



NGOs urge EU fisheries ministers to turn fragile progress into lasting recovery

25 August 2026: Following yesterday's [European Commission proposal for 2027 Baltic Sea fishing opportunities](#), environmental and angling organisations call on EU fisheries ministers not to treat the early signs of recovery for some Baltic Sea fish populations as a licence for steep quota increases.

The latest scientific assessment on central Baltic herring shows some encouraging signs of improvement. This is welcome, but the changes are recent and do not mean that the population has fully recovered. An increase in biomass alone does not demonstrate that fish populations are healthy and resilient or justify higher catch limits.

Fishing limits for small pelagic fish in the Baltic Sea have been set too high for years; last year's Agriculture and Fisheries Council's (AGRIFISH) decisions provide a recent example¹.

¹ See joint NGO press release on the outcome:

<https://www.wwfbaltic.org/newsroom/fisheries/fisheries-ministers-risk-breaking-eu-law-jeopardizing-baltic-sea-recovery>

Herring proposals support recovery, but sprat's wider ecosystem role must not be overlooked

NGOs support the Commission's proposed 2027 catch limit of 143,860 tonnes for central Baltic herring. Although 49% higher than last year, the proposal reflects the population's recent growth, whilst also increasing the chances of the still fragile population to continue rebuilding.

NGOs also cautiously welcome the proposed catch limit of 57,308 tonnes for Bothnian herring, a 3% increase, and the retention of the three-month spawning closure. Nevertheless, the population remains vulnerable and continues to be below healthy levels according to scientific advice². An even more cautious fishing level would be needed in order to restore the population to the required healthy level. NGOs therefore strongly recommend a lower Total Allowable Catch (TAC) of 45,544 tonnes.

For sprat, the proposed catch limit of 291,590 tonnes and proposed removal of the spawning closure do not sufficiently account for the observed and documented misreporting issues, or for species' vital role in the wider Baltic Sea ecosystem.

"The Commission has taken a careful approach to herring, and the same is needed for sprat. Sprat may be small, but they play a vital role in the Baltic Sea as key prey for cod, salmon and seabirds. Fisheries ministers should set a lower catch limit that leaves enough sprat in the sea to help the fragile Baltic Sea ecosystem recover," says Cathrine Pedersen Schirmer, Senior Fisheries Policy Advisor, Coalition Clean Baltic.

Cod remains in crisis

Scientists continue to advise zero catch for both eastern and western Baltic cod in 2027, a reminder of how depleted these populations remain. NGOs welcome the Commission's proposal to reduce cod bycatch quotas by 51% (to 211 tonnes) for eastern Baltic cod and by 88% (to 31 tonnes) for western Baltic cod, and to maintain the current conservation measures.

However, to increase the chances for recovery for Baltic cod populations, EU decision makers must walk the talk. New legal obligations require the use of fishing gear in flatfish fisheries designed to avoid accidental catches of cod. With this gear now mandatory, cod bycatch quotas should be reduced and set as close as possible to the advised zero catch.

For plaice, the Commission proposes to keep the same fishing opportunity as in 2026. However, cod is also caught as bycatch in the plaice fishery. NGOs therefore urge ministers to keep the plaice quota at a lower level, no higher than 1,593 tonnes for 2027, to help reduce accidental cod catches.

² ICES (2026). Herring (*Clupea harengus*) in Subdivisions 30 and 31 (Gulf of Bothnia). ICES Advice: Recurrent Advice. Report. <https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.advice.30932087.v1>

"Fishing opportunities for 2027 should reflect the objectives of the Nature Restoration Regulation. As Member States prepare their national restoration plans, fishing limits must help rebuild fish populations and support the recovery of resilient marine ecosystems. Overfishing and neglecting an ecosystem-based approach would undermine restoration efforts," says Justyna Zajchowska, Fisheries Lead for WWF Baltic Sea Programme.

Encouraging salmon returns do not show recovery across all rivers

Salmon returns to several large rivers in Sweden and Finland have been encouraging in 2026³. However, several smaller northern Swedish populations remain at critically low levels, and the effects of the three previous poor years are expected to persist. The regional picture therefore remains uneven.

NGOs welcome the Commission's proposal not to increase fishing opportunities for Baltic salmon. However, for both the Main Basin salmon and the Gulf of Finland salmon, fishing should only take place on compensatory released salmon or salmon from rivers where stocks are at full reproductive capacity.

