

BALTFISH Forum

25th June 2025

13:00 – 18:00

BSAC draft report

Courtyard Hamburg City and online via Webex

The BSAC was represented by Jarek Zieliński, the ExCom Chair (in person), Teija Aho, Demersal Working Group Chair (in person) and the secretariat (rapporteur - online).

1. Opening of the meeting

Stefan Hübler, representing the German BALTFISH Presidency chaired the meeting. He welcomed all participants to the second forum meeting held under the German Presidency. He congratulated the Polish colleagues for a successful Presidency of the Council.

The Forum meeting was well attended by several Baltic Member States, the European Commission, stakeholders from the fisheries sector and environmental NGOs.

2. Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

3. Approval of the minutes of the Forum meeting on 3 September 2024

The minutes were approved.

4. Update on the work program of the German BALTFISH Presidency

The BALTFISH Presidency gave an update on the work programme of the German Presidency. The discussion on TACs and quotas had started in September 2024 and the draft BALTFISH proposal for the TACs in 2025 was ready by mid-October. A HLG met just before the Council to find a common BALTFISH position on TACs. The decisions of the Council did not match 100% the BALTFISH proposal, but nevertheless the proposal could be considered good. BALTFISH held two HLG meetings in January and February 2025 to find joint position on closures for eel for 2025 and 2026. Since the HLG failed to achieve a common position, the closure period has remained as in 2024 (15th September – 15th March). Joint Recommendation on harbour porpoise has not been concluded and will be handed over to the Swedish Presidency. BALTFISH held a workshop on compliance with the landing obligation with EFCA and BSAC in November. The impact of windfarm expansion on Baltic Sea fisheries (spatial squeeze/co-use) and loss of sampling areas for stock assessments was discussed in May. Several virtual coffee meetings with the BSAC management team took place during the German Presidency. The Chair thanked the BSAC for excellent cooperation.

5. Exchange with Baltic Sea Advisory Council (BSAC)- Presentation by Jarek Zielinski, Chair of BSAC Executive Committee

The BSAC ExCom Chair presented the BSAC work priorities for 2025 and 2026. Horizontal issues included recommendations on the fishing opportunities, input to the CFP evaluation, the implementation of the Marine Action Plan and the establishment of the

Science Focus Group. He thanked the BALTFISH Presidency for good cooperation throughout the past year. He informed that the BSAC joint working group with the presentation of the ICES advice and discussion of the BSAC recommendations on TACs and quota in 2026 took place on the 17th June. The Executive Committee will meet on the 26th June in Brussels to finalise the BSAC recommendation. It will be sent to the BALTFISH members and Presidency, the Commission and other relevant organisations in the beginning of July. He informed that following recent discussions within the BSAC Executive Committee, in the beginning of June the BSAC sent a letter to the ACOM Chair asking ICES to reconsider the presentation of the advice as the current formulae is not the best one. The BSAC proposed that the experts directly involved in the individual stock assessments participate in presenting their respective findings, to foster a deeper exchange of views and in-depth understanding of scientific advice within the BSAC. On 11th June, the ACOM Chair replied that ICES could reach out to the relevant experts and explore their capacity and willingness to attend. Further dialogue with ICES on this matter will take place in due time before the release of the advice next year. The ExCom Chair requested BALTFISH HLG support to our request to ICES, and encourage experts to present the advice stock-by-stock. He underlined that it is of the highest priority for BSAC to improve the dialogue with ICES to enhance the quality and relevance of the BSAC's recommendations to the Member States and the European Commission.

The BSAC ExCom Chair presented the priorities of the BSAC Working Groups. He informed that the BSAC recommendations on seals and cormorants had been presented several stakeholders during different events. He also referred to the letter on the implementation of the new Control Regulation, sent to the Commission and BALTFISH in March 2025. He referred to the first list of specific landing ports published by the Commission in May, where the fisheries operators can benefit from a margin of tolerance derogation, considering that robust fisheries control conditions in these ports are met. He proposed to organise a study trip to one of the listed ports in Latvia. He also looked forward to the discussions on the implementation of the Control Regulation under the Swedish Presidency, in the framework of the BALTFISH Control Expert Group (CEG). The BSAC would like to establish closer cooperation with this group in the future.

