



Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission

Working Group on the State of the Environment and Nature
Conservation

STATE & CONSERVATION
15-2021

Online, 4-8 October 2021

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| Document title | Progress in drafting a project proposal for defining Precautionary Approach Level for seals in the Baltic Sea |
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| Agenda Item | 3J - Progress of relevant HELCOM expert groups and projects |
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| Submitted by | EG MAMA |
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Note that this document was submitted after the established deadline, as EG MAMA 15-2021 meeting was concluded on 16 September 2021. It will be decided by the Meeting whether the document can be discussed or is postponed to the next meeting.

Background

Following the invitation by STATE & CONSERVATION 11-2019, EG MAMA 14-2020 discussed how a Precautionary Approach Level (PAL) can be set for individual seal populations in the Baltic Sea. As a result of these discussions and an intersessional effort by EG MAMA, EG MAMA 14-2020 drafted an initial statement on establishing PAL for seal populations in the Baltic Sea, which was subsequently presented to STATE & CONSERVATION 13-2020.

STATE & CONSERVATION 13-2020 took note of the statement and concluded that if PAL can only be set retrospectively, this impairs both the functionality of the Recommendation 27-28/2 and its use for active management purposes. The meeting thus agreed that a more in-depth discussion is needed regarding PAL between EG MAMA and S&C representatives, which were discussed at an intersessional meeting of the State & Conservation on marine mammal indicators (STATE & CONSERVATION 13E-2021).

STATE & CONSERVATION 13E-2021 invited the relevant EG MAMA experts to produce a more detailed document for STATE & CONSERVATION 14-2021 explaining the issue (i.e., to outline on the pros and cons for the two different approaches for defining the PAL threshold for the three Baltic seal species to obtain further guidance on where to go with these thresholds) and a description of what is realistically needed to operationalize PAL. After considering these caveats, STATE & CONSERVATION 14-2021 invited EG MAMA to prepare an updated and detailed project proposal for submission to STATE & CONSERVATION 15-2021. The meeting noted that should the project plan not be considered viable, other options for progressing on the issue of PAL may need to be considered, including opening the Recommendation for revision.

Drawing on these previous discussions on the topic, EG MAMA 15-2021 discussed options for assessing PAL agreed to to form a group to start working on a preliminary project proposal. EG MAMA further invites feedback from State&Conservation on which species of seals such a project should cover.

This document contains extracts from the outcome of EG MAMA 15-2021, outlining a plan for preparing a draft project proposal for setting PAL for seals in the Baltic Sea.

Action requested

The Meeting is invited to consider the plans for drafting a project proposal for establishing PAL for seals and to offer guidance on the appropriate scope of such a project, including which species such a project should cover.

From the Outcome of EG MAMA 15-2021, held online on 14-16 September 2021

Precautionary Approach to management of seals

The Meeting discussed options for estimating a Precautionary Approach Level (PAL) for individual seal populations with current data and methods, recalling previous discussion on the topic (document 3-7).

The Meeting took note of intended work in Sweden on the effect of bycatch and hunting on grey seals ([presentation 6](#)).

The Meeting recalled that even if PAL can be estimated, the uncertainties will be high, as the PAL will vary notably in space and time.

The Meeting suggested drafting a preliminary estimate PAL with the current knowledge and data, and then further defining what kind of additional data are needed to reduce uncertainties.

The Meeting agreed that the modeling work would require substantial resources and that in addition to modelling work, extensive tagging studies would be needed, potentially complemented by improved information on seal behavior on haulout sites to account for observation biases.

The Meeting took note of a similar study in Canada on grey seal population trends and models to determine harvest levels ([Hammill et al. 2016](#)).

The Meeting pointed out that there are several funding instruments for biodiversity projects which could be considered for such a proposal, such as the EU LIFE program.

The Meeting agreed that for such a project, partners from all Contracting Parties with significant seal occurrence would be beneficial.

The Meeting agreed to form a group to start working on a preliminary project proposal. The Meeting invited the interested members of the expert group to express their interest to Group Chair (agi@bios.au.dk) by **22 September 2021** in order to organize a first meeting for the group in October 2021.

The Meeting recalled that grey seal has been a priority due to the conflict with fisheries but agreed that from an ecological and conservation viewpoint, extending the project to other seal species would be ideal.

The Meeting supported asking the view of State&Conservation on which species such a project should cover.