"Good returns to the Torne and several other large rivers are welcome, but Baltic salmon cannot be judged by a few rivers alone. Many smaller populations remain at critical levels, and there is no room to increase fishing pressure on wild salmon," says Thomas Johansson, Chairman, Östersjölaxälvar i Samverkan, and Secretary General, Baltic Salmon Fund

Fisheries ministers must turn promises into action for a real recovery of the Baltic Sea

When agreeing the Baltic Sea fishing opportunities for 2027 in October, EU fisheries ministers must apply a precautionary and ecosystem-based approach and:

- Follow the Commission's proposal on fishing opportunities for: Central Baltic herring, Western Baltic herring, Eastern Baltic cod, Western Baltic cod;
- Set lower, more precautionary and ecosystem-based fishing opportunities for: sprat, Bothnian herring, Gulf of Riga herring, plaice, Main Basin salmon, Gulf of Finland salmon;
- Under no circumstances set fishing opportunities for Bothnian herring higher than the Commission's proposal. A higher level of fishing would lead to a decrease in stock size;

³Finnish monitoring of salmon returns:

https://luonnonvaratiето.luke.fi/numerotieto/raportit?panel=nousulohiseuranta&inits=REGION_ID%3D3&lang=en&state=REGION%3D3%3BREPORT%3Dfi%3Asalmon_run_monitoring%2F89%3BYEAR%3D2026

- Honour the October AGRIFISH 2025 commitment by agreeing to a clear timetable for ambitious, time-bound rebuilding plans for every depleted Baltic Sea fish population, based on rebuilding trajectories that restore populations to healthy levels as quickly as possible; and
- Ensure that Baltic Sea fishing opportunities are aligned with EU nature restoration objectives, so that public and private work and investments in marine restoration are not undermined by continued overfishing, insufficient rebuilding measures and lack of implementation of ecosystem-based fisheries management.

In October 2025, the Commission and the eight Baltic EU Member States agreed⁴ on the urgent need to rebuild Baltic Sea fish populations. The 2027 fishing-opportunities decision is the first real test of that commitment. Some improvements in Central Baltic herring and sprat show that recovery is possible – ministers must now adopt fishing limits that secure that progress in the long term and give every depleted Baltic Sea fish population a credible chance to recover.

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Notes

For the full joint NGO recommendations on Baltic Sea fishing opportunities for 2027, please see: <https://www.ccb.se/joint-ngo-recommendations-on-baltic-sea-fishing-opportunities-for-2027>

- Central Baltic herring remains below the level at which rebuilding measures should begin. The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) expects the population to move only slightly above that level in 2027. Even then, fishing at the rate associated with maximum sustainable yield would leave a 36% probability of it falling below the threshold again in 2028⁵. ICES also warns that the stock contains genetically distinct spawning groups and is therefore vulnerable to losses in genetic diversity and overall productivity⁶.
- The sprat population has grown and is now above key biomass reference points. However, fishing pressure is already at the level associated with maximum sustainable yield. ICES cautions that persistent misreporting of herring and sprat adds uncertainty to

⁴ Council of the European Union (2025), [Draft minutes of the Agriculture and Fisheries Council](#), 27–28 October 2025, document 14646/25, p. 13, joint statement on the urgent need for rebuilding fisheries in the Baltic Sea.

⁵ ICES, Herring in subdivisions 25–29 and 32, excluding the Gulf of Riga, pp. 1–2. The stock is currently below MSY Btrigger; projected biomass for 2027 is only 5% above it. Under the FMSY scenario, ICES estimates a 36% probability of biomass being below MSY Btrigger in 2028.

https://ices-library.figshare.com/articles/report/Herring_i_Clupea_harengus_i_in_subdivisions_25-29_and_32_excluding_the_Gulf_of_Riga_central_Baltic_Sea_/30932081?file=65083161

⁶ Ibid., p. 4. ICES identifies genetically distinct spawning components and warns of vulnerability to losses in genetic diversity and overall productivity.

its assessment and advice⁷. Sprat is an important food source for cod, salmon and other marine wildlife⁸, while ICES reports that industrial sprat fisheries can include substantial catches of herring⁹. Higher fishing pressure on sprat could therefore affect vulnerable herring populations as well as species that depend on sprat for food.

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⁷ ICES, Sprat in subdivisions 22–32: ICES advice.

⁸ Birgersson, L. and Pedersen Schirmer, C. (2025). Small fish with a big impact – a review of forage fish importance for a healthy Baltic Sea. FishSec (Fiskesekretariatet), Stockholm, Sweden.

https://www.fishsec.org/app/uploads/2025/07/Small-fish-big-impact_Baltic-Sea-forage-fish-report_FINAL.pdf

⁹ ICES. 2026. Baltic Fisheries Assessment Working Group (WGBFAS). ICES Scientific Reports 8:39, section 7.2.5, p. 531. ICES reports that industrial sprat fisheries in several Baltic countries may include large bycatches of other species, predominantly herring. <https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.32455056>