The BSAC will address a letter to BALTFISH regarding the allocation of EMFAF funds in the post-2027 period, highlighting Baltic Sea priorities. This will be taken up in a dedicated session or ExCom meeting in autumn 2025.

The BSAC Science Focus Group will identify and discuss the current gaps in the scientific advice for Baltic Sea fish stocks, in order to improve the advice framework.

He thanked the Member States for their timely contributions to the BSAC budget. He also informed that the celebrations of the 20th Anniversary of the BSAC will start in November in Gdynia on the occasion of the EFCA patrol vessel visiting the port of Gdynia. Another anniversary event will be held in Stockholm, in January 2026 together with a seminar held with the Swedish Presidency and the final celebration will take place in May 2026. He kindly asked the BALTFISH Member States to allocate extra funds for the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the BSAC. On behalf of the BSAC members, he thanked the German Presidency for good cooperation and looked forward to working with the Swedish Presidency and continue virtual coffee meetings.

The Chair thanked BSAC for the work done and stated that BALTFISH will take into account all requests from the BSAC addressed to the HLG and CEG

A representative of the upcoming Swedish BALTFISH Presidency informed that the next Forum meeting will be held on 8th September in Stockholm.

A representative of the Latvian authorities thanked German Presidency for their hard work during the BALTFISH Presidency. He informed the BSAC that the Latvian authorities will look at the best arrangements for the visit in the Latvian port benefitting from the margin of tolerance derogation.

6. Presentation of ICES advice for the Baltic Sea 2026 – Presentation by Christopher Zimmermann, Thünen-Institut, and exchange of views

Christopher Zimmermann, Head of the Thünen-Institut, member of the ICES ACOM presented the ICES advice for 2026 for selected stocks. He presented the basis of ICES advice. He referred to the 10 principles of the advice, that should be neutral and free from political views. He stated that the Baltic ecosystem is suffering from combined impacts of many human induced pressures, such as eutrophication, its effects being accelerated by climate change occurring faster than in other regions. Degradation of essential benthic habitats, changes in food webs and other ecosystem processes are pronounced. Achieving sustainable fisheries management or recovering depleted fish stocks would require ecosystem restoration actions.

He referred to the fact that the Russian Federation will officially withdraw from ICES following its temporary suspension on 30 March 2022. The Russian Federation's membership will end on 9 December 2025. ICES takes the Russian catches and TAC taken from AtlantNiro webpage. Russia is not following ICES advice and has kept their catches constant while the EU Member States had reduced them substantially. Stock dependent assumptions for biological data (age and length distribution) are derived from previous years Russian data and data from other countries, but the lack of data from the actual Russian catches is especially problematic for eastern Baltic cod.

Christopher Zimmermann presented the advice for 2026, stock by stock. For western cod: the advice for 2026 and 2027 is zero catch based on precautionary considerations. Fishing mortality is extremely low and natural mortality has taken over, due to the effects of climate change and impact of predators. The lack of cod recruitment is a combination of warming sea temperatures and eutrophication, which in turn affect the cod's habitats, prey availability and health condition (growth and weight). The cod stocks will take long to recover and only if the nutrient inflow from land is stopped.

Plaice – the recent benchmark on selected plaice stocks (WKBPLAICE held in)¹ made the decision to merge the two stocks resulting in one stock, plaice in SDs 21-32. The reference points have been revised. There was rather high uncertainty in assumptions made regarding future productivity. Substantial and consecutive decreases in stock weight-at-age and condition have been observed in the last five years.

Sprat - 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).

Bothnian herring - 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

¹ [Benchmark Workshop on Selected Plaice Stocks \(WKBPLAICE\)](#)

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..

Central herring - the increased catch advice (+26%) 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.

Western herring – 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.

Salmon – the advice for the Gulf of Finland is that catches in 2026 should be no more than 11,800 salmon corresponding to reported commercial landings of no more than 10,480 salmon and for the Main Basin no more than 30 000 Atlantic salmon should be caught within subdivisions (SDs) 22–31 in 2026 from 1 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.

Questions

A fisheries representative from Denmark applauded the presentation. He expressed lack of confidence with the new assessment method used for central herring, with an ensemble of three models used in the assessment. He underlined that there must be something inherently wrong in establishing reference points for ensemble models. Last year, the advice called for a decrease of the TAC. This year the advice is increased by 26%. He underlined that rather than changing the models, the scientists should observe what is going on in nature and react accordingly.

