

Science Focus Group Agenda:

9th September 09:00-12:00.

Place: Online or Naturskyddsforeningen, Åsögatan 115 Stockholm.

Participants:

BSAC members: Christian Tsangardises (LIFE), Cathrine Pedersen Schirmer (Fisheries Secretariat), Gaëtane Le Breuil (EFFOP), Matti Ovaska (WWF and EBM WG Chair), Aimi Hamberg (CCB), Amanda Öberg (BalticWaters), Thomas Johansson (Baltic Salmon Fund), Krzysztof Stanuch (Polish National Chamber of Fish Producers), Florian Stein (DAFV), Peter Breckling (DFV), Michael Andersen (DFPO), Teija Aho (Swedish Fishermen Association), Raluca Ivanescu (DG MARE).

Observer: Kim Stobberup, Anna Dębicka (MSC),

BSAC Secretariat: Ewa Milewska (rapporteur), Jarek Zieliński ExCom Chair

Apologies: Glenn Douglas (Focus Group Chair).

1. Welcome by the Science Focus Group Chair Glenn Douglas

Christian Tsangarides (LIFE) chaired the meeting in the absence of the Focus Group Chair. The agenda was adopted.

2. Introduction to Focus Group topic; ICES Advice requests.

Raluca Ivanescu, representing DG Mare presented the process leading to the ICES advice¹. She referred to the fact that every four years the Commission signs a Framework Partnership Agreement with ICES. A grant agreement for recurrent advice is signed every year and covers the advisory deliverables related to relevant policy developments and the implementation of the CFP. On an ad-hoc basis, the Commission may also request ICES for non-recurrent advice related to specific policy developments. The Commission's request for recurrent advice is finalised in January in order to comply with the ICES advisory framework. The process includes internal consultation in DG Mare and is concluded by signing the grant agreement. The process of formulating recurrent advice is relatively simple, since the deliverables of the recurrent advice are the same every year. It covers mostly stock related advice and some general principles of the CFP and Multi-annual plans. The process of formulation of non-recurrent advice requests is more complex. ICES is asked to provide advice in response to special requests, related to the specific topics where scientific grounds are needed in order to identify proper solutions. Every non-recurrent request passes through ACOM and is then consulted with the relevant unit of DG Mare. ICES' work is based on the expertise and support of national institutes, which is sometimes difficult to access because of human resource challenges, such as limited pool of scientists, limited expertise in certain areas, limited data and / or methodologies, limited financial resources. In addition, repetitive nature of the recurrent advice process reduces potential expansion of the advice scope for non-recurrent requests.

Some requests are discussed with the Member States because of the horizontal management aspects. The Commission can also submit requests for technical service to answer special requests on e.g. the management of mixed fisheries. All requests provided by the Commission are presented on the ICES website².

¹ [Past Meetings - Baltic Sea Advisory Council](#)

² ICES Website: https://ices-library.figshare.com/pubtype_publications_advice/groups

The representative of DG MARE underlined that the Commission is grateful to the Advisory Councils for contributing with additional knowledge and for bringing additional light to science.

The Chair thanked the representative of DG MARE for her presentation.

The representative of DG MARE informed on the science event dedicated to the Baltic, organised on 18 September 2025³ by ICES and the European Commission, in the margin of ICES annual conference, in Klaipeda, Lithuania. She informed that the BSAC members on the possibility to join the event online.

Some participants regretted that the information about events related to the Baltic Sea science comes, to the BSAC, very late and asked the Commission to inform on such important meetings well in advance.

The ExCom Chair asked the Commission's representative to forward to the BSAC Secretariat, an invitation to the science event that could be forwarded to the BSAC members.

Cathrine Pedersen Schirmer (Fisheries Secretariat) asked how it is decided which advice is to be included in the headline advice. She pointed out that at present the headline advice does not follow the relevant legal requirements (the MAP) and the policy objectives.

Krzysztof Stanuch (Polish National Chamber of Fish Producers) underlined that the BSAC Focus Group has been established to identify current gaps in the scientific advice for Baltic Sea fish stocks, in order to improve the advice framework and possibly find alternative approach to advice on fish stocks. He asked the Commission to inform the BSAC on the non-recurrent advice requests at the early stage of the advice request process.

