



## Terms of Reference for the HELCOM Expert Group on Zooplankton (HELCOM EG Zoo)

*Approved by the HELCOM Working Group on Biodiversity, Protection and Restoration via correspondence in June 2025.*

### Purpose

Zooplankton is a major link in aquatic ecosystems and integral to food web dynamics, ecosystem productivity, and nutrient and carbon cycling. Given its key position linking phytoplankton to higher trophic levels, an improved understanding of zooplankton as a part of pelagic environments, is a prerequisite for an ecosystem approach to management, a cornerstone to HELCOM, Baltic Sea Action Plan, Marine Strategy Framework Directive and EU Common Fisheries Policy.

The HELCOM Zooplankton Expert Group (EG Zoo) works on developing zooplankton-based indicators to follow-up the implementation of the Baltic Sea Action Plan and supports the Joint Baltic Sea zooplankton monitoring and status assessments within HELCOM. The Group contributes to the core indicator reports and data products regarding use of zooplankton in environmental status assessment, including the State of the Baltic Sea Assessment (HOLAS). The Group further provides a forum for experts involved in the Baltic Sea zooplankton monitoring to share information on methodological aspects of collecting and analyzing samples, data storage, statistical treatment, quality assurance and taxonomical aspects of zooplankton research.

The Group focuses on the overall quality, evaluation and reporting of the national marine zooplankton monitoring data, on developing the use of long-term data for environmental assessment in the Baltic Sea as well as improving the efficiency of the monitoring data use, the quality of the data, and developing pelagic habitat assessments and their viability for use in HOLAS with respect to e.g., indicator aggregation.

In addition to the work on zooplankton indicators, the Group's work focuses on zooplankton as a part of pelagic habitats and food webs and providing guidance on these topics in HELCOM processes and projects.

The group derives from the HELCOM Zooplankton Expert Network which started developing indicators in 2010.

### Duties

The duties of the Working Group are to:

1. Serve as platform to further develop core indicators and explore potential applicability of various zooplankton indicators in the HELCOM area;
2. Contribute to assessments of pelagic habitats by EG Pelagic at intervals as decided in HELCOM, including regular review of the data and assessment products;
3. Work towards the harmonization of the zooplankton monitoring guidelines.
4. Regular discussions to keep the high standard of zooplankton monitoring in the Baltic Sea, to assure the comparability of results.
5. Maintain regular training sessions on taxonomy and other issues relevant for zooplankton work (e.g. sampling, biomass determination).
6. Maintain a joint list of Baltic zooplankton species for all subregions.
7. Oversee recommendations on data reporting formats for HELCOMs database (including those hosted by ICES) and other relevant related databases (e.g., WoRMS, AquaNIS etc).

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8. Revise recommendations for zooplankton biomass assessment as necessary.
  9. Further development of the pelagic habitat and food webs assessment methodologies in HELCOM as concerning zooplankton as well as zooplankton indicators, including regular scientific review of the agreed GES boundaries and integration of indicators.
  10. Ensure relevant information flow and work synergies with other HELCOM groups in case the need for cooperation is recognized.
  11. Identify funding and possibly apply for projects to support the work of the EG;
  12. Report to WG BioDiv.

### Expected outcomes

The Expert Group aims to:

1. Report relevant and up-to-date data to support the next HELCOM Holistic Assessments;
2. Cooperate regionally on the topic of zooplankton to develop methods and provide relevant results (updated indicator, developing relevant new indicator(s), integrated assessment, etc.) for the HELCOM Holistic Assessments to give a comprehensive overview of the ecosystem health status of the Baltic Sea and based on the best available scientific knowledge.
3. Implement relevant BSAP actions.
4. Serve as a regional platform for sharing the latest information on monitoring and relevant research on zooplankton.
5. Ensure the coordination and development of monitoring of zooplankton in the Baltic Sea.

### Organization of work

Concrete tasks for the Expert Group will be presented in the work plan. The work plan is valid for a two-year period but should be reviewed and updated on an annual basis to ensure that the timeline and planned work remains relevant. This task list enables long-term planning and delivery of significant products that may require several components to be developed during consecutive years.

Membership of the Expert Group is obtained by nomination from their national HELCOM delegation. It is important that all members of the Expert Group have a firm connection to their national delegations. The Expert Group Chair can also invite non-members to attend individual meetings or to take part in intersessional work as deemed relevant. Invited experts should demonstrate particular skills that are relevant to the delivery of a specific request. HELCOM observers are invited to nominate a representative for the Expert Group.

EG Zoo will be guided by the HELCOM Working Group on Biodiversity, Protection and Restoration (HELCOM WG BioDiv). Information flow to HELCOM WG BioDiv is a key factor and timely exchanges will increase acceptance of the work. HELCOM WG BioDiv may request that specific topics or issues are addressed.

The Expert Group will document its meetings. A concise outcome will be adopted before the end of each meeting or by correspondence after each meeting. The outcome is agreed by consensus.

HELCOM Meeting Portal will be used to distribute documents (in a restricted access mode) as well as publish the meeting documents, presentations, and the outcome (public after the meeting). Access to some documents may be kept restricted.

The mode of work for the Expert Group will include at least two annual meetings, including if needed one physical meeting hosted by a Contracting Party to the Helsinki Commission. Correspondence and online meetings are facilitated by the HELCOM Secretariat, with workshops taking place as needed.

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The group, with the support of the Secretariat, shall ensure good information flow and cooperation between the relevant HELCOM subsidiary bodies such as: EG Pelagic, EG Foodweb, EG Phyto, EG Benthic, EG Eutro, EN Clime, etc. The group shall also ensure good information flow with other relevant organizations such as OSPAR.

A chair will be elected by the members of EG Zoo for a 2-years term. The post can be reconducted to a maximum of 6 years.

The Chair will report back to HELCOM WG BioDiv on the activities of the Expert Group. This will take the form of an agenda item at WG meetings.

The work of the group is open ended. The Terms of Reference are subject to review and, as appropriate, revision by the Expert Group and approval by WG BioDiv.

The HELCOM Secretariat will provide administrative support to the Expert Group.