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EAA position on recreational fishing for Atlantic salmon in the Baltic in 2025

Common position statement by the European Anglers Alliance (EAA) for Baltic Sea salmon in 2025. The EAA is a pan-European organisation for recreational angling, defending the interests of approximately 25 million European anglers.

The position statement was written by four EAA members that have a particular interest regarding fishing opportunities for Atlantic Salmon in the Baltic Sea: Deutscher Angelfischerverband e.V. (Germany), Sportfiskarna (Sweden), Sportfiskerforbund (Denmark) and Suomen Vapaa-Ajankalastajat (Finland).

<u>The European Anglers Alliance suggests the following regulations and actions concerning Baltic salmon for 2025:</u>

- **A bag limit of one salmon (excluding recent spawners) per angler and day for sea anglers south of latitude 59.30 N.**
- **Recreational trolling north of 59.30 N should be subject to member state regulation and not be unnecessarily regulated by a 4 nautical mile boundary.**
- **Preliminary results of the ongoing study of mortality of Atlantic salmon released after being caught via trolling should be considered.**
- **Regulations demanding landing of whole un-filleted fish should only be for salmonids (salmon and sea trout), not for other species such as pike, perch and pikeperch.**
- **Utilise more EMFAF funding for the removal of fish migration barriers in the rivers.**
- **An ecosystem-based and adaptive management plan for salmon must be adopted.**

  A Europe-wide program should be initiated to achieve a balanced European management of cormorants[1,2,3].

The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) published its catch recommendations for Atlantic salmon[4] (*Salmo salar*) in the Baltic Sea (SD´s 22-31) for the year 2025 on the 31st of May. The advice from ICES contains suggestions for measures to strengthen and protect weak salmon river stocks by closing the mixed stock sea fishery, both recreational and commercial in the main basin.

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ICES advises that there should be zero catch of Atlantic salmon in 2025 from the mixed-stock at-sea fisheries (both commercial and recreational in the offshore and coastal areas). Furthermore, ICES advises that if spatial-temporal management can be implemented, some fishing opportunities would be possible. ICES considers that if sea fishing can be confined to existing coastal fisheries during the spawning migration (beginning of May to the end of August) in the Gulf of Bothnia and the Åland Sea, total at sea catch (both commercial and recreational) in these areas of no more than 40 000 salmon could be taken.

All current scientific information including the latest ICES advice show clear problems for several river stocks and that the majority of weak salmon populations occur in assessment unit five in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Together with ICES we believe that the current management involves a risk for extinction of several weak river stocks. We are therefore in agreement with ICES about the status of Baltic salmon and the need for strong salmon management in the Baltic Sea region.

EAA response to ICES advice and following policy decisions

Following the ICES advice for 2023, the EU Agriculture and Fisheries Council decided to limit the catch opportunities for Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*) in the Baltic to one adipose fin-clipped fish per recreational angler per day. This decision was based on a study showing that hooking mortality for fish released in the trolling fishery is approximately 25%[5]. However, this 34-year-old study is based on other species (coho and chinook salmon, *Oncorhynchus* species) in a different environment/region (Hawk Inlet, Gulf of Alaska, Pacific Ocean) and using different fishing gears. This study is therefore not applicable for recreational trolling for salmon (*Salmo salar)* in the Baltic Sea. The European Anglers Alliance is aware of an ongoing German-Swedish study whose preliminary results indicate a post-release survival rate of >90% in modern salmon trolling fisheries. Promptly utilizing the new results will be an important step in choosing the right management techniques for salmon trolling.

The European Anglers Alliance (EAA), national angling organisations and individual anglers have always been deeply involved in the health and wellbeing of our unique and iconic Baltic salmon.

Angling organisations are actively involved in the restoration of rivers and invest large amounts of time, money, and energy into the goal of restoring rivers and salmon populations. All anglers are well acquainted with, understand and respect regulations connected to their fishery including daily harvest limits (bag limits), seasonal closures and minimum size and slot limits. Angling keeps our members, a huge pool of voluntary labour, motivated to be engaged in river restoration, water quality monitoring and fisheries control. This stakeholder involvement is essential if we want to keep European citizens involved and supportive in the wellbeing of salmon and also the environment in general.

Social-economic importance of recreational fishing

Associated with the social importance of angler engagement is the economic importance of the recreational salmon fishery in the Baltic Sea. The trolling fishery is an important sector for income

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and jobs for coastal communities around the Baltic Sea. Research by the Thünen Institute of Baltic Sea Fisheries[6] has shown that German anglers spend 2 750 € per person and year in the recreational salmon trolling fishery, a total expenditure of 5 million €, corresponding to 1 000 € per salmon harvested. A Survey by the Finnish Federation for Recreational Fishing shows similar results with direct investment of 3 091 € per trolling boat at a cost of 1 150 € per landed salmon (Rautanen J, 2023)[7]. The EAA believes that sea angling for Baltic salmon, if regulated correctly, can have minimum effects on river stocks while maintaining angling opportunities and associated regional economic activities.

EAA would like to draw attention to the fact that commercial fishers throughout the Baltic Sea have an annual bycatch quota for Atlantic salmon. We fully understand that a bycatch quota may be necessary in order to be able to maintain commercial fishing in the Baltic Sea. We believe that, analogously to this, a quota should be set aside for recreational fishing. It would be fair and no less sustainable than the quota allocated to commercial fishing.