The Chair referred to the objectives of the Focus Group identified in its Terms of Reference⁴, underlining that the BSAC will in due time produce recommendations addressed to the Commission and ICES on advice requests and gaps in the advice.

Peter Breckling (Union of German Cutter Fishery) thanked the Commission's representative for presenting an excellent overview of the advice request process. He recognised other challenges such as lack of human resources with a limited pool of scientists, limited expertise in certain areas and data gaps. He noted that the timeline for non-recurrent advice is very long. Under the current challenges in the Baltic, it is important for the managers and fishers get any advice without delay. He pointed to the increasing problem of predators in the Baltic that requires to be recognised by ICES and included in the stock assessment models and advice.

³ For and from the Baltic: Navigating the Future of Fisheries with Ecosystem-Based Management, Thursday, 18 September 2025, 14:15–17:30, Klaipeda, and online, [ASC2025_final_programme.pdf](#)

⁴ Terms of reference of the Science Focus Group: Develop recommendations to be submitted to the Executive Committee for adoption:

- Addressing the European Commission: priorities for the advice requests, including recurrent and special advice requests addressed to ICES as well as the content of the current requests from the Commission.
- addressing ICES and the European Commission: gaps and weaknesses in advice (e.g. MSFD descriptors, regime shifts, risk assessment).

The representative of DG MARE underlined that the Commission is fully aware of the challenges faced by the fisheries sector in the Baltic as well as the increased impact of other pressures from land-based activities and climate change that require a more holistic approach. However, these problems will not be solved overnight. There is a need to look into a different way of asking for scientific advice that involves more elements. The purpose of the Ministerial Baltic Conference in the end of September and the science event during the ICES Annual Conference is to identify new tools and solutions to deal with these challenges. As one of its priorities, the Commission is trying to secure the budget for scientific expertise and to improve data collection through the existing methods. She underlined the involvement of DG MARE in enhancing the cooperation with Advisory Councils. Meetings such as MIRIA and MIACO provide an opportunity to raise issues related to scientific advice, as well as other challenges the Advisory Councils are facing. The engagement of Advisory Councils by DG MARE will be further finetuned.

The representative of DG MARE referred to the fact that the grant agreement between ICES and the Commission is available on the ICES website⁵. The process of requesting scientific advice from ICES is often time-sensitive, which may not allow for systematic consultation of recurrent advice with stakeholders. She underlined that the headline advice needs to be agreed in a complex process with other advice requestors, to ensure that it is aligned with the most common denominators, such as the MAP, and the basic agreement between the European Commission and ICES.

Justyna Zajchowska (WWF, Baltic Ecoregion Programme) asked the representative of DG MARE to explain the process and role of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Commission and ICES. She pointed out that the recurrent advice does not follow the relevant legal requirements (the CFP and the MAP) and the policy objectives as the reference points included in the headline advice are less ambitious than those required by the MAP.

Cathrine Pedersen Schirmer (Fisheries Secretariat) asked how DG MARE coordinates the advice requests with DG Environment, taking into account the MSFD targets for fish populations, in order to ensure that fining is conducted in such a way as to achieve the targets set in MSFD descriptors.

Aimi Hamberg (Coalition Clean Baltic) asked how the Commission works on bringing coherence between the objectives set in different legislative acts, such as the CFP and the Ocean Pact. She underlined that the MSFD goals have not been included in the advice requests. She asked when is the best time for the BSAC to come with the recommendations on improving the advice framework.

The representative of DG MARE explained to the Memorandum of Understanding sets out where ICES will provide scientific advice to the Commission. Every four years the Commission signs a Framework Partnership Agreement with ICES. A grant agreement for recurrent advice is signed every year and covers the advisory deliverables related to relevant policy developments and the implementation of the CFP. The advice requests reflect the legal requirements. She stated that stakeholders have been invited to submit suggestions for improving the CFP in the framework of its evaluation. The consultation provides an opportunity to raise issues related to scientific advice. The advice requests reflect the legal requirements however there is a need to have a balanced approach in formulating such requests that can deliver advice.

