



THE
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Analysis of Fisheries Council agreement on fishing opportunities in the Baltic Sea for 2018

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Background

On 10th October 2017, the EU Council of ministers decided on fishing limits in the Baltic Sea for 2018. Setting appropriate fishing limits is fundamental to achieving the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) objectives to restore and maintain fish stocks above levels capable of producing the maximum sustainable yield (MSY). To achieve this, Article 2(2) of the CFP regulation¹ requires that the MSY exploitation rates be achieved by 2015 where possible, and on a progressive, incremental basis at the latest by 2020 for all stocks.

For the majority of fish stocks managed by fishing limits in the Baltic Sea, decisions on total allowable catches (TACs) and measures to recover fish populations should be taken within the framework of the Baltic Sea multi-annual plan (MAP)². This was the second year that decisions on certain fishing limits were agreed within the framework of the Baltic Sea MAP.

With the 2020 MSY deadline fast approaching, and nearly three years passed since the 2015 deadline, not all stocks in the Baltic Sea are being exploited at or below MSY exploitation rates as required by the CFP. Achieving MSY exploitation rates by a date later than 2015 should only be allowed in exceptional circumstances, where it would seriously jeopardise the social and economic sustainability of the fishing fleets involved (CFP Recital 7).

Progress in ending overfishing in the Baltic Sea

Pew welcomes that the Council set several Baltic Sea fishing limits not exceeding scientific advice and in line with the Baltic Sea MAP this year, including for western Baltic herring, central Baltic herring, Gulf of Riga herring, and sprat. We also congratulate ministers for setting the Gulf of Bothnia herring TAC at a level below the maximum scientifically advised catch and for following Article 4(4) of the Baltic Sea MAP to limit the variation in central Baltic herring fishing opportunities between consecutive years to no more than 20 per cent.

¹ [REGULATION \(EU\) No 1380/2013 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 11 December 2013 on the Common Fisheries Policy, amending Council Regulations \(EC\) No 1954/2003 and \(EC\) No 1224/2009 and repealing Council Regulations \(EC\) No 2371/2002 and \(EC\) No 639/2004 and Council Decision 2004/585/EC](#)

² [REGULATION \(EU\) 2016/1139 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 6 July 2016 establishing a multiannual plan for the stocks of cod, herring and sprat in the Baltic Sea and the fisheries exploiting those stocks, amending Council Regulation \(EC\) No 2187/2005 and repealing Council Regulation \(EC\) No 1098/2007](#)

However, Pew is seriously concerned by the Council's decision to continue to sanction overfishing of the **eastern Baltic cod** stock. Not only is the TAC set 28% above the scientific advice³, but the TAC for western Baltic cod seems to also include catches of this stock, as it mixes in subdivision 24. This means that fishing mortality on the eastern Baltic cod stock will be higher still. It is therefore clear that the Council set fishing limits for eastern Baltic cod too high. While the Baltic Sea MAP does not define specific mortality targets or conservation reference points for this stock, the scientific advice was clear and no justification has been provided for setting fishing limits higher than that advice.

The introduction of a temporary closure period (1st July to 31st August) for certain fishing methods and vessel lengths is insufficient to mitigate the risks of overfishing. In 2016, STECF was asked to assess and quantify the impact of closure periods on the fishing effort applied in the Baltic Sea cod fisheries and the impacts on the cod stocks⁴. STECF considered that the closures cannot represent a substitute to the reduction of catches required to achieve the MSY objective as indicated by the ICES scientific advice in 2016. A spawning closure can potentially be beneficial as a complement to catch regulation, but STECF considered that the closures will contribute to achieving the MSY objective for the Baltic cod stocks only if the total catches of western Baltic cod and eastern Baltic cod remain within the limits indicated by the latest ICES scientific advice. The eastern Baltic cod TAC is set above the scientifically advised catch for 2018, and no evidence is provided that the agreed closure period will be sufficient to allow the achievement of the MSY objective for the eastern Baltic cod stock.

For the **western Baltic cod** stock the Council agreed to set the TAC at 5,597 tonnes, not exceeding the scientifically advised maximum catch limit (6,066 tonnes⁵). However, the TAC was set much closer to the maximum catch limit than the lower catch limit (2,357 tonnes⁶) advised by ICES.

Article 5(3) of the Baltic Sea MAP requires the stock biomass, currently well below the limit reference point (B_{lim}), to be rapidly rebuilt to levels above those capable of producing MSY through the use of conservation measures, which may include suspending the targeted fishery and the adequate reduction in fishing opportunities. Although Council supported continued remedial measures to help recover the western Baltic cod stock (daily recreational catch limits and a temporary closure period for commercial fisheries), ICES estimates that the stock biomass will be just above B_{lim} in 2018, if predictions of a good recruitment are correct. There is also a strong assumption, not yet verified, that the commercial and recreational catch limits and conservation measures for 2017 and 2018 will be fully effective in reducing fishing pressure as predicted. In the face of such uncertainty, ministers should have been more ambitious, setting a TAC for western Baltic cod closer to the lower catch limit advised by ICES⁷, with more precautionary conservation measures for 2018, to ensure a rapid biomass recovery as required by the MAP.

Pew is also concerned that the Council decided to exceed the scientific advice for **Baltic Sea plaice**. This is a step backwards for plaice, after its TAC was set not exceeding scientific advice for the last couple of years. While the Baltic Sea MAP does not define specific mortality targets or

³ Including a downwards TAC adjustment for the mixing of eastern and western cod stocks in subdivision 24.

⁴ STECF, 2016 - [Special request for evaluating Baltic cod additional measures](#).

⁵ Including an upwards TAC adjustment for the mixing of eastern and western cod stocks in subdivision 24.

⁶ Including an upwards TAC adjustment for the mixing of eastern and western cod stocks in subdivision 24.

⁷ Including an upwards TAC adjustment for the mixing of eastern and western cod stocks in subdivision 24.

conservation reference points for this stock, the scientific advice was clear and no justification has been provided for setting fishing limits above that advice.

For the **Baltic salmon** stocks, which are not covered by the Baltic Sea MAP, it was not possible to ascertain whether the Council decisions are fully consistent with scientific advice, due to continued ambiguity around the calculation of those TACs. It is highly likely that the salmon TAC for subdivisions 22-31 was set exceeding scientific advice, based on the deductions necessary for unreported, misreported, damaged and third country (Russian) catches. However, the picture is less clear for the salmon TAC in subdivision 32. More transparency is required on how the scientific advice for salmon stocks is transposed into a TAC.

Finally, Pew regrets that the Council did not adopt the Commission proposal to further protect the critically endangered **European eel** from commercial and recreational fishing activities in the Baltic Sea, through the introduction of a total ban on fishing. Ministers have postponed discussions on measures until the December Council meeting. Pew urges ministers to adopt EU-wide measures to decisively end overfishing and address the critical state of this stock. According to ICES advice catches should be reduced to zero, or as close to zero as possible in order to restore the eel stock and achieve the CFP's objectives.

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