask the EU Court for an annulment of the Council's decision not to review the 2024 Baltic fish quota decision, namely the central herring, the Bothnian herring and sprat.

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

The WG Chair opened the floor for discussion stock by stock and the initial development of draft BSAC recommendations for the fishery for 2026. She reminded the BSAC members of the new guidelines for the format and preparation of the annual BSAC recommendations on the fishery in the Baltic[20].
The Executive Secretary informed that the draft recommendations will be drafted by the Secretariat based on input from the joint working group meeting and derived assumptions on majority positions. The draft recommendations will be distributed to members after the

[18] Baltic Salmon and Trout Assessment Working Group (WGBAST)

[19] pdf; Environmental organizations appeal to EU court to invalidate fishing quotas due to Baltic herring stocks collapse; https://www.ccb.se/plea-for-the-sea-herring-heroes-advocate-for-a-fair-baltic-sea

[20] Guidelines-for-Baltic-TAC-recommendationsFINAL.pdf

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meeting. Members will have the opportunity to discuss and give further input at the ExCom meeting on 26th June 2025. The ExCom will take a final decision on this recommendation during its meeting. However, before the recommendation will be submitted to the Commission, the Secretariat will allow some days for ExCom members to make editorial comments on their own position. The final recommendations will be sent to the Commission in early July.

Cod SDs 22-24

A fisheries representative from Denmark was of the opinion that the 2026 TACs for the western cod stock should be set as a rollover of the 2025 TACs (340 tonnes). He informed that his organisation will submit a statement to be included in the BSAC recommendations, concerning a possible exemption in fishing closures. He underlined that high mortality of cod is not induced by fisheries and therefore cannot be reduced by setting the fishing opportunities at zero. He underlined that taking account of the landing obligation, fishers should be given an opportunity to fish cod legally and dispose of a sufficient bycatch TAC. He also pointed to the problems related to the mandatory use of the new gears introduced in flatfish fishery, especially on small vessels.

Several fisheries representatives supported setting the 2026 TAC as a rollover of the 2025 TAC.

A representative of an environmental NGO from Sweden referred to the joint NGO recommendations on Baltic Sea fishing opportunities for 2026[21]. The NGOs recommend that the TAC for 2026 should also be set at zero tonnes, due to the degraded state of this stock. They recommend developing a rebuilding plan and habitat restoration measures.

A representative of recreational anglers referred to the position of his organisation on western cod[22]. They recommend preserving the recreational fishing opportunities for cod in 2026. They also recommend[23] a combination of management measures that ensure equivalent protection at simultaneous higher anglers' satisfaction: introduce a maximum landing size for anglers, increase the minimum landing size and combine both with seasonal closures and bag limits; intensify the dialogue between the interest groups, science, and politics. They recommend no dedicated fishing activities on spawning cod, improvement and obligatory use of selective gear to reduce bycatch of cod in commercial fisheries and adoption of the Framework towards development of a European Management Plan for the Great Cormorant[24] to reduce the impact of cormorant predation on cod stocks.

Another representative of an environmental NGO from Sweden underlined the need for more precautious decisions with regard to the cod TAC in view of the state of the stock, as fishing has an impact on the stock. Cod protection and recovery should be prioritised. Managers should follow scientific advice in their decisions.

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[21] 250617-Joint-NGO-TAC-paper_2025_layout_FINAL.pdf
[22] 2025-06-03_EAA-position-Western-Baltic-Cod-ICES-advice.pdf
[23] EAA position on recreational fishing for Western Baltic cod in 2026
[24] Cowx IG, Jepsen N, Van Anrooy R (2025). Framework towards development of a European Management Plan for the Great Cormorant. Draft – May 2025. https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/ae045ae8-dfbe-47d9-b733-b062cfd4a83c/content

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Some fisheries representatives from Sweden called for more active predator control and highlighted that fishing closures also affect the pelagic fisheries. They drew attention to the fact that science is lacking to prove that pelagic fisheries impact cod during their spawning period. In their view pelagic fishery should be allowed during the closures.
A small-scale fisheries representative agreed to a rollover of the 2025 TAC for western cod, on the condition that selective fishing is incentivised and the quota is allocated to fishers who use passive gears. In his view, active gears are not compatible with the landing obligation and account for high discard rates[25]. He agreed on the need to implement effective predator management.
Some fisheries representatives questioned the numbers of cod bycatch presented in the WGBAS report[26], as pointed out by a small-scale fisheries representative.
A fisheries representative from Denmark underlined that the cod stocks will not recover unless there are effective management measures for the control of predators. There are many young cod in the sea, but they disappear because of predators. Changing reference points would be an alternative solution to approach the problem. He referred to the fact that a zero TAC would mean to stop all fishing. A cod bycatch quota is needed to enable other fisheries to continue, and thus to ensure continuity of food production and preserve thousands of jobs in the sector.
A small-scale fisheries representative from Germany underlined that several factors that impact the condition of the cod stocks need to be taken into account in the management. In his view, not a single factor can be neglected if a recovery of stocks is to be achieved.