⁵ [ICES CS SI2_869124 application.pdf](#)

With reference to the coherence with other legislations, **the representative of the European Commission** referred to numerous initiatives announced by the Commission in the past two years, among others the Marine Action Plan and the Ocean Pact. DG Environment has its own communication channel with ICES, used for advice requests. She agreed that the well-being of fish stocks is influenced by several variables including environmental conditions, but including such variables into the advice requires methodology and expertise. The Commission is fully aware of these challenges. The ICES Baltic science event as well as the Ministerial Conference in the end of September confirm the attention paid by the Commission to the Baltic. The Commission's representative underlined that advice requests take account of other legislation apart from the CFP to the extent possible. However, the scope of the MSFD is broader than that of the CFP, covering a greater range of biodiversity components and indicators than just fish species.

With reference to the best time to deliver the BSAC recommendations, **the representative of the European Commission** stated that the BSAC contribute with its recommendations on priorities for the advice requests as soon as possible, preferably before the pre-MIRIA⁶ meeting organised by the Commission with the Advisory Councils in the beginning of January, to discuss the advisory process and advice requests.

Krzysztof Stanuch (Polish National Chamber of Fish Producers) referred to the responsibility of the Commission for management decisions based on the best available science and in this context asked why the Commission had proposed to rollover the fishing opportunities for central herring and sprat for 2026, despite the ICES indications of positive developments for these stocks and therefore a possibility to raise these TACs. He underlined that good recruitment prognosis for sprat has now been confirmed by the results of the autumn and spring surveys.

Amanda Öberg (BalticWaters) asked whether a regional adaptation of the advice to the specific needs of the Baltic would be possible. She underlined that at present legal requirements are not fully reflected in the advice and therefore the advice does not propose sufficient measures to recover the stocks.

Christian Tsangarides (LIFE) questioned the assumption that fishing at F_{MSY} for all stocks simultaneously with reference points derived from single-species models is sustainable. He referred to a different way of using the science in Australia and the United States, recommending higher biomass thresholds. He referred to an exchange in the Science journal between ICES and the authors which discusses the suboptimal use of science in European fisheries policy as discussed in the article "Systemic failure of European fisheries management".⁷

Cathrine Pedersen Schirmer (Fisheries Secretariat) asked how the Commission decides on which commercially exploited stocks should be included in the recurrent advice and assessed by ICES.

The representative of DG MARE replied that the Commission asks ICES to assess commercially relevant stocks. New stocks could be introduced into the advice requests if there is enough

⁶ MIRIA is a meeting of ICES and Requestors of ICES advice

⁷ <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.adv4341>

commercial relevance and clear request from stakeholders. However, budgetary implications need also to be considered in such case.

With reference to responsibility for management decisions, **the representative of DG MARE** pointed out that the Commission operates within a legal framework. She referred to the fact that the Member States have also been involved in designing the current legislation and are responsible for decisions taken. The recurrent requests mirror the provisions of the MAPs. She encouraged all stakeholders to give input to CFP evaluation and underlined that this is a good opportunity to rethink the management system.

In the case of herring and sprat TAC proposals, **the representative of DG MARE** referred to the statements made by a DG MARE representative at the BALTFISH Forum the previous day, indicating that the forecasts are more uncertain than usual and therefore the Commission proposes a cautious approach to maintain the 2026 TAC at the same level as for 2025.

As to the possibility for a regional adaptation for advice, **the representative of DG MARE** underlined that in the case of the Baltic, the implementation of ecosystem approach needs to be quicker. This requires new methodologies.

As to the optimal use of reference points (F_{MSY}) **the representative of DG MARE** stated that it is up to managers to decide on how to use the science.

The BSAC ExCom Chair commented that there is still room to improve the communication between the Commission and the BSAC, given the late information on the science event related to the Baltic. He underlined that the BSAC takes the situation in the Baltic very seriously. In consequence, the Science Focus Group has been established to identify current science questions needed to address issues facing Baltic Sea fish stocks.

