

**BSAC response to the communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council**  
**"Sustainable fishing in the EU: state of play and orientations for 2026"**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

**The BSAC** takes note of the Commission's Communication and accompanying Staff Working Document. The BSAC is hereby providing, as requested by the Commission, comments on the Commission's Communication and the accompanying Staff Working Document.

**The BSAC** takes note of the Commission report on the state of play and the orientations that the Commission intends to follow in its proposals for 2026. The BSAC acknowledges the fact mentioned in the Communication (Staff Working Document) that the Commission proposal on fishing opportunities for 2025 took into account the Baltic Sea Advisory Council's (BSAC) recommendations. The Staff Working Document also refers to the BSAC recommendations on the CFP evaluation, as well as recommendations on seals and on cormorants, and the replies to the Commission questionnaires on the implementation of the Baltic Sea multiannual plan and of the landing obligation. The Commission's Staff Working Document also highlights the good cooperation between the BSAC and BALTFISH. The BSAC will continue to cooperate with BALTFISH and its Presidency in 2025-2026.

## **Progress in achieving maximum sustainable yield**

**The BSAC** welcomes the Commission's recognition that European fisheries continue the trend from previous years of gradually improving their sustainability. However, there are concerns raised regarding key stocks still under pressure, including the impact of climate change on stock distribution and ecosystem dynamics. According to the Communication, in the Baltic Sea, some fish stocks have deteriorated further due to a combination of pressures beyond fishing activity, including eutrophication, pollution, and climate-driven ecosystem changes. The BSAC notes that there are positive signs for some pelagic stocks, such as herring in the central Baltic. In the case of sprat, the BSAC is of the opinion that the decision on 2026 TAC should be based on the latest knowledge from the spring trawl surveys, confirming the positive recruitment. Representatives of environmental NGOs (*BalticWaters, Fisheries Secretariat, Coalition Clean Baltic, Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, WWF*) are of the opinion that several of these stocks are not fully recovered or in a healthy states, such as the herring stock in the central Baltic Sea. The BSAC supports the Commission's call for Member States to apply and implement EU legislation in full to recover fish stocks. The CFP and the Baltic Sea MAP have yet to be fully

implemented, and so do the environmental policies at sea and on land.

**The BSAC** is of the opinion that the situation cannot be improved by the fisheries sector alone, and other sectors need to contribute as well. BalticWaters, Fisheries Secretariat, Coalition Clean Baltic add that while fishing is the main activity impacting the ecosystem via selective extraction of species, agriculture and forestry, together with wastewater discharge, also pose major pressures on the ecosystem through nutrient and organic enrichment. The effects of nutrient enrichment and fisheries are widespread in the ecoregion.

Referring to the environmental situation in the Baltic and the multiple pressures faced, as mentioned in the Commission's Communication, the BSAC recalls its comments of 10<sup>th</sup> July 2025 from the recommendation for the fishery in the Baltic Sea in 2026 to the Commission:

**The BSAC** agrees that the focus must remain on the overall ecosystem while not excluding other factors affecting fish stocks. **The BSAC** wishes to highlight that ICES flags<sup>1</sup> that many species and habitats of the Baltic Sea are not in good condition, according to recent assessments. This affects food web functionality, reduces resilience and resistance against further environmental changes, and diminishes prospects for socioeconomic benefits, including fishing opportunities. Fisheries management should follow and adapt to rapid changes in the ecosystem. It is important that the decision-making process at regional level is adaptive and fast, whilst also being precautionary. Fishing is just one of the factors influencing the stocks. For several stocks in the Baltic, the fishing pressure is at present at a very low level, so that other factors might be more or equally important, such as habitat loss and/or degradation, species interactions, warming waters due to climate change, eutrophication, and changes in salinity. Therefore, to increase the resilience of the ecosystem, including that of fish populations, against pressures from human activities and climate change, fisheries management needs to consider the direct impacts of fishing on fished resources and marine habitats, as well as incidental impacts from fishing and other pressures within the context of the entire marine ecosystem. The interactions between different sea users should also be considered in fisheries management (such as dredging, sand and gravel extraction, offshore wind and renewable installations). In addition, an ecosystem-based fisheries management should also account for both the prey/predator relationship and harvesting patterns, and how environmental conditions affect the conditions of the stocks.

