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ANALYSIS OF TOTAL ALLOWABLE CATCHES FOR 2016 IN THE BALTIC SEA

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1. Background

The Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) requires an end to overfishing with legally binding targets and deadlines. Article 2.2 states:

“In order to achieve the objective of progressively restoring and maintaining populations of fish stocks above biomass levels capable of producing the maximum sustainable yield, the maximum sustainable yield exploitation rate shall be achieved by 2015 where possible and, on a progressive, incremental basis at the latest by 2020 for all stocks”.

The CFP only allows for flexibility in this deadline in exceptional cases, when meeting it “would seriously jeopardise the social and economic sustainability of particular fleets” (Recital 7).

Under the CFP, each year the European Commission is responsible for proposing fishing limits, Total Allowable Catches (TACs). The Fisheries Council (comprised of the 28 ministers responsible for fisheries) then sets the corresponding fishing limits.

2. European Commission 2016 Baltic Sea TAC proposal

In September the Commission published its proposal for fishing limits in the Baltic Sea for 2016 ahead of the October Fisheries Council. The proposal was for nine TACs (out of a possible 10) for stocks in the Baltic Sea¹:

- For eight TACs, the Commission proposed not exceeding scientific advice. These were for herring, plaice, sprat and salmon.

¹ European Commission (COM(2015) 413 final): Proposal for a Council Regulation fixing for 2016 the fishing opportunities for certain fish stocks and groups of fish stocks applicable in the Baltic Sea.

- For the eastern cod stock the Commission proposed a fishing limit (of 41,143 tonnes) which exceeded the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea's, ICES, advice (of no more than 29,220 tonnes).
- The Commission did not originally propose a fishing limit for western Baltic cod. The spawning stock biomass of the stock is below the minimum reference point, known as "B_{lim}" (i.e. there is a high likelihood that reproduction is impaired), and fishing mortality is well above the maximum limit (F_{MSY}). Furthermore, ministers made a commitment in 2014 to reduce fishing mortality in 2016 to the F_{MSY} level. Instead the Commission requested that ministers agree measures to be taken.

3. Fisheries Council 2016 Baltic Sea TAC decision

On October 22nd, the Fisheries Council set the TACs for 10 fish stocks in the Baltic Sea²:

- On average, the TACs exceeded the scientific advice by 24 percent, last year's TACs exceeded scientific advice by 16 percent.
- For four TACs the Council did not exceed scientific advice. These were for plaice, central Baltic herring, herring in subdivisions 22-24 and salmon in subdivisions 22-31.
- Six TACs were set above scientific advice. These were the TACs for both cod stocks, salmon in subdivision 32, sprat, Gulf of Riga herring and Bothnian Sea herring.
- For the eastern cod stock ministers agreed a TAC of 41,143 tonnes. ICES advised a total catch of no more than 29,220 tonnes, implying a TAC for the EU of no more than 26,298 tonnes when non-EU catches are taken into account.
- Council agreed a TAC for the western cod stock of 12,720 tonnes, which exceeded the ICES advice of no more than 5,239 tonnes³ including allowance for recreational catches. Despite the ICES advice, and a commitment made by fisheries ministers in 2014 to reduce fishing mortality in 2016 to the F_{MSY} level, ministers agreed to continue overfishing of this stock.

4. Conclusions

1. A majority of TACs proposed by the Commission for the Baltic Sea in 2016 followed scientific advice and were in line with the CFP.
2. The Commission proposed continued overfishing of the depleted eastern Baltic cod stock. It did not publish a proposed TAC for the western cod stock⁴.
3. A majority (6 out of 10) of TACs agreed by ministers do not follow scientific advice exceeding it by 24 percent on average.
4. The TACs decided for cod exceed scientific advice by 143 percent for the western stock and 56 percent for the eastern one.
5. The decisions on 2016 Baltic TACs taken by ministers move Baltic fisheries further from achieving the objectives of the CFP and instead legislate continued overfishing in the region.

² Fisheries Council Press release, 22 October 2015:

<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/agrifish/2015/10/22-23/>

³ ICES advice for 2015 for Western Baltic Cod:

<http://www.ices.dk/sites/pub/Publication%20Reports/Advice/2015/2015/cod-2224.pdf>

⁴ The post-Council press release (<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/agrifish/2015/10/22-23/>) implies the Commission at some stage proposed a TAC for western cod stock nearly double the scientific advice.

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