Baltic Marine Environment
Protection Commission

Statement by Monika Stankiewicz, HELCOM Executive Secretary, at the fourth session of the UN Environment Assembly, Nairobi, Kenya, 11 - 15 March 2019

Mr President, Excellencies, distinguished participants,

The Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission, or HELCOM, works to achieve a healthy marine environment in the Baltic Sea, and to ensure the sustainable use of its resources.

HELCOM is based on a regional convention and the Contracting Parties are nine Baltic Sea countries (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Sweden) and European Union.

HELCOM, like its 17 sister organizations around the world, are a bridge between global commitments and the national action in each of the regional seas we manage. Our cooperation under the UN Environment and its Regional Seas Programme creates a unique opportunity to advance implementation of global commitments.

The HELCOM countries are at the forefront on innovation on environmental protection. Transparency, involvement of civil society and engagement of private sector are for good part of the Baltic Sea cooperation.

The Baltic Sea countries are already implementing an ambitious and comprehensive regional programme of measures called the Baltic Sea Action Plan, in synergy with national legislation, international agreements and European legislation.

Likewise, among the latest global assessments, the recent HELCOM holistic assessment reveals that the status of the Baltic Sea marine environment continues to be unsatisfactory as a result of pressures from human activities. Recovery is not yet sufficient to achieve the ecological goals and objectives we have set for ourselves.

The assessment shows that the impaired state of the marine environment impacts the welfare of citizens in a concrete way. For example, losses in recreational values in the Baltic Sea due to the deterioration of the marine environment are estimated to be up to 2 billion euros annually.

At the HELCOM ministerial level meeting last year, held under the EU chairmanship, the Contracting Parties decided to update the action plan based on the latest scientific findings on ecosystems, including the impacts of climate change and utilizing the Sustainable Development Goals as a framework. In this update, the post-2020 global framework for biodiversity under UN is an important process to take into account as well. I would like to highlight a few examples of the agreed actions that will directly contribute to the implementation of the ministerial declaration and resolutions foreseen to be adopted at this Meeting.

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Nutrient resources are not optimally managed everywhere in the Baltic Sea region and there is a need to improve both recycling of nutrients and their efficiency of use. Thus, the HELCOM Ministers agreed to elaborating by 2020 a Baltic Sea Regional Nutrient Recycling Strategy. A strategy will focus on measures at source rather than end-of-pipe solutions, will be based on the best available scientific knowledge, and will promote environmentally safe nutrient recycling especially from manure and sewage, taking into account principles of circular economy, geographical and socio-economic conditions, among others.

Further, Contracting Parties supported measures aimed at preventing contamination by plastics, including micro-plastics, and at addressing the entire lifecycle of products. The Contracting Parties also decided to develop appropriate measures to address micro-plastics in riverine inputs, urban wastewater effluents as well as storm water based on an increased knowledge on the scale of the problem.

Furthermore, they agreed to re-examine the effectiveness of measures and recommendations for legacy pollutants and to identify the scale of problems of contaminants of emerging concern, including micro-pollutants, and based on this knowledge, to consider possible cost-effective mitigation measures.

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The findings on the degradation of our Planet continue to be alarming, and the scale of the challenge we are facing can at times feel overwhelming.

But it is possible to revert this negative trend, and I would like to offer some concrete Baltic Sea examples that consistent action can lead to successes.

The white-tailed sea eagle, top predator in the Baltic Sea coastal food webs, has suffered for decades from the effects of persistent chemicals in the Baltic Sea environment. Ban on the use of these chemicals has been in place for some time already, resulting in the recovery of the white-tailed sea eagle.

Also, the number and volume of illegal oil spills at sea has been reduced drastically. The input and deposition of cadmium, mercury and lead has been substantially decreased. Several seal populations have improved. Concentrations of radioactive substances indicative of good status are likely to be achieved by 2020.

Last but not least, the inputs of nutrients, nitrogen and phosphorus, to the sea from land-based sources have been cut substantially. A 50% reduction target for nutrients was set by HELCOM already in the 80’s, followed by the establishment of the state-of-the-art nutrient reduction scheme in 2007 as part of the Baltic Sea Action Plan.

Further concrete reduction of pollution from shipping can be expected thanks to the IMO decisions to designate the Baltic Sea as a NOx Emission Control Area and special area for sewage discharges from passenger ships under the MARPOL Convention.

This progress has been underpinned by the regionally coordinated environmental monitoring programmes of the HELCOM countries based on commonly agreed guidelines and standards. Resulting data are harmonized and accessible to everyone thanks to open access data policy. The HELCOM work shows that data harmonization can be accomplished given that there is common will for that.

Today, the Baltic Sea ecosystem is affected by levels of warming, deoxygenation and combination of multiple pressures that mimic those expected for many coastal areas in the future.

Several of the detrimental trends have been reversed thanks to the cooperation that started already in the 70's.

Thus the Baltic Sea could be an example for other regions in the world to look back and study successes but also the pitfalls and challenges of coastal management.

HELCOM remains committed to share its experience and continue working together towards a Pollution-Free Planet.

I thank you for your attention.