

To the German BALTFISH presidency:

Urgent Action Needed to Prevent the Extinction of the Baltic Proper Harbour Porpoise

The Baltic Proper harbour porpoise population is on the brink of extinction. This dire situation has been well-documented for many years. Solutions are available and can be implemented immediately, alongside necessary measures to restore the Baltic Sea's good environmental status. Allowing the loss of this unique population due to political inaction would be unacceptable and would undoubtedly face widespread societal condemnation.

In May 2020, ICES published scientific advice on preventing harbour porpoise bycatch in the Baltic Properⁱ. Subsequently, in February 2022, after lengthy discussions within BALTFISH, a delegated act on bycatch mitigation for the Baltic Proper harbour porpoise in marine protected areas (MPAs) and other core areas was published. However, this delegated act fails to meet the requirements outlined in the ICES advice to effectively prevent ongoing bycatch. To date, no additional joint recommendations or bycatch prevention measures have been submitted to the European Commission.

On 6 December 2024, ICES, at the request of the European Commission, published a special request advice to support the implementation of the Action Plan for harbour porpoise in the Baltic Seaⁱⁱ. This advice assessed spatial bycatch risks based on the best available data: harbour porpoise distribution from the SAMBAH project and fishing effort data.

Although the SAMBAH distribution data is nearly 12 years old and the fishing effort data lacks sufficient detail, both in spatial distribution and effort measurement (e.g., using days at sea rather than soak time and gear dimensions), the assessment highlights areas with higher bycatch risk. Crucially, ICES' clear recommendation is that a sustainable population of harbour porpoises in the Baltic Proper cannot be achieved without fully implementing the management measures outlined in the 2020 advice.

The ICES 2020 recommendations include:

- Closures of static net fisheries in “core areas” for the population, including within MPAs.
- Mandatory use of acoustic deterrent devices (ADDs/pingers) in all static net fisheries within the population range, where closures are not in effect.

If military concerns currently preclude the use of pingers as a bycatch mitigation measure, alternative effective solutions must be identified and implemented without delayⁱⁱⁱ. Furthermore, we emphasise that ADDs/pingers should only serve as an interim measure and should never be deployed in MPAs designated for harbour porpoises, because pingers can never prevent bycatch altogether and can cause disturbance.

We urgently call on the German presidency of BALTFISH to take immediate action by ensuring active discussions on implementing measures to prevent harbour porpoise bycatch in the Baltic Proper. This will need a series of dedicated meetings especially on a technical level. It is imperative to reach an agreement and submit a robust joint recommendation to the European Commission before the summer of 2025.



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ⁱ ICES (2020). EU request on emergency measures to prevent bycatch of common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*) and Baltic Proper harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) in the Northeast Atlantic

ⁱⁱ ICES (2024). EU request on support for the implementation of the Action Plan for harbour porpoise in the Baltic Sea (Baltic Proper)

ⁱⁱⁱ BUND, DUH & WDC (2023). Bycatch mitigation for the Baltic Proper harbour porpoise. What to do if pingers are not an option?