**The BSAC** is aware that the effects of climate change are becoming increasingly noticeable across the Baltic Sea, and there is a clear need to take measures to mitigate its effects on fish stocks and fisheries. To this end, the BSAC held two webinars on climate change, in May 2023 and in August 2024, aimed at a better understanding of climate changes and discussing how to build resilient Baltic Sea fisheries through sound scientific advice and management.

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<sup>1</sup> ICES (2024). Baltic Sea Ecoregion – Ecosystem Overview. ICES Advice: Ecosystem Overviews. Report. <https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.advice.27256635.v1>

**The BSAC members** also call for additional science to examine problems of the species interrelations and how to adapt management to those changes. **The BSAC** underscores that the socio-economic consequences of reduced fishing opportunities - such as job losses in coastal communities and threats to traditional livelihoods - must be central to policy decisions.

**Representatives of the environmental NGOs** (*BalticWaters, Fisheries Secretariat, Coalition Clean Baltic, Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, WWF*) underline that the poor status and decline of Baltic fish populations over several decades indicates ecosystem-wide stress, with policy interventions failing to reverse negative trends. Persistently fishing on declining and vulnerable fish populations is fundamentally unsustainable in the long term, both for the fishing sector that depends on healthy stocks and for the wider marine ecosystem.

**The BSAC** members have been highlighting the need for improving the scientific advice that informs fisheries management and the setting of fishing limits.

**The BSAC** emphasizes that addressing these challenges requires stronger collaboration between scientists, NGOs, and the fishing industry to ensure transparent reporting, effective enforcement, and shared solutions.

**In the opinion of the NGOs** (*BalticWaters, Fisheries Secretariat, Coalition Clean Baltic, Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, WWF*) the current ICES advice on fishing opportunities – and the requests (by fishery managers like the European Commission) that guide the provision of such advice – do not fully reflect all relevant legal requirements and policy objectives applicable to the EU such as recovering fish populations within a concrete timeframe and maintaining them above sustainable levels in the near future,

**Representatives of the environmental NGOs** (*BalticWaters, Fisheries Secretariat, Coalition Clean Baltic, Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, WWF*) call for including the legal requirements of Article 4.6 of the Baltic Sea multiannual plan in the ICES headline advice, which requires setting fishing opportunities at levels that ensure the risk of stocks falling below  $B_{lim}$  is below 5%..

**Representatives of small-scale fishers** (*Low Impact Fishers of Europe*) underline the need to increase the total biomass of fish populations in the Baltic. Several stocks, such as Baltic cod, Bothnian herring and sprat are at or close to record low levels. The organization stresses that there has never been so little fishable biomass in the Baltic as it is today. LIFE concludes that central issue for managers is to ensure that we have more fish, bigger fish and older fish in the Baltic and the most effective way to achieve this in the short-term is through a significant reduction in the quotas for herring and sprat.

**The BSAC** looks forward to the Commission proposing and the Council adopting specific remedial measures for the fish stocks that have decreased below healthy limits.

**A BSAC member** (*Low Impact Fishers of Europe*) states that a main problem in the Communication is the assumption that fishing at FMSY is a proxy for sustainability.

According to some scientists, the reference points are not adapted to follow the dynamic changes occurring in the environment, and an assumption that fishing stocks at their current FMSY values are sustainable could be false. They also refer to the shortcomings in implementing the EU reporting rules.

## **Balance between the fishing capacity of the Member States' fleets and their fishing opportunities**

**The BSAC** recognises the need to reduce dependency on fossil fuels and move to renewable and low-carbon energy sources as quickly as possible. The BSAC has published its recommendations on energy transition in October 2023. It specifically calls on the Commission to look more closely at the capacity rules and their impact on the energy transition, especially the definition and calculation of capacity. There is a need for a more substantial reflection on socio-economic aspects and the future of the fisheries and food production.

## **Landing obligation**

**The BSAC** takes note of the Commission's publication of the study underpinning the evaluation of the landing obligation and has provided an answer to the first consultation on this topic. The BSAC agrees with the conclusion of the study that the implementation of the landing obligation (LO) has not been fully successful. As stated in the BSAC White Paper on the implementation and revision of the CFP, the most obvious and critical issue related to the LO is whether it is controlled and/or complied with. Neither is the case. Control and implementation of the landing obligation can be improved through the revised Control Regulation and the Technical Measures Framework.

