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A considerable improvement of the Eastern Baltic cod stock in the Baltic, stable Western cod stock, however still at a low level and a decrease of pelagic stocks – herring and sprat – these are the main highlights of the advice of the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea – ICES for 2011.

Every year, at the end of May, the scientific advice of the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea is presented to the general public, i.e. decision-makers, fishermen and NGOs. It illustrated the state of the fish stocks which are subject to commercial fishery in the Baltic. The advice constitutes the basis for the decisions on total allowable catches taken by the European Commission.

According to the ICES advice, after many years of low abundance of cod populations in the Baltic Sea, the situation has improved, in particular with reference to the Eastern cod stock. As compared to 2006, its size has increased by three times. According to scientists, it results, among others, from improved environmental conditions. Inflows of saline water into the Baltic had created better spawning conditions for cod and thus resulted in strong young populations.

Environmental conditions are just one of the reasons for an improvement – says Piotr Prędko, fisheries specialist at WWF Poland – The improved state of cod populations, in particular the eastern stock also results from an effective implementation of the long term management plan for Baltic cod and constant efforts aimed at adjusting the allowable catches to the existing resources. The eastern cod is a good example of the importance of long term fisheries management. WWF is of the opinion that all commercially exploited fish stocks should be subject to long term management plans.

Well- designed long term management plans based on reliable scientific data are crucial in rebuilding fish resources and in securing sustainable exploitation of the living marine resources – adds Prędko.

The advice for the Western Baltic cod stock is a little bit less optimistic. The population remains at a stable, but very low level. It is therefore crucial to apply precautionary approach in the management of this stock.

As pointed by ICES advice, the populations of Baltic herring and sprat have decreased. It means that the catch quotas for these species should be lowered.

The advice presented by ICES clearly indicates that the Baltic fish stocks are closely linked – says Prędko – an increase in the abundance of a predator such as cod causes a decrease of populations of fish it predated on, in this case herring and sprat. Long term management plans should take into account the interactions between different fish species that live within the same fishery ground and not only the species targeted by commercial fishery. This is the only way to guarantee stable fish resources.