



PRESS RELEASE:

HELCOM releases a holistic assessment of the state of the Baltic Sea

Moscow, 20 May (HELCOM Information Service) – A holistic assessment of the Baltic Sea was released today at the HELCOM Ministerial Meeting taking place in Moscow.

According to the report the Baltic Sea ecosystem has degraded to such an extent that its capacity to deliver goods and services to humans living in the nine coastal states has been hampered. None of the open basins of the Baltic Sea has an acceptable ecosystem health status. Actions to improve the situation are costly but there is a great risk that non-action will result in even higher costs. The assessment is a product of cooperation between experts from all Baltic Sea countries and the European Commission.

According to the report, eutrophication, caused by excessive inputs of nitrogen and phosphorus, continues to be of major concern in most areas of the Baltic Sea. The Bothnian Bay and the northeastern parts of the Kattegat are the only open-sea areas not affected by eutrophication. This is the case, despite a decrease in inputs of nitrogen by 30% and of phosphorus by 45% since 1990. “Eutrophication has not diminished despite the decreased nutrient inputs. What worries us most is that the reductions in nutrient inputs during recent years are largely due to natural conditions such as dry years rather than active reduction measures,” says Anne Christine Brusendorff, HELCOM’s Executive Secretary. “Therefore I think that further upgrading of waste water treatment facilities and measures to reduce nutrient inputs from agriculture are of utmost importance.”

There are positive signals of decreasing trends of certain persistent organic pollutants like PCBs, DDT and dioxins because of banning of these substances. Despite these positive signs, the overall status of almost the entire sea area, as concerns hazardous substances, is still impaired. The current status is largely a result of inputs that took place decades ago although certain new and less well known substances like brominated flame retardants and pharmaceuticals have also become a cause of recent concern.

The declining condition of Baltic biodiversity is weakening the capacity of the ecosystem to provide valuable goods and services. The biodiversity of the Gulf of Bothnia is largely in favourable status but almost all other Baltic Sea areas are classified as ranging from bad to moderate according to the preliminary status assessment. The Baltic Sea offshore fish community has undergone a shift from a cod dominated to sprat dominated system as a result of combined effects of climate-related fluctuations, over-fishing and eutrophication. Essentially all human activities have an impact on biodiversity but eutrophication and fishing have probably resulted in most harm to biodiversity.

The sum of human induced pressures impacting the marine environment is the highest in the Gulfs of Finland, Riga and Gdansk and the southwestern sea areas. These are also the sub-regions with the highest population densities in their catchments. Coastal areas, which are especially sensitive since they harbour higher biodiversity, are under a greater pressure than the open-sea areas. Those areas also face a growing pressure from various types of physical pressures such as construction activities due to an increasing interest in the use of the marine space.

As solutions to the impoverished state of the Baltic Sea, the HELCOM report lists a variety of actions which if implemented should lead to an improved eutrophication status, less pollution by hazardous substances and restored biodiversity. Nature restoration activities like the revival of the populations of top predators and the restoration of coastal wetlands and river habitats, along with actions to reduce inputs of nutrients and other pollutants, are highlighted as important measures yielding multiple positive effects.

The Initial Holistic Assessment serves as an information basis for the decisions the ministers of the environment and high-level representatives of HELCOM Contracting Parties take during the HELCOM 2010 Ministerial Meeting. The Meeting marks the peak of the Russian Chairmanship of HELCOM. The ministers are gathered to evaluate the progress of the implementation of the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan to radically reduce pollution to the marine environment and restore its good ecological status by 2021.

Follow-up:

The HELCOM Initial Holistic Assessment of the Ecosystem Health of the Baltic Sea 2003-2007
<http://www.helcom.fi/stc/files/Publications/Proceedings/bsep122.pdf>

Note to Editors:

The Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission, usually referred to as the Helsinki Commission, or HELCOM, is an intergovernmental organisation of all the nine Baltic Sea countries and the EU which works to protect the marine environment of the Baltic Sea from all sources of pollution.

HELCOM is the governing body of the "Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area," known as the Helsinki Convention.

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