A fisheries representative from Poland referred to the ICES opinion that the rebuilding of cod stocks will take decades. However, some scientists are of the opinion that a different approach to technical measures could change the stock situation much faster.

Christopher Zimmermann stated that both cod and flatfish share the same unfavourable environment with excessively warm water. For pelagic resources and salmon the prognosis is better. He underlined that is impossible for ICES to come with a prognosis for the stocks that exceeds 5 years.

A representative of DG MARE referred to the fact that most of the Baltic stocks are not doing well or even show alarming signals and need to recover. The situation is not getting better for several fish stocks. The stocks cannot be managed at the limit and only with the objective to reach MSY. The Commission will take this into account when proposing the fishing opportunities, with the hope that the AGRIFISH Council will follow.

A representative of an environmental NGO referred to the uncertainties in the assessments. She called to be more precautionary in setting the fishing opportunities and take account of the unbalanced environmental situation in the Baltic.

Another representative of an environmental NGO agreed that the Baltic stocks need to be recovered. She underlined that the decisions on the TACs should respect all ICES safeguards set by the existing legislation. She underlined that any uncertainties in the advice should be clearly communicated and that is not the case now.

A fisheries representative from Denmark addressed the Commission in saying that the TAC figures are politically set and do not reflect what is going on in nature.

A representative of the Latvian administration drew attention to the fact that the ICES advice includes several uncertainties. He questioned the fact that scientific advice is debated every year. It should be made clear for the managers which options they should choose from the ranges given in the advice.

Christopher Zimmermann replied that uncertainties are communicated in the advice and it is up to managers to decide what level of uncertainty and risk they can accept. This is a political decision. He underlined that in the Baltic, environmental changes occur quicker than scientists are able to change the assessment models and therefore uncertainties occur. ICES cannot extrapolate what will happen in the future.

Another representative of an environmental NGO asked whether the mortality caused by predators is included in the assessments.

Christopher Zimmermann replied that the overall mortality caused by predators is included in the assessments as part of natural mortality, but not for specific predator species. It is difficult to estimate whether the predator mortality has increased over time.

A small-scale fisheries representative stated that the models do not account for fluctuations in predation. It takes many years for natural mortality to be reassessed.

Another small-scale fisheries representative underlined the urgent need to safeguard the future of small-scale fisheries in the region.

Questions on cod

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).

A representative of recreational anglers stated that the anglers recommend preserving the recreational fishing opportunities for cod in 2026. He underlined that a combination of management measures proposed by the anglers² such as a maximum landing size for anglers, increasing the minimum landing size and combining both with seasonal closures and bag limits ensures equivalent protection for the cod stocks.

Christopher Zimmermann replied that introducing a protection for bigger fish by setting a minimum landing size would require a long legislative process. The cod stocks need to be protected now, and therefore there is no scope for allowing any recreational fishing.

In reply to a question by **a representative of an environmental NGO** on prey availability, he answered that cod shows no signs of recovery because it is affected by a combination of increased water temperatures and eutrophication, which in turn affect the habitat, prey availability and health condition of cod.

Another representative of an environmental NGO asked whether the new gears for flatfish fishery to avoid bycatches of cod have been implemented.

The Chair replied that the new gears were implemented on 1st April 2025.

² [2025-06-03_EAA-position-Western-Baltic-Cod-ICES-advice.pdf](#)

A representative of the Latvian administration stated that any reduction of the bycatch TAC for cod will have a detrimental effect on other fisheries. He underlined that Russia is not respecting scientific advice and the fisheries management. They take bigger shares of pelagic catches and cod than before. In his opinion, any savings of quota made as a result of reductions of the fishing allocations for the EU Member States support the Russian unsustainable fisheries and increase the fishing opportunities for Russia

A fisheries representative from Poland emphasised that the amount of oxygen needed for decomposing 1 kg of dead fish should be calculated. In the event of such oxygen deficit in the Baltic, these fish should be caught in fishery.

Christopher Zimmermann explained that more oxygen is produced by plankton than used for decomposing dead fish.

The Chair stated that the lack of oxygen is caused by several other impacts in the Baltic.

A fisheries representative from Poland underlined that it is extremely important to find the real reason for oxygen deficit in the Baltic.