3. Identification of problems with ICES advice
4. Suggest solutions
5. Text with a recommendation to ExCom for a statement

The Chair proposed to discuss items 3, 4 and 5 at a later stage, giving priority to other items on the agenda due to time constraints.

6. Input to speaking points for ExCom chair to coming “Our Baltic” Meeting.

The Chair informed that the Focus Group is to give written input to the speaking points for the ExCom chair to be presented during “Our Baltic” Conference. He reminded the participants that the ExCom Chair had been invited to attend the Conference and take active part in one panel discussion. There will be two panel discussions: one on the “State of the Baltic Sea” (discussion between the Commissioners and HELCOM Executive Secretary) and another one on “Closing the scientific knowledge gap to identify additional conservation measures, adjust fisheries and tackle misreporting” (20-minute interactive discussion in Q and A format between the moderator, the Commissioner, MEP Isabella Lövin and BSAC ExCom Chair).

The BSAC ExCom Chair thanked the Chair for prioritising the agenda point 6 on the input to the speaking points at the Our Baltic Conference. He reminded the meeting that these speaking points need to be approved by the ExCom in due time before the meeting on 30th September. The Working

Group Chairs are involved in formulating the input. He reminded the meeting that the BSAC continues to put pressure on the Commission and ICES to improve the science used by managers as well as to improve the process by which BSAC develops its own advice, among others through a letter addressed to the ACOM Chair in June 2025.

The Chair referred to the questions that will be raised by the moderator during the panel and opened the floor for comments:

- **“What additional conservation measures can you identify to be implemented via joint recommendations from BALTFISH to halt the decline of Baltic Sea Fisheries and adapt them to the realities of smaller quotas?”**
- **What do you intend to do to enable your national scientific institutes to bridge the knowledge gap needed to identify additional conservation measures and to ensure the availability of scientists to work in the ICES process?**
- **What will you do to tackle misreporting?**

With reference to the first question, **Michael Andersen (DFPO)** underlined that at present environmental factors have a much stronger impact on the situation in the Baltic than fisheries. Therefore, conservation measures applied to the fish stock, often reducing the fishing opportunities to zero, cannot solve the problem. There is a need for another approach, i.e. to tackle the circumstances preventing the fisheries.

Peter Breckling and Krzysztof Stanuch supported the statement that the problems in the Baltic can be solved uniquely by measures applied to fisheries. Fish stocks are affected by environmental factors, impacting food web functionality, reducing resilience and resistance against further environmental changes. He called for including the need to implement management measures for predators. There is also a need to assess the future productivity of the Baltic ecosystem to set the realistic management goals.

Krzysztof Stanuch (Polish National Chamber of Fish Producers) emphasised that the advice framework needs to be changed by filling the gaps in the advice, i.e. by including the impact of selectivity on the stock structure.

Michael Andresen (DFPO) applauded the statement by his German colleague referring to the need to assess the future productivity of the Baltic.

With reference to the question on knowledge gaps, **Aimi Hamberg (Coalition Clean Baltic)** stated that the need to reach the MSFD targets should be mentioned.

Justyna Zajchowska (WWF, Baltic Ecoregion Programme) underlined the role of every sea user in the conservation of the Baltic. She stated that the ExCom Chair will represent the entire BSAC at the high level conference and the statements it makes need to be agreed by consensus. She noted that the BSAC is the only stakeholder organisation invited to speak at this event. The advice agreed by consensus, such as recommendations on seals and cormorants need to be quoted in order to avoid any misuse of wording. WWF does not object to quoting the BSAC recommendation on predators in the ExCom Chair's speaking points. With reference to misreporting, the existing control tool such as REM and eDNA should be implemented. Another representative from WWF

supported the use of eDNA as part of the solution to tackle misreporting. The effects of species interactions should be quantified estimated and included in the advice.

The ExCom Chair reminded the meeting that the panel will only last 20 minutes. He agreed that the proposed input needs to include consensus - based statements. For the question on misreporting, he underlined that the provisions of the Control Regulation need to be enforced by relevant institutions and Member States. It should also mention that the BSAC has been calling to fill knowledge and involvement gaps in the advice.

