European Association of Fish Producers Organisations

Association Européenne des Organisations de Producteurs dans le secteur de la pêche

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Letter by e-mail attachment to:

- **Mr. Virginijus SINKEVIČIUS:** European Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries (cab-sinkevicius-contact@ec.europa.eu)
- **Ms. Charlina VITCHEVA**: Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (Charlina.Vitcheva@ec.europa.eu)

CC:

- EP PECH Committee secretariat
- BaltFish Presidency
- Member States

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Baltic Sea Working Group Advice on 2023 Fishing Opportunities

	EU quota 2022	ICES advice for 2023	Change in %[1]	Commission proposal for TAC 2023	EAPO advice for quotas for 2023
Cod 22-24	489	943	+ 92	489	3,111
Cod 25-32	595	0	0	595	3,550
Plaice	9,050	13,315	+ 47	11,313	13,315
Herring 22-24	788	0	0	788	7,000
Herring 25-29, 32	53,653	95,643[2]	+ 78	61,051	86,557
Herring 30-31	111,345	102,719	-7	80,074	102,719
Sprat	251,943	249,237	- 17	201,554	285,860
Salmon	63,811	75,000	+17	63,811	

Comments on EU approach to stock TAC setting

The recent invasion of Ukraine by Russia has put European fishers in a crisis, high fuel prices make it hard for fishing businesses to be profitable. EAPO would like the council to consider this when setting TAC for stocks that have an upper FMSY range. For such extraordinary circumstances, and in the need

[1] Compared to advice for 2022

[2] Including Russian catches

to maintain the food supply chain based on the own natural resources, amending the existing UE legislation to create possibility of setting the TAC using the upper range of FMSY, would improve the socioeconomic situation of European Fisheries and have a positive impact on European Food Security. This extraordinary measure would be addressed for the stocks when scientific evidence on negative interspecific interactions exists and when the stock is in a good state,

Comments on Baltic Sea Stocks

The situation in the Baltic is dominated by an imbalance in the ecosystem. Water temperatures are historically high, and the eutrophication problems withstand. These factors favour a high sprat population and form the ecosystem in the Baltic through a dominance of clupeids as well as sticklebacks. The high levels of sprat in turn cause negative effects for other species, through for example egg predation on cod, and competition for food resources with herring. EAPO firmly believe that according to the ecosystem-based management a reduction of the sprat biomass would most probably give positive effects for cod and herring populations and potentially for a number of other species as well (salmon, pike, perch and others).

This situation is reflected in ICES's advice as two stocks are faced with zero catch advice (eastern Baltic cod stock and western Baltic herring).

The state of the stocks is not solely due to the effects of fishing.

ICES concurs that fishing is not the sole reason for the ongoing changes in the ecosystem, but fishers are the first to be impacted economically and socially by the poor state of the Baltic Sea. EAPO wishes to stress the importance for actions to diminish the impacts on the ecosystem, and fisheries dependent societies.

Regarding fishing activities, the major outstanding challenges faced by Baltic European fishers are:

- decreasing cod bycatch in flatfish fisheries; The new alternative selective gears have been developed but, for legal reasons, fishers are still not allowed to use them despite the BALTFISH recommendation and the STECF acknowledgement.
- for the shared stock of the western herring; adjusting applicable international agreements and management measures with Norway and the United Kingdom

EAPO asks for a quick implementation of the necessary legal acts to allow using the new selective gears and for opening the discussion with the EU Member States and third countries as well about the management measures for Western herring.

Regarding cod, Fishing in subdivision 22-24 as well as subdivision 25 is restricted during the summer months "to protect cod spawning" (Regulation 2021/1888 Fixing for 2022 the fishing opportunities for certain fish stocks and groups of fish stocks applicable in the Baltic Sea), with some exemptions for smaller and pelagic vessels at certain depths. In practice, large areas are closed even to these fisheries during the closure months due to practical considerations (such as there is no less/smaller fish in the depths where fishing is allowed).

Thus, there is a closure for the pelagic fishery in subdivision 22-25 during May-August that has now been in place for three years. The regulation is said to protect cod spawning from disturbances, but there has never (even when the regulation was first enforced) been presented any scientific support that cod are in fact disturbed by pelagic fishing during the reproduction. Cod bycatches in the pelagic fishery are negligible and cannot affect cod reproductive success.