Cod SDs 22-32
A fisheries representative from Denmark was of the opinion that the 2026 TACs for the eastern cod stock should be set as a rollover of the 2025 TACs (595 tonnes). He also underlined the need to implement measures for the management of seal and cormorant populations to allow the recovery of cod stock. There are many young cod in the sea, but they disappear because of predators.
Several fisheries representatives supported setting the 2026 TAC as a rollover of the 2025 TAC.
A representative of an environmental NGO referred to the joint NGO recommendations on Baltic Sea fishing opportunities for 2026[27]. They recommend setting a zero TAC with any bycatch TAC for this stock. Given high Russian catches in previous years, the decision on the fishing opportunities should be even more precautious. They recommend developing a rebuilding plan and habitat restoration measures.
A small-scale fisheries representative agreed to a rollover of the 2025 TAC for western cod, on the condition that selective fishing is incentivised and the quota is allocated to fishers who use passive gears. He questioned the ICES catch data and stated that in his

[25] Baltic Fisheries Assessment Working Group (WGBFAS) tables 2.3.12 – 2.3.15
[26] Table 2.3.12 -15 Baltic Fisheries Assessment Working Group (WGBFAS)
[27] 250617-Joint-NGO-TAC-paper_2025_layout_FINAL.pdf

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view and according to the observations of fishers during landings, in boxes containing pelagic fish, the EU bycatches of cod in pelagic fisheries are underestimated.
Some fisheries representatives could not agree with the opinion on high amount of cod bycatch in pelagic fisheries.
A representative of an environmental NGO referred to the need to implement habitat restoration measures.
A fisheries representative from Denmark agreed with the ICES advice to undertake habitat restoration efforts for Baltic cod, but drew attention to the need to recommend concrete measures that would help to restore the cod habitat, i.e. the Baltic Sea.

Salmon SDs 22-31

Some representatives of environmental NGOs recommended a zero catch from the mixed-stock at-sea fisheries in SDs 22 – 30. If targeted fishing for salmon is to be permitted, it should be a total catch of 5,000 salmon in the Gulf of Bothnia and the Åland Sea (SD 31), in 2026, taken only in close connection to rivers with compensatory releases. In his view, fishing should start only on 1st July, after the migration period.
A group of NGOs submitted their joint recommendation[28]. They recommended that there should be no targeted salmon fishery in 2026 unless the new assessment shows that this year's spawner numbers exceed the levels required to produce MSY.
A representative of recreational anglers[29] presented the recommendations for Baltic salmon. He underlined that the current situation could be called a crisis, given poor and declining numbers of returning spawners in the last 3 years and very high levels of post-smolt mortality fishery in the estuaries of weak rivers. This situation needs to be addressed in a structured way, through an ecosystem-based and adaptive management. The impact of cormorants should also be addressed by adopting the Framework towards development of a European Management Plan for the Great Cormorant[30].
A fisheries representative from Finland recommended to follow the scientific advice and to set a total catch at 30,000 salmon in the Gulf of Bothnia and the Åland Sea, and a zero catch from the mixed-stock at sea-fisheries in SDs 22-29, in 2026. He drew attention to the fact that probably a big share of this quota will not be caught, as a short fishing season recommended by ICES may prevent fishers from setting up salmon gears. **Fisheries representatives from Denmark and Sweden** supported this proposal.
A fisheries representative from Denmark and Sweden supported the proposal to set the TAC in line with the scientific advice.
A small-scale fisheries representative agreed to follow ICES advice. He drew attention to the need to use e-DNA analysis of pelagic catches to determine the scale of the salmon bycatch in industrial pelagic fisheries. He also agreed to the need to accelerate the implementation of the European Management Plan for cormorants

[28] 250617-Joint-NGO-TAC-paper_2025_layout_FINAL.pdf
[29] 2025-06-03-EAA-position-Baltic-Salmon-ICES-advice.pdf
[30] Cowx IG, Jepsen N, Van Anrooy R (2025). Framework towards development of a European Management Plan for the Great Cormorant. Draft – May 2025. https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/ae045ae8-dfbe-47d9-b733-b062cfd4a83c/content

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Some fisheries representatives from Finland and Sweden stated that bycatch of salmon in pelagic fisheries is very rare.

Salmon SD 32

A representative of environmental proposed to postpone the start of the fishing season to avoid wild salmon from the Gulf of Bothnia stocks.

A fisheries representative from Finland proposed to follow scientific advice at set the TAC at 11,800 salmon.

