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BALTIC SEA TOTAL ALLOWABLE CATCH 2025 Recommendations by LIFE Baltic membership

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INTRODUCTION

Following the introduction of emergency measures in the Baltic to protect cod stocks five years ago, the situation has only worsened, and there are no grounds for optimism that things will improve any time soon <https://lifeplatform.eu/baltic-emergency-no-fishers-of-the-future-without-fish-in-the-future/>

On May 31, the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) published its scientific advice on how much fish can be extracted from the Baltic Sea next year (2025). This advice is produced to inform the European Commission (EC) and the AgriFish Council when setting fishing opportunities for 2025, and the EC's proposal on fishing opportunities in the Baltic, due to be published at the end of August.

The ICES advice shows that most stocks are not recovering or are even declining further. Sprat has now been added to cod and western herring as species at historically low levels. Whilst LIFE welcomes the ICES advice to reduce fishing levels, we are concerned that this advice does not go far enough, blinkered as it is, and unable to go beyond a simple single species approach.

Whilst quotas for targeted fishing have been reduced, ICES has not taken into account either the impacts of natural mortality (notably predation by cormorants and seals) nor by-catch mortality in their recommendations. In the case of cod, fish are still being caught in large quantities in demersal trawl fisheries targeting flat fish (flounder and plaice). Far more cod is being caught (and discarded) as bycatch in these fisheries than in the fisheries targeting cod.

For these reasons, LIFE asserts that in sea areas 21-32, for fisheries targeting Cod, Plaice and Western Herring, fishing should be closed to all fleets and gears excepting for small-scale low impact fleets using passive gears. The provisions of Article 17 of the CFP make this possible, by applying criteria of an environmental nature to allocate fishing opportunities only to vessels under 12 metres using non-towed gears.

LIFE Recommendations for Baltic TACs in 2025

Stock	LIFE recommendation (tonnes)	ICES recommendation (tonnes)	Notes
Western cod 22-24	340	24	Passive gear only
Eastern cod 25-32	595	0	Passive gear only
Plaice 21-32	7,106	25,365	Passive gear only
Western herring 22-24	788	0	Passive gear only

Central herring 25-29, 32		48, 442	95,340 – 125,344	+20% last year's quota
Riga herring 28.1		30,394	30,394 - 45,235	Fmsy lower
Bothnian herring 30-31		n/a	n/a	>20,000 tonnes
Sprat 22-32		73,566	130,195 - 169,131	0,5 Fmsy
Salmon SD 22-31		Reopen coastal fishery in SD 29-30	0 salmon	

Prioritise biomass growth

There is a biomass crisis in the Baltic. Fish stocks have declined by more than 50% since the 1970s. LIFE recommendations are based on the clear need to grow fish stocks. This means increasing the biomass of stocks and allowing a range of year classes to develop.

In 2013 the EU reformed its fisheries policy promising a new era with healthy fish stocks. Since then, biomass in the Baltic has declined by around 800.000 tonnes while catches have shrunk by 130.000 tonnes and multiple fisheries are closed or heavily restricted.

Implementing the ICES advice will not bring our stocks back. We need TACs set which will lead to growth in the fishery. Coastal fishermen are clear: cut the quotas and restrict the trawl fishery for herring and sprat.

Western cod

LIFE recommends a rollover TAC of 340 tonnes and that this shall be allocated in line with Article 17 exclusively to the passive gear fleet on grounds of selectivity. We underline that Subdivisions 22-24 should be designated trawl free fishing areas and that the plaice quota needs to be set at a level which minimises cod bycatch.

Western Baltic cod is below the lowest biomass threshold level, Blim, and is faced with a record discard rate of 55% of catches thrown away. Remedial measures must be taken.

Why are discards at record levels in the demersal trawl fishery?

ICES explains: "The change towards flatfish-directed fisheries in both active and passive gears resulted in higher discards due to smaller mesh sizes (90mm flatfish gears instead of 105+mm cod-directed gears). The decreasing condition in Baltic Sea flatfishes (see 3.1.7.2) is also affecting flounder in SDs 22 and 23, resulting in flounder above the MCRS being discarded more often than before."

This high discard rate is a product of fishing gears not adapted to the current cod and flatfish stock structures and the interspecies dynamics of the demersal fishery now found in the western Baltic. As such the problem will persist if a trawl free area is not implemented.

