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On the recovery of European eel in the Baltic Sea region

To all representatives of Baltfish and the Baltfish Presidency:

At this first Baltfish Forum under the Swedish Presidency, we would like to take the opportunity to make a general statement on eel management in the Baltic Sea region, as it is presented as a key part of the Baltfish draft work programme and considering the current status of the European eel population.

European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) has been classified as critically endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) since 2008. It is also included on the HELCOM Red List⁷ and on the national Red Lists of several of the Baltic Member States.

There is a framework for eel recovery, including several instruments and legal requirements. Aside from the EU recovery measures under the eel regulation (1100/2007⁸), there has been additional annual EU provisions since 2018⁹ to protect eel migration – specifically silver eels – in order to boost recruitment.

We also have regional commitments under the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan (2021), focusing on protecting and restoring the eel population, as well as freshwater migration routes in the region. The Baltic Sea Action Plan sets out to determine and implement measures that would benefit from regional cooperation and international collaboration on a Baltic wide level by 2024 and 2025 respectively. However, progress on both EU and Baltic level has been slow and results very limited.

The most recent scientific advice (ICES, 2024¹⁰) on fishing opportunities and conservation of European eel is zero catch for all life stages in all habitats, including catches for restocking and aquaculture. The eel regulation – in place for over 15 years – also calls for a reduction in effort or catches of at least 50% – a target realised by some but not all Baltic Member States.

The latest reported landings for the Baltic region were around 775 tonnes in the commercial fisheries and 320 tonnes in recreational fisheries. A total catch of at least 1 094 300 kg – more than 1,5 million individual eels. Many of those eels were likely restocked – we have a long history of propping up eel numbers in the Baltic region by restocking – but restocking in order to keep fishing cannot be considered a conservation measure,¹¹ as set out in the EU eel regulation.¹²

European eel remains in a critical state and it is time to realise the long-stated ambition in the Baltic Sea region for coordinated measures to ensure recovery. Stronger measures are needed and unless implementation is coordinated, eels saved in one country will continue to be fished by another.

- 1) In line with the scientific advice on fishing opportunities for European eel, we call for a full closure of all eel fisheries until the population has recovered sufficiently to allow sustainable exploitation in line with the objectives of the EU's Common Fisheries Policy. Under no circumstances should effort or catches be increased until a significant recovery has been verified.
- 2) Council Regulation 2025/202 calls for a coordinated approach to the eel fishing closures in the Baltic Sea region in line with temporal migration patterns. For 2026, we urge Baltfish to agree on a regionally coordinated approach to protect eel migration, based on science and best available knowledge about migration routes. A uniform closure during 1 July to 31 December 2026 would be in compliance with the intention of the current regulation, as it covers the main migration in coastal waters in all the Member States, or the closures could be tailored to closely match national migration patterns but in a coordinated manner.
- 3) We ask that in your national Eel Management Plans, which are still under review in several Baltic Member States, you also prioritise other measures, such as restoration of habitats and migration routes, that will aid eel recovery and are in line with commitments under the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan (B16 & B17).

Over the coming months, we ask you to carefully consider the scientific advice and to take decisions that have the recovery of European eel at heart, as this is the only way to a sustainable fishery in the longer term.

Yours sincerely,

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Magda Jentgena, Baltic Sea and Freshwater Programme Manager, Pasaules Dabas Fonds

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Tapani Veistola, Executive Director, Suomen luonnonsuojeluliitto

Thomas Johansson, Chairman, Östersjölaxälvar i samverkan and Secretary General of the Baltic Salmon Fund

Edmundas Greimas, Executive Director, Lietuvos gamtos fondas

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1. HELCOM, 2025. HELCOM Red List II of Baltic Sea species in danger of becoming extinct. Baltic Sea Environment Proceedings No. 205.
 2. COUNCIL REGULATION (EC) No 1100/2007 of 18 September 2007 establishing measures for the recovery of the stock of European eel.
 3. Article 13 in COUNCIL REGULATION (EU) 2025/202 of 30 January 2025 fixing for 2025 and 2026 the fishing opportunities for certain fish stocks, applicable in Union waters and, for Union fishing vessels, in certain non-Union waters, and amending Regulation (EU) 2024/257 as regards fishing opportunities for 2025.
 4. ICES, 2024. European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) throughout its natural range. In Report of the ICES. Advisory Committee, 2024. ICES Advice 2024, ele.2737.nea, <https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.advice.27100516>
 5. M. Rohtla, *et al.*, 2020. Conservation restocking of the imperilled European eel does not necessarily equal conservation. ICES Journal of Marine Science, Volume 78, Issue 1, January-February 2021, pp. 101–111: <https://doi.org/10.1093/icesjms/fsaa196>
 6. European Commission: Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Coffey, Economisti Associati, EUROFISH, F&S, POSEIDON, MacNab, S., Luchetta, G., Nimmo, F., Huntington, T., Uden, R., Frederickson, M.Caillart, B., Evaluation of the Eel Regulation – Final report, Publications Office, 2020: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2771/679816>
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