

Oceana's recommendations on fishing opportunities for 2018

Baltic Sea Stocks



General recommendations

In advance Fisheries Council decision on fishing opportunities in the Baltic Sea, Oceana releases its recommendations for setting total allowable catches (TACs) for 2018, in line with the most recently available scientific advice and aiming to stop overfishing in Baltic fisheries before 2020.

The end of overfishing is necessary not only to guarantee the sustainable exploitation of fish resources at present but also for the future in order to recover the profitability and social prosperity of fishing activities. Achieving good environmental status (GES) of the oceans is also a main goal of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD)¹, which shares a 2020 deadline.

EU Member States must therefore ensure that TACs are in line with scientific advice and guarantee stocks are above biomass levels that are able to provide the highest long-term average catch (MSY). However, in a number of cases disregard of this premise has led several Baltic stocks into a dire situation - granting short-term benefits to the fishing industry but putting an enormous economic impact in the long-term. A clear example of this is western cod, recently put to the brink of collapse by mismanagement which resulted in severe cuts to the fishing limits as the only viable option left.

Oceana urges EU Member States to turn the tide without delay, adhere to science when setting TACs. After 2020 overfishing EU stocks will become illegal under the EU law.

To ensure the long-term stability of Baltic Sea fisheries, the EU Council of Ministers must:

- Follow scientific advice when setting fishing opportunities, prioritising stock recovery and putting an end to overfishing;
- Set a TACs for the western and eastern Baltic cod stocks that ensure long-term recovery.

¹ Directive 2008/56/EC (Marine Strategy Framework Directive)

- Stop all directed sprat fisheries in subdivision 25 and redistribute fishing efforts to the northern areas to allow cod stocks to recover;

Cod in peril

Cod is a highly important fish species in the Baltic, both environmentally and commercially, and its recovery should be a top priority for decision makers and stakeholders.

In recent years the most worrisome and problematic stock is the western cod. Although the TAC has been reduced for a number of years (**a total of 74% reduction since 2012**) the cuts were not nearly high enough. Last year ICES recommended an unprecedented 93% reduction of the annual TAC but decision makers chose to ignore the problem. The Council of Ministers has decided on a vastly inadequate 56% reduction despite warnings from several conservation organisations and scientific institutions that it only delays the inevitable. Unsurprisingly, the stock continues to give severe cause for concern.

In just 10 years, the commercial catches of the western cod stock have dropped by more than half, while the eastern stock remains in a fragile state and needs careful management. The western stock suffered from very limited recruitment in the recent years but miraculously recruitment in 2017 is estimated to be very high. Since the current juvenile fish will become the future *spawning stock biomass* which underpins a stock's productivity and stability therefore **it is of utmost importance to ensure the preservation of juveniles** and this very generous recruitment.

The eastern stock even despite reported signs of improvement has a low count of larger fish. The 2017 biomass, based on the two latest surveys, shows a decline in all length groups. Moreover ICES notes that the average condition of cod (weight at length) has been decreasing since the 1990s to present historic low level and the fish show symptoms of severe stress.

European Fisheries Ministers simply cannot keep wasting their words and neglect the plight of Baltic cod. In 2014, Denmark, Germany, Finland, Lithuania, Poland, Latvia, Estonia and Sweden officially agreed to reach a sustainable fishing level for the western Baltic cod by 2016. However, the TAC agreed was still far too high to fulfil the agreement.

Oceana's recommendation for 2018 TACs

Cod in the western Baltic Sea, Subdivisions 22-24: Like last year, this year ICES recommends large cuts to the fishing limits – up to 75% (based on fishing mortality ranges provided by the Baltic Multiannual Plan), which would result in a TAC between 1,376 tonnes and 3,541 tonnes in 2018.

The western cod stock is in a very poor condition. It has been suffering from a fishing mortality well above sustainable levels. For several years the spawning stock biomass has been below the B_{lim} reference point (which means that the stock is at a high risk of suffering from reduced recruitment, a state that should be avoided at all cost) for several years now. Recruitment has been low since 1999 and last year it was estimated to be the lowest in recorded history. However, recent surveys have indicated that the 2016 year class is strong and widely distributed in the western Baltic area, therefore recruitment this year is estimated to be the highest since 2005.

Additionally in recent years, recreational fishing pressure has been relatively large in relation to the commercial fishing pressure and because of that are being restricted with bag limits in 2017.

The before mentioned positive development of the stock that is hoped for depends largely on the strength of the 2016 year class and ICES notes in its annual advice that recruitment estimates are always uncertain.