Eastern cod

LIFE recommends a rollover TAC of 595 tonnes and that this shall be allocated in line with Article 17 exclusively to the passive gear fleet on grounds of selectivity.

The discard rate of eastern cod caught in SD 24 is estimated at 71% of catches (Table 2.3.6 WGBFAS report). For SD 25-32 sampling is low and an estimate is not provided however across the entire distribution range 34% of the catch is under 35cm or unwanted.

Recovery of eastern cod will only be possible if natural mortality declines. Herring and sprat quotas need to be reduced to take into account of this while predation from seals and cormorants also need to be reduced.

Plaice

LIFE recommends a TAC of 7,106 tonnes which is equal to the estimated fishing mortality level of 2024. We note that the majority of the TAC is unfished every year and that the majority of fish are of poor quality and thin.

The scientific advice behind the plaice stock highlights why the vast majority of Baltic demersal stocks should be exclusively for passive gear fisheries.

For plaice catches in SD22 landings for passive and active gear are 569 and 602 tonnes respectively, but the trawl segment needs more than 1200 t to land that volume while accounting for 98% of plaice discards and unaccounted for cod mortality. The landing obligation is not implemented and data quality is reduced.

Table 5.2.2 of the WGBFAS report clearly shows the benefits and improvements that come with the passive gear segment when the stock structure is as it is in the current Baltic environment.

It is necessary that the plaice TAC is limited by the biomass thresholds of the cod stocks and that selective fishing is prioritised.

Western herring

LIFE recommends a rollover TAC of 788 tonnes.

We welcome the derogation from recent years to allow small-scale vessels using passive gears access to the stock. This is necessary and continues to provide benefits to the fishery. Signs of recovery are limited and management measures in the eastern parts of the North Sea to promote biomass growth would be welcomed.

Central herring

LIFE recommends a TAC of 48,442 tonnes. This represents a 20% increase on the 2024 quota.

The stock has responded positively to the lower fishing mortality from the past two years. Our members report improved condition with more fatter and better quality herring. We want to see this positive trend continue and for growth in stock size and herring condition to continue to improve.

Riga herring

LIFE recommends a TAC of 32,796 tonnes in line with Fmsy lower estimate for the stock. This herring stock has been well managed and catches have been at or close to record levels in recent years.

Fishing at the Fmsy point value is rarely the optimal quota level due to the associated risks and limited benefits. Fmsy lower is the only catch option which is estimated to increase biomass in 2026.

Bothnian herring

LIFE notes that the stock has been declining in biomass for the past 30 years. We welcome that the reference points are being re-estimated.

WGBFAS note that the decrease of SSB in recent years is presumed to be largely a consequence of a change in the food chain, which caused a remarkable decrease in weight at age, deteriorated body condition and even starving and dying especially among the larger herring. Furthermore, the overall decrease in SSB after the peak in 1994 corresponds to an overall increase in

fishing mortality during the same period up until 2016. After 2016, while fishing mortality has in general decreased, the SSB has not increased. In 2023 the Finnish catch decreased by 7% (4,155 tonnes) and the Swedish catch by 34% (5,716 tonnes) compared to 2022.

LIFE recommends that the TAC for next year is below 20,000 tonnes and that there is an increased sampling programme so that more and better quality is gathered.

Sprat

LIFE recommends a TAC of 73,566 tonnes. This sets the quota at 0,5 Fmsy.

We are concerned about the record low recruitment for the stock these past 3 years. Recruitment is variable but this is unprecedented.

Fishing sprat at 50% of Fmsy for a stock where fishing mortality has been too high and recruitment has been too low is sensible and integrates the precautionary buffer approach.

This sprat TAC together with the proposed TAC for central herring of 48,442 tonnes means we are likely to avoid a choke species situation in 2025 for the pelagic segment.

We recommend that for all unsorted pelagic catches that are landed at a Designated Port undergo a DNA analysis of their catch and species composition.

The technology is in place for us to understand what and how much is being caught. This has to be made use of immediately for unsorted bulk catches.

Salmon

LIFE recommends that the limited and selective coastal fishery in SD 29-30 is reopened. The fishery is beneficial and we welcome further collaboration with scientists and managers.

LIFE is a pan-European platform of small-scale fishing organizations across Europe aiming to unite them to achieve fair fisheries, healthy seas and vibrant communities.

More information: lifeplatform.eu