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COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Accompanying the document

Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council 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

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This document comprises a report of an impact assessment for a proposal for a multi-annual management plan covering stocks of cod, herring and sprat in the Baltic Sea. Multi-annual management plans have shown to be very valuable for the sustainable management of fishery resources. By establishing rules for the exploitation of the stocks and associated measures as needed for the management of a fishery with regard to a specified target, they provide stability and predictability while ensuring that fish stocks are exploited within the agreed limits.

Fisheries management for European fish stocks is based on the precautionary approach and on the principle of Maximum Sustainable yield (MSY). The precautionary approach is intended to ensure that each fish stock is kept above a minimum stock sizes, known as a precautionary biomass. If the stock falls below this level there is an increased risk that the stock's ability to reproduce itself will be affected. Under the precautionary approach, management can be considered to be about keeping the stock away from where we don't want it to be. In contrast, the MSY approach is more about defining where we do want the stock to be and managing accordingly. In the EU, MSY is normally defined in terms of the proportion of fish removed by fishing, which is known as fishing mortality or F. By keeping fishing mortality close to a target value (often known as F-MSY) it is possible to ensure that the overall average catch taken from the stock is close to the maximum that is possible without doing any harm to the stock. This is known as Maximum Sustainable Yield.

The main fisheries in the Baltic are for cod, herring and sprat. Cod in the Eastern Baltic and Western Baltic are considered to be separate stocks. There are a number of different herring stocks in the Baltic, with the main stock being found in the sea's eastern basin. There are smaller stocks in the Bothnian Sea, the Gulf of Riga and the Western Baltic. The latter stock spawns in the western Baltic, and then migrates into the Skagerrak and the Eastern North Sea in order to feed. There is one stock of sprat in the Baltic. Of the seven Baltic stocks considered here, only three herring stocks: Central Baltic, Gulf of Riga and Bothnian Sea are currently exploited at levels consistent with MSY.

Currently the cod stocks are subject to long term management plan which does not address anymore the reality of the status of the stocks. The targets established in the plan are not coherent with the MSY approach. The plan introduced a parallel system of stock management by limiting the fishing effort which scientists lately concluded as unnecessary. The main management tool for pelagic stocks is a yearly catch limits established by the Council. The

TACs and quotas are based on yearly political agreements in the Council and there can be large fluctuations from year to year. This makes it very difficult to ensure that fishing mortality will be consistent with MSY by 2015. The unpredictability in the level of future fishing opportunities makes it difficult for the industry to plan ahead, risking additional adaptation costs. Too high or exceeded TACs have contributed to fishing mortality remaining above target values, leading to reduced yields and income.

To address this problem, three policy options are considered here. They are the existing management regime, and two candidate approaches to establishing management plans. The differences between the approaches involve the main stocks where there are biological interactions, i.e. the Eastern cod stocks, the sprat stock and the central Baltic herring stock. The differences involve the target fishing mortalities used for these stocks; approach A involves relatively low fishing mortalities, close to existing single species values, while approach B involves slightly higher fishing mortalities, which can be considered as more consistent with a multi-species approach. In both cases, options 2 and 3 should be considered as broad approaches to management plans, rather than specific plans in themselves; further scientific work and consultation will be required in order to establish details of any resulting management plans.

There are clear advantages to bringing all of the relevant stocks into a management plan through the stability and predictability it would bring to catches, the increased probability of achieving the international obligation to achieve MSY by 2015, and the added value that a management plan can provide. For this reason options 2 and 3 are favoured over option 1.

The international obligation of the EU to ensure sustainable fisheries at MSY level by 2015 for the stocks concerned is to achieve environmental benefits. The probable reduction in the overall amount of fishing, which would also imply a reduction in emissions from vessel engines.

Bringing the herring and sprat stocks under a management plan would provide a systematic basis for setting annual TACs in a way which would provide the pelagic sector with predictability of catches which would help support business planning and stability of supply. It would also add value, as management plans are usually a prerequisite for a fishery to obtain certification from, for example, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). Fish caught in such certified fisheries can then attract a higher price in the market.

Lowering fishing opportunities might result, in the short term, in slight profit reduction for the fishermen, processing industry, and it might negatively affect the consumers, but restoring the status of stocks will ensure long-term benefits in terms of profit and sustainable fishery. Furthermore, the temporary reduction of quotas normally results in increasing the price for that stock.

The abolishment of fishing effort system and of requirement of single area fishing will simplify the legislative environment and reduce administrative burden on MS and industry.

In terms of the two management plan options, Option 2 (Management plan approach A, with lower target fishing mortalities for some stocks) is preferred over Option 3 (Management plan approach B, with higher target fishing mortalities for some stocks). While the differences in the impacts of the two options are relatively small, there is an increased risk of adverse environmental impacts with option 3. Moreover, STECF have advised that while the target fishing mortality values used in Option 2 are sufficiently robust for use in a management plan,

but for any higher values (such as those used in option 3), further work is required in order to evaluate the associated risks. In effect, Option 2 represents a set of single species management plans, whereas Option 3 would represent a step towards a multi-species management plan. At this point, the science to support that step is not yet available, although scientists have indicated that this could be resolved in the near future.

Disclaimer: This executive summary commits only the Commission's services involved in its preparation and does not prejudice the final form of any decision to be taken by the Commission.