A small-scale fisheries representative underlined that any reduction of the bycatch quota will have serious consequences for small-scale fishers who depend on this quota. He also drew attention to the inconsistency in the legislation allowing vessels with active gears to fish up to 50 m depth, while small-scale fishers targeting flatfish with passive gears are only allowed to fish up to 20 m³. Another small-scale representative explained that Increases in sea temperature are thought to be a significant factor in why flatfish are increasingly found in deeper, cold waters. Therefore, small-scale fishers called for a derogation to the exemption limiting fishing to a maximum of 20 m depths for certain vessels Extending the exemption to 30 m in coastal waters, far away from the cod spawning grounds, would present no threat to cod recovery but allow the fishery to continue. Further, it is not clear why one fleet segment may not fish below 20 m but another may fish to 50 m. The exemption should be harmonised to 30 metres depth for both fleet segments.

Christopher Zimmermann stated that the spawning closure is aimed at leaving the cod undisturbed during spawning.

A fisheries representative from Denmark stated that spawning closures have not been shown to have any measurable positive impact on stock development; and at the same time, they have a major effect on the fishing sector.

Plaice

Replying to a question by **a representative of an environmental NGO**, **Christopher Zimmermann** stated that high productivity and low condition of the plaice stock could be related to the competition for food between cod and plaice. There is plenty of small plaice but once they become adult they do not have enough food. He stated that whereas it would be logical to increase the fishing intensity, in the situation when environment is changing so quickly this is a very dangerous approach.

Sprat

³ [Council Regulation \(EU\) 2024/2903 of 18 November 2024 fixing the fishing opportunities for certain fish stocks and groups of fish stocks applicable in the Baltic Sea for 2025 and amending Regulation \(EU\) 2024/257 as regards certain fishing opportunities in other waters](#)

A representative of an environmental NGO expressed concern about the advised increase of the TAC. She underlined that the decision on 2026 TAC should be based on the latest knowledge when the latest results from the spring trawl surveys are available, and not on the uncertain year-class strength. She asked whether the results of the latest survey will be available before the AGRIFISH Council in October.

Christopher Zimmermann replied that ICES could provide an indication of the abundance of young sprat already in September.

A representative of the Finnish administration asked about the reasons for the distribution of this this year class mainly in northeastern areas.

Christopher Zimmermann replied that there are several environmental factors that could be related to this changed distribution, including climate changes.

A fisheries representative from Denmark commented that the observations made by fishers at sea indicate an abundant year class.

Herring Gulf of Bothnia

A small-scale fisheries representative asked whether the eDNA analysis could improve the knowledge on the bycatch of salmon in herring fishery.

Christopher Zimmermann stated that eDNA is a promising method for catch identification and it will get cheaper in the future.

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 MAP⁴.

Christopher Zimmermann replied 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 Member States with regard to this Article.

A representative of an environmental NGO from Poland asked BALTFISH and the Member States to follow the legal obligation under Article 4.6 of the Baltic MAP in their decisions on the 2026 TACs.

Central herring

Fisheries representatives from Denmark referred to the fact that the SSB for central herring is now the largest since 1998. The TAC should be set in accordance with the advice.

A representative of an environmental NGO from Sweden pointed to the joint NGO recommendation to develop a rebuilding plan to ensure rapid recovery above B_{MSY} , for instance based on the findings of ICES WKREBUILD2, including rebuilding a healthy age-size structure of the stock. **Another NGO representative** underlined that the existing legal provisions must be applied to ensure that the stock does not fall below B_{lim} .

Christopher Zimmermann stated that a rebuilding plan is needed for the stocks that are close or under the B_{lim} .

In reply to a question from **a representative of the Estonian authorities** on the effectiveness of spawning closure for cod and herring, **Christopher Zimmermann** replied

⁴ 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 B_{lim} .

that although the effectiveness of cod spawning closures has not been proven, in theory it is a good measure that might bring positive results over a longer period of time.

A representative of DG MARE stated that the stocks should not be managed just above B_{lim} . She pointed at the importance of rebuilding stocks in the Baltic Sea for the future.

Western herring

A fisheries representative from Denmark complained about 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.

A representative of an environmental NGO from Sweden pointed to the ICES advice to implement measures to protect and restore spawning habitats and nursery areas.