EAPO requests that the summer stop for other fisheries related to cod spawning be lifted for 2023, or at the very least be thoroughly evaluated as to its efficacy when it comes to giving any effect on the cod recovery. The economic impact on the local herring fishery for consumption to local filleting industries is enormous and without any positive results to show for the cod population, it is entirely disproportionate. The largest herring with best quality for the industry is usually fished during summer in areas 24-25.

Comments on individual stocks

COD SDs 22-24:

The western Baltic Sea Cod Stock is facing additional mortality rendering previous advices uncertain regarding the state of the stock. ICES had predicted a substantial reduction in fishing mortality and a corresponding increase in SSB. The recent advice does not show the anticipated increase in SSB, ICES presumes this could be because of increased natural mortality (due to increased predation, hypoxia, decreased condition, increased water temperatures) rather than being caused by unreported catches.

Still, the western Baltic Sea cod remains an important species for Baltic fishers. Even though it recently has changed from being a targeted species to being a bycatch in the flatfish fishery. With the landing obligation as it is, setting the TAC too low will make Western Baltic Cod a choke species for the flatfish fishery.

Commission's proposal to set the TAC for cod as a rollover of the 2021 value is not helpful. There is a scientific assessment that results in an advice to increase the fishery by 35%. This should render an increase in the commercial quota from 489 to 660 tonnes completely uncontroversial. However, EAPO finds the situation to be so extraordinary, that management should be based on traditional methods. In order to maintain both food production and employment as high as possible (but still sustainable),EAPO suggest setting the TAC on the basis of Fmsy + Fpa / 2, which implies a total catch of 3.111 tonnes.

Further to this, EAPO recommends removing the clause that cod can only be caught as bycatch. For the cod stock it is the quantum that is removed which matters, not whether it is caught with or without certain amounts of other fish. For the management however, it complicates the regulations very much and, in some cases, prevents many fishers from catching their quotas of other fish.

Cod SDs 25-32:

As it was written for the western Baltic Sea cod stock, the eastern Baltic Sea cod stock is also mainly caught as a bycatch by flatfish fisheries. Under the landing obligation, setting a zero TAC for this stock would make it a choke species for fishers targeting plaice. As was the case for Western cod, EAPO also recommends removing the clause on cod only being caught as bycatch.

With that in mind, EAPO suggests setting the TAC to EU TAC 3,550 t (F = 0.05 - ICES estimate)

Plaice in SDs 22-32:

Once again, this year, Plaice has proven to grow very well in the region. This applies both to the stock found in the Kattegat and the western Baltic Sea and to the stock found further east, around Bornholm. The growing stocks and the corresponding increased abundance of young individuals enhances the need for the implementation of a derogation from the landing obligation, based on high survival

EAPO recommends following the ICES advice and setting the 2023 TAC at 13,315 tonnes in accordance with the MSY approach. EAPO also wishes to insist on the need for implementing more selective gear to reduce cod bycatch and allow for a recovery of the COD stock.

Herring 22-24

EAPO recommends a TAC based on the Baltic multi annual plan which secures the long-term sustainability of the stock and should be the guiding tool for managing western Baltic herring. To further support the positive development of the stock EAPO recommends advancing with a two-year transitional approach, in which the TAC for WBSS can be set at in accordance with the MAP for 2024. **For 2023, EAPO recommends** setting the TAC **at 7,000 t**, a level equal to 50% of MAP F_{MSY} lower[46].

EAPO does not recommend a zero TAC for WBSS in 2023. EAPO insists on the need, in accordance with the CFP, to take into account the socio-economic consequences of a zero advice on the fishing industry and the coastal communities it supports. Several fleets, processors and communities rely on the western Baltic herring as a component in the targeted fisheries for sprat and other herring stocks.

Herring 25-29, 32

EAPO recommends that the 2023 TAC for herring in the central Baltic management area should be **95,643 tonnes**, which is in accordance with the MAP F_{MSY} scenario in the ICES advice, allowing for an increase in SSB.

The corresponding **EU TAC** in the central Baltic management area for 2022 would be calculated as: 95,643 tonnes + 794 tonnes – 3,211 tonnes = 93,226 tonnes, 93,226 t – 9.5% of the Russian share = **86,557 tonnes (MAP F_{MSY}).**

Herring 30-31

EAPO recommends setting the 2023 TAC for herring in this management area at 102,719 tonnes, which is in accordance with the FMSY-scenario.

