

Annex 10 Statement by the Executive Secretary at HELCOM 37-2016

Dear Colleagues,

The milestone of the year 2015 was the adoption of the Regional Action Plan for Marine Litter in June. Concrete work for the plan started in May 2014, following the Ministerial commitment in 2013 binding all the Baltic coastal governments and EU. The drafting process, led by Germany, benefited from the expertise of non-governmental organizations, research institutions, industry, administration and authorities. Thanks to the wide consultations the plan is very comprehensive and includes an excellent set of actions to combat marine litter. Now the challenge is to find leaders and implementers for each action so that fine ideas are followed by concrete work and results. I am glad that we could take this forward in the HELCOM Marine Litter Stakeholder Conference held on Wednesday.

In October the modernized database of Baltic Sea Marine Protected Areas (HELCOM MPAs) was released. The database provides easy and user-friendly access - for anybody interested - to detailed and new information on coastal and marine HELCOM MPAs such as on human pressures, threat categories and monitoring of species, biotopes and biotope complexes as well as about national protection status. I can proudly say that the HELCOM MPA database stands out among other similar databases on regional and global levels, particularly because of its vast coverage and because the information it contains is current.

The comparable data sets and assessments of pollution loads cover both the nine HELCOM countries and also more distant transboundary sources; they are unique from a worldwide perspective. Without this data it would be impossible to assess major pressures from human activities.

Last year a new approach was introduced and agreed to the future Pollution Load Compilation (PLC) assessments. This will ensure more clearly distinguished products, smooth and operationalized regular updating of the products, and better sharing of responsibilities of different actors for timely delivery.

One of these new products prepared and released in December was the assessment of progress towards reaching Country-allocated Reduction Targets. This was a major achievement considering the complexity of the issue and high political interest, and we thank all the dedicated scientists and experts for the product. At the same time, it has become evident that there is a new need for a more concise product for policy-makers.

Implementing this approach in PLC remains a main task – for all of us - also for this year, but it can only happen with the active involvement of more Contracting Parties.

I am especially proud what we have managed to achieve within the project on making HELCOM eutrophication assessments operational (EUTRO-OPER). This project resulted in a tool for the integration of indicators, an assessment protocol, and a solution to increase the comparability of assessment of open sea and coastal waters. But importantly, work and data flows have been automated, including in-built step-wise approval procedure by national experts of the assessment product, providing a solid system for easy updates of the eutrophication assessment in the future. This was accomplished in partnership with ICES. The ambition is to follow this approach also for other themes as far as possible, within the work on the Second Holistic Assessment of the Ecosystem Health of the Baltic Sea (HOLAS II).

The preparation of HOLAS II was at full speed last year and will continue to be the major umbrella activity of HELCOM in the near future. The aim is not only to produce a single assessment publication, but to create a longer-lasting and web-based system to serve future updates, and to enable better use

nationally and increased outreach. This means improved documentation, semi-automation and use of the HELCOM working structure to maintain the system as opposed to project-maintained assessment.

All necessary ingredients for making HOLAS II a success are in place – it has been planned in detail and is well coordinated, Contracting Parties are committed and their best experts are engaged, and for the first time ever I can state that I feel comfortable in terms of available resources for the exercise (albeit not all needs can be secured yet). EU grants for two actions we call BalticBOOST and HELCOM TAPAS projects have significantly helped in this respect and are very much appreciated.

This carefully planned assessment will also be truly holistic, as it will include integrated assessment of themes on eutrophication, hazardous substances and biodiversity, and results of separate HELCOM Maritime Assessment will be used as well. Commercial fish species, as they are part of the marine ecosystem, will also be assessed, along with cumulative pressures and impacts from major human activities, based on the improved data and information. Marine litter and underwater noise, not assessed previously, will be new elements.

For the first time, a social and economic analysis will also be truly incorporated into the HELCOM assessment by linking human activities to pressures and impacts on ecosystem components within one holistic framework. The work on social and economic analysis that started last year may prove itself to be one of the milestones or a break-through for future HELCOM work. Such aspect has been largely lacking in HELCOM work so far, which has prevented full use of HELCOM results in many spheres and sectors. We have now fair chances to rectify this obvious shortcoming.

So we stand firm in terms of preparing HOLAS II in HELCOM. But there are other circumstances and processes that influence our work and need to be catered for. On the European level a parallel process takes place to make assessments. It makes no sense to duplicate the work, and the HELCOM countries that are also EU members have already agreed to use HOLAS II as the basis of the national assessments under the EU MSFD.

While I am absolutely convinced it will be possible to cater also for this need, I find it of paramount importance that both immediate national management needs and longer-term HELCOM policy needs are met, and that:

- the HELCOM assessment system improves and is based on the best available science
- that we are able to compare the outcome to the previous assessment
- that we show how far from reaching the Good Environmental Status (GES) we are - as likely most of the areas in the Baltic Sea will be still short of the target - and that we also show progress and improvement.

We will not be in a position to maintain political attention unless we start demonstrating the effects our decisions and actions are bringing.

Last but not least, two issues that have been or are about to be concluded during this Meeting are important accomplishments as well: a new HELCOM Recommendation on sustainable aquaculture, efficiently led by the Fish group, established not so long ago but already working at full speed, and a decision to submit the proposal by HELCOM countries to designate the Baltic Sea as a NECA to IMO MEPC 70, in parallel with the North Sea NECA submission.

This has been an exceptional meeting of the Helsinki Commission, thank you Contracting Parties, Observers and colleagues in the Secretariat.