**The NGO members** (*BalticWaters, Fisheries Secretariat, Coalition Clean Baltic, Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, WWF*) **of the BSAC** highlight the importance of swiftly implementing remote electronic monitoring with CCTV on vessels using bottom trawling, as pilot projects in the EU have shown that the use of REM significantly reduces the amount of illegal discarding of fish.

**The BSAC** held a workshop with EFCA and BALTFISH following the publication of the EFCA report on the evaluation of compliance with the Landing Obligation in the Baltic Sea in 2019-2021.

**The BSAC** welcomes the implementation of the new gears in the flatfish fisheries to reduce bycatches of cod in the Baltic Sea. The BSAC had repeatedly appealed for more selective trawl gears to be made available in the Baltic, and for faster approval processes, and at the same time pointed to the need for the correct formulation and interpretation of the rules on technical measures concerning gear designs and the need to consult the fisheries sector on the Delegated and Implementing Acts to Technical Measures Regulation 2019/1241.

**Representatives of the environmental NGOs** (*BalticWaters, Fisheries Secretariat, Coalition Clean Baltic, Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, WWF*) are of the opinion

that the use of selective and low impact gears should be further incentivized, either through regulations, such as are restrictions for non-selective gears or additional access to quota through implementing Article 17 of the CFP Basic Regulation.

## **Implementation at sea basin level: Control and enforcement by Member States**

**Representatives of the environmental NGOs** (*BalticWaters, Fisheries Secretariat, Coalition Clean Baltic, Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, WWF*) draw attention to the significant misreporting of landings mentioned in the Staff Working Document accompanying the Communication. The problem is especially serious in the Baltic Sea, where major shortcomings have been detected in those Member States with the largest quotas. They call on the Commission and Member States to enforce measures to eliminate this problem.

In addition, **some BSAC members** (*Low Impact Fishers of Europe*) note the establishment of Listed Ports under the revised Control Regulation allows for a derogation from the existing margin of tolerance for unsorted landings from small pelagic fisheries. They highlight the need for additional control measures, such as eDNA, to be rapidly implemented at these sites so as to support the transparent and accurate recording of catch and bycatch data.

## **Orientations for 2026 fishing opportunities**

As stated, **the BSAC** has already delivered its recommendations for 2026 and eagerly awaits the Commission's proposal for the Baltic.

**The BSAC** recommendation for the fishery in the Baltic Sea in 2026 to the Commission sent on 10<sup>th</sup> July 2025 highlighted that:

***The BSAC** once again acknowledges that many species and habitats of the Baltic Sea are not in good condition, according to recent assessments. This situation affects foodweb functionality, reduces the resilience and resistance against further environmental changes, and diminishes prospects for socioeconomic benefits, including fishing opportunities. Three stocks are faced with zero catch advice (eastern Baltic cod stock, western Baltic cod stock, and western Baltic herring). However, for some stocks, such as central Baltic herring and sprat, the catch advice is higher than last year. Some fish stocks in the Baltic Sea are showing signs of recovery, and efforts to rebuild stocks and improve selectivity are ongoing. With a view to working towards an ecosystem-based fisheries management, it is necessary to recognize positive developments alongside the existing challenges for a more holistic view.*

*An ecosystem-based fisheries management should also account for both the prey/predator relationship and harvesting patterns, and how environmental conditions affect the conditions of the stocks.*

## **CONCLUSIONS**

**The BSAC** supports the overall objective of the Commission on the need to protect resources, which must take into account all factors influencing the fish stocks in the Baltic

Sea.

At the same time, the BSAC draws attention to the fact that a resilient fisheries sector is needed to ensure food supplies and safeguard the socio-economic fabric of coastal communities. A rapid rebuilding of depleted Baltic stocks, and long-term sustainable fishing levels with ambitious precautionary buffers are needed to ensure food supplies and safeguard socio-economic interests on coastal communities.

**The BSAC** has contributed to the important work on the evaluation of the CFP. **The BSAC** welcomes the fact that the European Oceans Pact will seek to foster a broader, integrated and holistic approach to ocean governance across all sectors, including internal and external policies. The BSAC reiterates the urgency of multi-stakeholder collaboration to address systemic issues like misreporting and climate adaptation. The BSAC recommendations on the Ocean Pact were submitted to the Commission on 17<sup>th</sup> March 2025.