Representatives of environmental NGOs asked to include recovery plans for depleted stocks as a conservation measure. They mentioned some specific knowledge gaps, among others on the reasons for decreased survival of salmon in the northern part of the Baltic. An ecosystem-based advice still needs to be further developed and implemented. They also called for including the need to ensure coherence between different legislations. Member States should be encouraged to do more to combat misreporting.

Gaëtane Le Breuil (European fishmeal and fish oil producers EFFOP) underlined that additional measures should be applied by other sectors than fisheries. The situation cannot be improved by measures applied to the fisheries sector alone, and other sectors need to contribute as well.

Teija Aho (Swedish Fishermen Association) underlined that fishing is not the main factor influencing the fish stocks. She called for improving data collection framework by including the impact of predators on fish stocks. The seal and cormorant induced mortality should be incorporated into the stock assessment models.

The ExCom Chair informed that on 14th October the BSAC Management Team will meet the Commissioner in Brussels and will also convey the outcome of the discussions of the Science Focus Group.

7. BSAC Input to MIAC meeting.

The Chair informed that PelAC is in charge of organising next year's MIAC meeting on 22nd January 2026 in ICES Headquarters in Copenhagen. The deadline for submitting questions has been set for the end September. Each AC is requested to limit itself to one question to be asked during the meeting. Written questions are however not limited and you may include them in the form.

In 2025 BSAC asked:

1. *How changes within the ecosystem (productivity, natural mortality, predators' abundance...) are considered in the ICES advices (reply during the meeting);*
2. *How ecosystem considerations are considered in the stock advice;*
3. *Update on the work on mixed fisheries advice in the Baltic Sea for pelagic and demersal fisheries.*

After some discussion, **the Focus Group** concluded that the answers to the questions asked last year had not been satisfactory for the BSAC members. Therefore, **the Focus Group** decided that the questions asked by the BSAC in 2025 MIAC meeting are still highly relevant and should be repeated in January 2026.

The Focus Group will communicate its decision to repeat the questions from January 2025 at the next MIAC **to the ExCom**. The ExCom members will be asked to provide questions that could be submitted in written to MIAC (through PELAC) by the end of September.

Cathrine Pedersen Schirmer (Fisheries Secretariat) asked whether observers are allowed to the pre-MIRIA meeting organised by the Commission in January for all Advisory Councils.

The ExCom Chair informed that in January 2025 the number had been limited to 2 representatives per Advisory Council. After receiving an invitation to pre-MIRIA in January 2026, the BSAC Secretariat will forward a request for allowing more participants from each AC to participate in the meeting.

8. AOB.

The ExCom Chair informed the Focus Group that the Executive Secretary has been on sick leave since the end of July. On 5th September 2025, the Executive Secretary informed the members of the Management Team on his current state of health. According to the doctor, he is recovering well, but should come back slowly to work to avoid any relapse. In the coming weeks, he can tentatively begin working again on an agreed slow startup. He suggested a 3 hours per day/ 3 day workload in the first weeks. He will mainly deal with BSAC accounts. Therefore during the next two months (until end of October) the ExCom Chair and the rapporteur will continue to assume the tasks of the Executive Secretary. N update of the situation at the BSAC Secretariat will also be presented to the ExCom on 13th November.

The Focus Group took note.

The participants proposed to keep the agenda of the Focus Group short to allow in-depth discussions.

A representative of an environmental NGO proposed to prepare a work programme for the remaining two meeting of the Focus Group until June 12026.

The Focus Group took note and will communicate this proposal to the Chair of the Focus Group.

The ExCom Chair thanked the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation for excellent meeting premises for the Focus Group.

The Chair thanked everyone for a good meeting.

9. Next meeting date and main subject.

The ExCom Chair praised the Science Focus Group as one of the most relevant initiatives of the BSAC. He proposed to hold the next meeting in person to enhance fruitful discussions.

The Science Focus Group decided to meet on 4th December in Gdynia, back to back with the EBM Working Group held on 5th December 2025. The ACOM Chair, Colm Lordan will be invited to take part in the meeting.