Pelagic stocks

Western herring

Some fisheries representatives proposed the 2026 TAC be set as a rollover of the 2025 TAC of **788 t.**

A representative of an environmental NGO referred to the joint NGO position[31] of a group of NGOs, recommending a zero TAC for this stock. They recommend requesting ICES on possible temporal and spatial management measures in the eastern parts of the North Sea, in order to avoid by-catch of WBSS herring and secure a reduction of unwanted fishing pressure on this stock.

A small-scale fisheries representative recommended setting the 2026 TAC at 788 tonnes, on the condition that the quota is allocated to fishers who use passive gears.

Central herring

A representative of an environmental NGO referred to the joint NGO position[32] of a group of NGOs, recommending a TAC below < 89 827 t. They recommend applying Article 4.6 of the Baltic Sea MAP requiring that fishing opportunities (which includes TACs) shall be set so that there is a less than 5% probability of the stocks falling below the biomass limit value B_{lim}. For Central Baltic herring, this is not possible with the F ranges given in the ICES headline advice. They also recommended additional actions, including a development of a rebuilding plan to ensure rapid recovery above B_{MSY}. In their view, the TAC should be allocated to low-impact coastal fishers catching herring for direct human consumption

Fisheries representatives from Denmark and Estonia proposed to follow the ICES advice and set the TAC at 154,996 tonnes (corresponding to the EU TAC of 139,532 tonnes). They noted that ICES recommended a 26% increase of the TAC as compared to the advice for 2025, explained by a very large 2022 year class, contributing to the estimations of the highest SBB observed since 1989. **A fisheries representative from Denmark** stated that according to the advice, it is evident that that the TAC for 2026 can be increased. Fishers should be compensated for years of sacrifice with a low TAC. The legal obligation set in Article 4.6 of the Baltic MAP referred to by a group of NGOs is questioned by the legal services of the Council and is in contradiction to the CFP, that states that we should pursue F_{MSY} strategy.

[31] 250617-Joint-NGO-TAC-paper_2025_layout_FINAL.pdf
[32] 250617-Joint-NGO-TAC-paper_2025_layout_FINAL.pdf

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A representative of an environmental NGO advised precaution in setting the TAC and underlined that more than a long-term stable recruitment and SSB level are needed to take any decisions heading at an increase of the TAC. In the view of a group of NGOs, the headline advice proposed by ICES is not precautionary enough.
Some fisheries representatives from Sweden proposed setting the 2026 TAC in line with the MAP F_{lower} scenario. In this case, the EU TAC would amount to 105,488 t.
A small-scale fisheries representative stated that the TAC for all lower trophic level species (herring and sprat) should always be capped at 0.5 F_{MSY}, as a precautionary buffer to minimise the risk of the stock falling below B_{lim}. He recalled that the single-species advice does not take account of species interactions. Fishing all stocks at F_{MSY} is not possible. He proposed setting the 2026 EU TAC at 88,707 tonnes. In his view, such precautionary buffer is needed to take account of uncertainties in the assessment and eliminate the risk of going below B_{lim}.
A fisheries representative from Denmark questioned this proposal to use 0.5 F_{MSY} to calculate the TAC, also questioned by scientists. He agreed that it is impossible to fish all species at F_{MSY}. However, this should not be an argument to underfishing. We need to work together with nature, on nature's conditions and not to manipulate it. He underlined that no one is proposing a TAC level that would result in a decrease of the SSB. Fishers are the ones who pay the price for dubious management decisions. He underlined that the managers should help fishers if there is evidence that the TAC can be increased and such decisions have no significant negative impact for the stock.
A fisheries representative from Sweden referred to the fact that small-scale fishers have tripled their catches in the last 3 years. He underlined that big vessels pay the price for setting the TAC at lower level.

Gulf of Riga herring

A fisheries representative from Estonia proposed setting the 2026 TAC for Gulf of Riga herring at 30,913 tonnes, following the ICES MSY approach (also equal to MAP F_{MSY}). The corresponding TAC in the Gulf of Riga management area for 2026 would be calculated as 30,913 tonnes - 636 tonnes + 4,090 tonnes = 34,367 tonnes.

Other fisheries representatives supported this proposal.
A representative of an environmental NGO referred to the joint NGO position[33], recommending the TAC within or below the lower end of the FMSY range and not exceeding 27 416 t, in order to build ecosystem resilience by allowing the stock biomass to increase more substantially.

Bothnian herring

A representative of an environmental NGO referred to the joint NGO position[34], recommending the TAC below 25,560 tonnes. She underlined that even with zero TAC for 2026, the stock will not achieve MSY Btrigger in 2027.