Another fisheries representative from Denmark referred to the measures aimed at protecting this stock that have been taken in the western part of the Baltic. After closing the targeted fishery in this part of the Baltic, 80% of this stock is taken in the North Sea. He pointed to the fact that the effects of these measures have not yet been seen. The measures should be closely monitored, as they might also negatively impact some areas and fleet segments, i.e. small-scale fishers.

Christopher Zimmermann stated that a benchmark for this stock is planned in 2025.

Salmon

A representative of recreational anglers recommended a bag limit of one salmon (excluding recent spawners) per angler and day for sea anglers south of latitude 59.30 N as well as adoption of the Framework towards development of a European Management Plan for the Great Cormorant to reduce the impact of cormorant predation on salmon stocks.

A representative of an environmental NGO from Poland referred to the joint NGO position recommending 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 fisheries representative from Denmark underlined that the salmon management measures introduced some years ago had a major effect on salmon fishers in Denmark by preventing them from pursuing their fishery.

A small-scale fisheries representative referred to the use of e-DNA analysis in catch monitoring.

A fisheries representative from Denmark referred to the positive results of the tests made by the Danish Pelagic PO using e-DNA for identifying pelagic catch composition. He regretted that this method had not been included in the revised Control Regulation. With reference to the ICES advice, he stated that any uncertainties should be discussed at such for a as MIAC or MIACO meetings. He underlined that questioning scientific advice and inventing new approaches to set the TACs below the scientific advice is a dangerous approach.

A representative of the Latvian administration underlined that it is important to trust science. Headline advice provided by ICES is not detrimental to any stock.

A representative of an environmental NGO from Sweden emphasised that uncertainties need to be communicated clearly in the ICES advice and also brought to the attention of decision-makers.

A representative of DG MARE stated that the headline advice is formulated as a maximum level at which the TAC should be set. Setting a TAC below this level is not against the advice. She expressed disappointment by the language used by some participants.

Christopher Zimmermann underlined that the headline advice proposes F ranges. It is up to the managers to decide at what level the TAC should be set, it is just a matter of evaluating the risk of any decision.

7. FishSec presentation of report “Small Fish with a Big Impact — A Review of the Importance of Forage Fish for a Healthy Baltic Sea”

A representative 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 2022⁵. The review part is a summary of existing, current scientific research. A range of topics 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.

assessed and managed as 4 stocks. Reduced availability of forage fish affects 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, stock recovery plans (if stock goes below B_{pa}), need to preserve genetic diversity of sub-populations, need to protect and restore critical spawning habitats, need to improve compliance, monitoring and data quality, knowledge on diet and stickleback interactions, as well as the need to improve EBM integration to ICES assessment & address knowledge gaps. 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.

8. Information about German Commission on the Future of Fisheries- presentation

The German Presidency informed about the German Fisheries Commission. The Commission on the future of fisheries was set up in 2024 in accordance with the coalition agreement of the former government coalition (2021-2024). The objective was to protect and strengthen viable, ecosystem-compatible and sustainable marine fisheries, marine

⁵ [Press Release: New study presented on dramatic decline of cod in the Baltic Sea – FishSec](#)

angling and marine aquaculture, and the production of aquatic food in Germany. The Commission composed of 40 representatives of the fisheries sector, NGOs, and local actors from coastal regions produced a guiding document.

Recommendations included the development of environmentally sound fishing gear, bycatch monitoring for small-vessels, concluding the development of fish trawler prototypes for the future, analysis of the types of sea fisheries and aquaculture that can be permitted within wind farms. The final report is available in German. The English version will also be published.

9. AOB: HELCOM presentation on FISH meeting in March 2025

A representative of HELCOM informed on the work on the HELCOM common understanding of EBFM. The process of drafting the HELCOM understanding of EBFM started in 2023 and the document has since been considered by several sessions of HELCOM WG Fish, a dedicated workshop held on 4 March 2025 and various drafting group sessions. In the autumn 2025 possible drafting group sessions will be organized to further work on the document, based on received comments, and during the one-day informal consultation session of WG Fish on 12 November the document is expected to be recommended for approval on the HELCOM Heads of Delegation level. She invited BALTFISH and the other stakeholders to provide comments to the document.

10. Closure

The Chair thanked everyone for good discussions and closed the meeting.