Weak salmon stocks are not the result of recreational fishing

The European Anglers Alliance wishes to clarify that angling is not the reason behind weak salmon populations. The current situation is caused by problems within river catchments such as migration obstacles, cormorant predation and lack of spawning habitats that limit the stock development. Anglers have a vested interest in Baltic salmon and agree that it is important to change the current Baltic salmon management to a more ecosystem-based and adaptive form, but we believe that European citizens right to get out onto the Baltic Sea, experience the environment, fish and fishing should as much as possible be maintained. Without angler engagement it will be very difficult to maintain public investment in restoring wild salmon stocks, migration barrier removal and river restoration. The EAA therefore believes that a bag limit of one fish (wild or fin-clipped) per angler and day for sea anglers south of latitude 59.30 N is an appropriate way to limit the effects of angling upon assessment unit five stocks while maintaining anglers' investment in the restoration of rivers. For recreational fishing north of latitude 59.30 N the EAA believes that trolling catch bags should not be bound by 4 nautical mile regulations but subject to member state regulation.

The EAA would like to underline the importance of increasing actions leading to the free migration of salmon in rivers, both up and downstream, river restoration and to prevent over exploitation by predators.

All migrating fish have problems with small scale hydropower, disused mills, weirs, and other man-made obstructions. If we are to reach our common goals for Baltic salmon smolt production and thereby sustainably develop both the commercial coastal and the recreational fishery for salmon, then we must prioritise removal of barriers for fish migration. We therefore strongly support the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 goal of removing migration barriers and restoring at least 25 000 km of European rivers[8].

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Salmon Management must be reviewed

The EAA highlights the need for a change in the way salmon is currently managed to an ecosystem-based, adaptive management. Currently, smolt production is seen as the most important factor when calculating whether a salmon river has reached MSY. Salmon are not being managed river specifically and industrial fishing for herring and sprat does not incorporate ecosystem needs, including that of salmon and cod. This has led to the current situation of poor and declining numbers of returning spawners, very high levels of post-smolt mortality, the continuation of commercial salmon fisheries in the estuaries of weak rivers and yet some weak populations still are given a positive status. These issues need to be addressed in a structured way if we are to return all Baltic salmon populations to positive trends.

Impact of cormorants

Another significant issue for weak salmon populations has been the exponential growth of cormorant predation within rivers and estuaries along the Baltic coast. Research conducted by the Danish Institute of Aquatic Resources (DTU Aqua) shows mortality of wild salmon by cormorants of over 50 % during several consecutive years in salmon rivers[3] and for other salmonids, the severe impact on juvenile and adult fish has been scientifically proven[9,10]. Predation of large numbers of salmon in a very short time by large flocks of migrating cormorants can be especially problematic as this is difficult to solve on a local or even national level highlighting the need for a European cormorant management scheme[1].

[1] EIFAAC (2022). Impact of cormorant predation on fish and fisheries in Europe. EIFAAC Advisory note: 1/2022

[2] EAA (2023) EAA Cormorant Position Statement 2023. https://www.eaa-europe.org/files/2023-09-22-eaa_position-cormorant_management_pub-pdf_13030.pdf

[3] Jepsen N, Flávio H, & Koed A (2019). The impact of cormorant predation on Atlantic salmon and sea trout smolt survival. *Fisheries Management and Ecology*, **26**(2), 183-186.

[4] ICES(2024). Salmon (*Salmo salar*) in subdivisions 22-31 (Baltic Sea, excluding the Gulf of Finland). In Report of the ICES Advisory Committee, 2024. ICES Advice 2024, sal.27.22-31. https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.advice.25019630

[5] Wertheimer A (1988). Hooking Mortality of Chinook Salmon Released by Commercial Trollers. North American Journal of Fisheries Management, **8**(3), 346–355. https://doi.org/10.1577/1548-8675(1988)008<0346:HMOCSR>2.3.CO;2

[6] Thünen (2022) https://www.thuenen.de/de/of/aktuelles-und-service/fragen-antworten/fragen-und-antworten-zur-wissenschaftlichen-fangempfehlung-des-ices-fuer-den-ostseelachs-2022/

[7] Rautanen J (2023). Merilohen uistelu Suomessa 2022 (eng. Salmon trolling in Finland 2022). A Survey made by Finnish Federation for Recreational Fishing (FFRF). Online publication in Issuu.

[8] Free-flowing rivers: Commission advises how to select sites and finance removal of obsolete barriers https://environment.ec.europa.eu/news/free-flowing-rivers-commission-advises-how-select-sites-and-finance-removal-obsolete-barriers-2021-12-21_en

[9] Källo K, Baktoft H, Jepsen N & Aarestrup K (2020). Great cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis*) on juvenile down-migrating trout (*Salmo trutta*) in a lowland stream. *ICES Journal of Marine Science*, **77**(2): 721-729.

[10] Källo K, Birnie-Gauvin K, Jepsen N, & Aarestrup K (2023). Great cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis*) predation on adult anadromous brown trout (*Salmo trutta*). *Ecology of Freshwater Fish*.