[33] 250617-Joint-NGO-TAC-paper_2025_layout_FINAL.pdf
[34] 250617-Joint-NGO-TAC-paper_2025_layout_FINAL.pdf

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Some fisheries representatives from Finland and Sweden recommended setting the TAC for this stock in line with the scientific advice, at 55,869 t. (MAP range F_{lower}). They drew attention to the need to incorporate the seal and cormorant induced mortality into the stock assessment models and the need to introduce effective management measures to minimise the impact of predators on the stock.
A small-scale fisheries representative proposed to set the TAC for this stock at ≤ 25,560 tonnes. **A representative of recreational anglers** supported this proposal to protect several weak salmon stocks in SDs 30-31 by avoiding salmon bycatch in pelagic fishery. He informed that ICES will come with a report on this issue next year.

Sprat

A representative of an environmental NGO referred to the joint NGO position[35]. They recommended that managers wait with the decision on TAC until the latest knowledge from the spring trawl surveys is available. Due to the mixing with the degraded herring stocks in the central Baltic they cannot provide a quantitative catch recommendation, but we emphasise that the TAC should be set below the lower end of the F_{MSY} range.
Fisheries representatives from Denmark and Estonia recommended setting the 2025 TAC at 224,616 tonnes, in accordance with the advice (F_{MSY} MAP). The corresponding EU TAC for 2026 would be calculated as total TAC 224,616 t minus Russian share of 10.08% = 201,975 t. They underlined that the estimated recruitment for Baltic Sea sprat is the highest observed in 10 years which is coinciding with the fishers' observations at sea.
A fisheries representative from Estonia commented that the Russian catch data taken from the website of their scientific institute is very uncertain.
A fisheries representative from Sweden proposes a total TAC in line with the lower range of F_{MSY} EU MAP at 176,056 tonnes. Taking into account the Russian share of 10.08%, this would give EU TAC of 158,310 t.
A small-scale fisheries representative recommended a 2025 **EU TAC for sprat** at the level of **103,405 tonnes.** This is calculated as 0.5 F_{MSY}(F=0.17): 114,983 t minus 10.08% Russian share. He pointed to the uncertainty in the forecasts in the ICES advice (underestimated natural mortality) and the fact that recruitment is concentrated in the eastern part of the Baltic.

Plaice SDs 22-32

A fisheries representative from Denmark proposed to set the TAC for plaice in line with the advice. At the same time he expressed deep dissatisfaction with the quality of the ICES advice for this stock, after merging the two plaice stocks during the most recent benchmark. In his view, the SSB assessment is unrealistically high. **A fisheries representative from Sweden** supported the proposal to follow scientific advice.
A representative of an environmental NGO referred to the joint NGO position[36]. They advise to prioritise protection and recovery of both Baltic cod stocks by setting the plaice

[35] 250617-Joint-NGO-TAC-paper_2025_layout_FINAL.pdf
[36] 250617-Joint-NGO-TAC-paper_2025_layout_FINAL.pdf

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TAC well below single-stock headline advice and in no event allowing the fishing level to increase (≤ 4,894 t). They also point out the declining weight-at-age and condition of plaice over the last years.
A small-scale fisheries representative questioned the quality of the assessment of this stock. In his view, there is no point in recommending an increase of the TAC in the advice, while the quota is not utilised to a large extent.
A fisheries representative from Denmark stated that there is not much effort put into the fishery, because of the fact that plaice are skinny.
A small-scale fisheries representative from Germany stated that there is no point in catching more plaice if there is no market for such skinny fish. Scientific surveys are needed to find an explanation for the bad condition of plaice.

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The Working Group asked the Secretariat to produce, after the meeting, draft BSAC recommendations for the fishery in the Baltic Sea in 2026. Participants were asked to submit input to the recommendations. The draft would be sent to the WG and ExCom for comments and the recommendations will be discussed and adopted by the ExCom on 26th June 2025, The final recommendations will be sent to the Commission in early July.

5. EBFM Working group chair presents "Draft BSAC response on HELCOM EBFM paper"

The EBM Working Group Chair presented the BSAC response to the HELCOM paper on common understanding of ecosystem-based fisheries management[37]. He recalled that the BSAchad been asked by HELCOM to provide comments on HELCOM common understanding of EBFM. The EBM WG Chair, together with the Secretariat, drafted a letter to HELCOM, including comments submitted by several BSAC members. The document will be sent to the ExCom for adoption at the next meeting on 26th June 2025, and then sent to HELCOM.
The draft BSAC recommendations on EBFM were also discussed at the WG meeting. He asked the BSAC comments to send comments by the end of June, so the EBM WG Chair and the Secretariat could proceed with the document.
The Working Group took note.

6. AOB

The ExCom Vice-Chair, also acting as the Chair of the Science Focus Group proposed to add a point to the agenda of the Focus Group, referring to the invitation of ICES experts to BSAC meetings.
The Working Group took note.

[37] Advice & Recommendations - Baltic Sea Advisory Council

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