On a side note, Coastal fishers are witnessing a a collapse in the coastal fishery for herring in these areas which is causing a serious debate and conflict with the pelagic fisheries in Sweden. EAPO highlights the need for ICES expertise to clarify the situation.

Sprat

For sprat, according to the ICES advice, 2023 fishing opportunities will be reduced by 15% compared to 2022 fishing opportunities.

Using an ecosystem-based approach to the fisheries management in the Baltic, EAPO firmly believes there are sound reasons for a high sprat quota and for trying to reduce the sprat biomass to a lower level.

It has been scientifically documented at least since the mid 1990's that clupeids, and in particular sprat, are predators on cod eggs and that this should be taken into account with regard to the fisheries management for the Baltic (e.g. Köster & Schnack, 1994, Dana, vol 10, p 179-201). For the cod, egg survival is one of the most crucial parts of the early development, and oxygen depletion and predation on eggs by clupeids are the major causes for egg mortality. (Köster et al 2003, Scientia Marina, vol 67: S1).

Sprat may serve as prey items for larger cod, but this requires the cod to get big enough to eat the sprat. This is rarely the case these days. Cod growth is predominantly limited by the lack of bottom-

dwelling food in younger ages. Furthermore, large cod prefer herring to sprat, and the herring population and growth would also benefit from a higher sprat quota and less competition between sprat and herring for food resources. High sprat abundances also result in a larger part of the salmon diet consisting of sprat, leading to higher risk for M74 syndrome in salmon (Mikkonen et al 2011, ICES Journal of Marine Science, 68: p 2134-2144).

Furthermore, high sprat biomass has been shown to coincide with low body condition in both herring and sprat (exactly what is now observed by fishers in the Baltic), presumably due to competition within and between the two species for food resources (Casini et al Population Ecology 53: p. 511-523). A lower sprat biomass may therefore be positive to allow both the central Baltic herring to recover from its current low biomass levels as well as help the cod stocks recover. An increased sprat biomass also explained 53% of variation in perch recruitment from 1994 to 2007 at an open coastal site and was linked to reduced abundance of coastal predators like perch and pike in the southwestern Baltic (Ljunggren et al 2010, ICES Journal of Marine Science, vol 67:8, p. 1587–1595).

According to the Baltic MAP Article 4:5, Fmsy upper may be used when the stock is above MSY Btrigger but also if there is scientific advice or evidence that there may be negative interspecific interactions.

The sprat SSB is well above the reference values, so the first part of this condition is met.

EAPO argues that the second part of the condition is also met. As shown above, sprat predation on cod eggs is scientifically documented, and with the current situation for the cod stocks all measures should be taken to reduce the natural mortality of the cod, including using the higher range for sprat to reduce egg predation as well as food competition between sprat and juvenile cod as well as herring for plankton.

EAPO believes that maximising the sprat quota therefore is according to the ecosystem approach and fulfils the requirements set in the Baltic Sea MAP for utilising the upper Fmsy range.

We also want to draw attention to the aspect of food security in the context of the war in Ukraine as sprat is a popular and accessible protein.

EAPO therefore recommends using the upper Fmsy range and set the 2023 sprat TAC at 317.905 tonnes. (317,905 t - Russian share 10.08% **= 285,860 t (F_{MSY} upper)**

Salmon SD 22-32

EAPO calls for developing the renewed management plan of the Baltic salmon in all SDs

Conclusion

On a finishing note, the Baltic Sea is facing a difficult situation caused by increasingly deteriorating ecosystems due to the increasing anthropogenic pollutions. To add insult to injury, the most important stocks are trophically related in a manner that fishing one impacts the other, either by allowing for its recovery, because one is a bycatch of the other or because closing fishing in that period to protect one stock drastically impacts the profitability of another fishery. Setting TACs in the Baltic Sea must be done by taking these into account and by applying an ecosystem-based approach, to preserve Fisheries as much as fishes.

We must work to better the tools at our disposal, such as the existing Multiannual Plans, as much as use the new tools (*New fishing gear allowing for less bycatch of Cod)* and research available (*Negative interspecific interactions between Sprat and Cod*) to make the best decision with the best available science.

Yours sincerely

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EAPO President