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Statement by Rüdiger Stempel, Executive Secretary of HELCOM

Instead of being the much awaited and anticipated year where biodiversity and ocean matters would take centre stage in a series of dedicated global conferences, 2020 took us all by surprise. As it turned out, it was COVID-19 that virtually monopolized global attention, bringing tragedy and grief and severely disrupted the lives and work of countless people around the globe. 2020 truly was an “annus horribilis” and we are not out of the woods yet.

Despite all of this, however, HELCOM was fortunate insofar as our operations continued almost as planned in 2020, with only minimal disturbances felt in the early stages of the pandemic when we had to adjust to our new working reality and shift all our meetings online at a moment’s notice. Overall, HELCOM work progressed as intended.

In 2020, the update of the Baltic Sea Action Plan, or BSAP, remained our central focus, as it has been since 2018, when that update was decided on by the HELCOM Ministerial Meeting in Brussels. Building on intense preparatory work that took place throughout 2020 in the various HELCOM bodies, from the expert networks to the working groups, as well as the 2020 HELCOM Stakeholder Conference, we were able to present a first full draft of the updated plan in December 2020.

With regard to eutrophication, currently still the single largest pressure on the Baltic Sea, HELCOM advanced on abatement measures. Indeed, our work on the elaboration of a Baltic Sea Regional Nutrient Recycling Strategy continued throughout 2020, and HELCOM also adopted its Recommendation 41-3 on the use of national manure standards, a commitment made by the HELCOM Ministerial Meeting 2013.

The results of one of our major projects on nutrients – the assessment of progress towards nutrient input ceilings for HELCOM countries – were also published in 2020, providing the basis for the revision of the nutrient input ceilings in the updated BSAP. Overall, as a token of the efficiency of measures, the year 2020 showed a reduction of nitrogen deposition.

Concerning biodiversity, another of our major pillars, HELCOM has been working on identifying and concretizing species and habitat-related measures and actions for inclusion in the updated Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP). Dedicated sessions on biodiversity were included in the HELCOM Stakeholder Conference 2020 and were part of the BSAP Update workshops held throughout the year. Moreover, the revised Recommendation on the protection of harbour porpoises was also adopted in 2020.

Also related to biodiversity, HELCOM has also conducted an analysis of the needs with respect to marine protected areas (MPAs), from planning to the actual designation of areas, and from management to monitoring. As of December 2020, HELCOM counted 178 MPAs in its area, covering about 13% of the Baltic Sea.

Concerning maritime activities, HELCOM adopted some crucial recommendations pertaining to safer shipping, and revised the HELCOM Response Manual, the region’s key instrument for coordinating transboundary response to maritime incidents such as oil or chemical spills.

In 2020, our work on sustainable aquaculture in the Baltic Sea continued, notably through the development of a catalogue on Best Available Technology and Best Environmental Practices (BAT/BEP) on the issue. Further steps were also taken to strengthen cooperation and coordination between HELCOM and the regional fisheries bodies Baltic Sea Fisheries Forum (BALTFISH) and Baltic Sea Advisory Council (BSAC).

In light of the expiration of the MSP Roadmap in 2020, the joint HELCOM-VASAB MSP Working group has also agreed to prepare a new regional MSP roadmap, which is expected to be interlinked with the updated BSAP and provisionally guide regional MSP activities until 2030.

Hazardous substances and litter also figured on the 2020 HELCOM agenda, as we set out to revise the HELCOM Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter (RAP ML). Initially adopted in 2015, the plan has already led to significant progress on the issue. Four overviews of hazardous substances of high concern were also published in 2020, covering diclofenac, PFAS, PBDE and dioxins.

The update of the HELCOM Recommendation on urban storm water management was also launched in 2020, addressing crucial environmental aspects such as contaminants, microlitter and resilience to the effects of climate change.

And speaking of climate change: the joint HELCOM/Baltic Earth Climate Change expert network was launched in 2020, tasked with preparing a Baltic Sea climate change fact sheet meant to inform decision-making in the Baltic Sea countries on related policies. A process that has now been brought to fruition.

Another of the more recent topic on the HELCOM agenda, underwater noise, was also given particular attention last year with the development of a first draft of our Action Plan on Underwater Noise.

HELCOM work would not be where it is without its monitoring and assessment activities, and 2020 was no exception, as shown by the finalization of the review and update of our 40 monitoring programmes as well as of the HELCOM Monitoring Manual. In a bid to harmonize, harvest and share data about the Baltic marine environment at a regional level, HELCOM also launched the Baltic Data Flows project.

Finally, 2020 also saw a change of HELCOM chairmanship. After a successful tenure that had started in 2018 and focused on the BSAP update, climate change, nutrient inputs, and more synergy with the Agenda 2030, Finland handed over to Germany which will chair the Commission through June 2022, guided by equally ambitious priorities.

2020 therefore was not only a year where we had to overcome unforeseen and, indeed, unprecedented, challenges but also one of intense activity, marked by unrelenting efforts to achieve our common goal of good environmental status for the Baltic Sea.

In closing, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you, our colleagues in the various other HELCOM bodies and the broader HELCOM community as well as – last but certainly not least – the staff of the HELCOM Secretariat for this sustained effort to keep HELCOM on track in challenging circumstances.

Thank you very much for your attention!