If the TAC were set to be set at F_{lower} mortality range (in line with the Multiannual Plan) it would mean fishing limits in 2018 at 1,376 tonnes (-75% reduction compared to last year). Under this scenario the predicted

spawning stock biomass in 2019 could reach 51,190 tonnes (84% increase). That would not only bring the stock back from below B_{lim} but would also put the stock well above $MSY B_{trigger}$ reference point with a safe buffer. **Therefore, Oceana recommends that TAC for cod in subdivisions 22-24 should not exceed 1,376 tonnes** (which is consistent with MAP's F_{lower} MSY range and using ICES Advice Rule).

Moreover Oceana does not support quota transfer from eastern Baltic cod TAC to the western Baltic cod TAC. It is impossible to determine with full confidence which fish is being caught even despite evidence of both stocks mixing in areas 24 and 25. The transfer may cause additional stress (increased fishing mortality) on a fragile western stock.

Cod in the eastern Baltic Sea, Subdivisions 25-32: While the eastern cod stock is showing certain signs of improvement, it remains in a fragile state due to recent drastic declines in a number of larger and older fish. ICES have reported that fish larger than or equal to 30 cm have decreased between 2011 and 2014. There have also been a number of concerns regarding the stock assessment *i.e.* the inability to determine age. Therefore, the ICES framework for category 3 stocks was applied, which

means that the available knowledge is insufficient to apply the ICES MSY approach and the advice rule is therefore based on the precautionary approach instead. ICES considers that a reduction of clupeid F in Subdivision 25 can possibly improve growth and condition of cod as well as reduce cannibalism. Oceana recommends that spatial management measures are implemented. This means that all directed sprat fisheries in subdivision 25 should be stopped and fishing effort should be redistributed to the northern areas to allow cod stock to recover.

Decision makers and stakeholders must ensure that the long-term health of the ecosystem becomes the highest priority when managing this stock. It is crucial that the scientifically found precautionary considerations laid down by ICES are followed by the Council of Ministers. **This means that the Baltic TAC for the eastern cod stock in subdivisions 25-32 should not exceed 24,767 tonnes** (based on precautionary approach and taking into account Russian share of 5%).

Table 1: Oceana's fishing limits proposal for Baltic Sea stocks

Quantities are given in tonnes, except for salmon, which is expressed as a number of individuals.

Brackets show TAC difference in % to the previous year, i.e. negative % indicates a reduction; positive % indicates an increase in the TAC.

Species	ICES Fishing area	TAC 2017 ²	ICES advice 2018	EC proposal ³	Stock Status	Oceana's proposal 2018
<i>Cod (Gadus morhua)</i>	SD 22-24	5,597 (-56%)	1,376 – 3,541	5,597	Below MSY B_{lim} , $F > F_{MSY}$	1,376 (-75%)
<i>Cod (Gadus morhua)</i>	SD 25-32	30,857 (-25%)	26,071	22,275	Unknown	24,767 (-20%)**
<i>Herring (Clupea harengus)</i>	SD 22-24*	28,401 (+8%)*	17,309	12,987	Below MSY $B_{trigger}$, $F > F_{MSY}$	17,309 (-39%)
<i>Herring (Clupea harengus)</i>	SD 25-29 & 32	191,129 (+8%)	267,745***	238,229	Above MSY $B_{trigger}$	238,229 (+25%)
<i>Herring (Clupea harengus)</i>	SD 28.1	31,074 (-11%)	24,919***	28,999	Above MSY $B_{trigger}$, $F > F_{MSY}$	28,999 (-7%)
<i>Herring (Clupea harengus)</i>	SD 30-31	140,998 (+17%)	95,566	70,617	Above MSY $B_{trigger}$, $F > F_{MSY}$	95,566 (-32%)
<i>Sprat (Sprattus sprattus)</i>	SD 22-32	260,993 (+29%)	291,715***	262,310	Above MSY $B_{trigger}$	262,310 (+0,5%)**
<i>Plaice (Pleuronectes platessa)</i>	SD 22-32*	7,862 (+95%)*	3,104 (SD 24-32) 5,405 (SD 21-23)	6,272	Undefined (SD 24-32) Above MSY $B_{trigger}$ (SD 21-23)	6,272 (-20%)
<i>Salmon (Salmo salar)</i>	SD 22-31	95,928 (0%)	116,000	106,096	N/A	79,595 (-17%)**
<i>Salmon (Salmo salar)</i>	SD 32	10,485 (-20%)	9,558	10,003	N/A	8,669 (-17%)** No targeted fishing for wild fish

* The ICES advice area and EU management area do not match.

** Russian share of the TAC already excluded.

*** As corresponding to F_{MSY} .

² Fishing opportunities in the Baltic Sea for 2017, [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/agrifish/2016/10/community-total-allowable-catches-\(tacs\)-in-the-baltic-sea-for-2017_pdf/](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/agrifish/2016/10/community-total-allowable-catches-(tacs)-in-the-baltic-sea-for-2017_pdf/)

³ <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2017/EN/COM-2017-461-F1-EN-ANNEX-1-PART-1.PDF>