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Stakes high in the Baltic

– as RAC looks to set new agenda

The Baltic Sea region is a hotbed of EU policy activity set for substantial change over the coming months. **Ewen Cook** talks to the Baltic Sea Regional Advisory Council (BSRAC) about the challenges that lie ahead for the Baltic fishing industry.

ALL EYES will be on the Baltic Sea for the remainder of 2009 and beyond. An array of strategic management projects – both inside and outside the fishing industry – are set to re-shape this critical resource, which sustains over 85 million people and yields a million tonnes of fish a year.

The Baltic is surrounded by eight EU Member States as well as parts of the Russian Federation. It is the largest brackish water area in the world, with a vast range of salinities in which cod, herring and sprat are the major species of commercial value. The industry has been forced to contend with some catastrophic policy decision in recent years – most notably the salmon drift net ban introduced on January 1 in 2008 – but the next few months will bring the Baltic into focus like never before.

The start of the Swedish presidency of the EU on July 1, along with the imminent adoption of the ‘EU strategy for the Baltic Sea Region’ requested by the Commission in 2007, are of huge significance.

The four-point Strategy, which requires the Baltic Sea to be more “environmentally sustainable; prosperous; accessible and attractive; and safe and secure,” will be one of the priorities of the Swedish presidency and could have serious implications for a fishing industry already dismayed by heavy-handed EU directives.

But the Strategy is only one of the legislative ventures in the Baltic region today. The Commission has also announced pilot projects on maritime spatial planning and surveillance, which will force the fishing industry to battle several conflicting industries such as offshore energy.

Against this backdrop, the Baltic Sea Regional Advisory Council (BSRAC) is set for its most important year to date.

The BSRAC, set up in March 2006 in line with a decision by the EU to create seven RACs to provide advice on fisheries management, is known for being one of the most active and ambitious councils.

This year it has already produced a recommendation on a management plan for Baltic salmon, but the RAC must now address the tricky issue of a long-term management plan for pelagic species – as well as initiating new work which will contribute to the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy.

In addition, the BSRAC has begun a process of co-operation with the Pelagic RAC over the critical question of how to allocate the Western Baltic spring spawning (WBSS) herring stock, which is shared between the two RACs in the infamous marine area IIIa.

Reine J. Johansson, BSRAC president, tells *FNI*: “All RAC’s have different ways of working, but with the BSRAC one thing is sure: after the fall of the iron curtain, the we are in a unique position to take up the debate on fisheries management.

“The RAC must not sit and wait for the Commission to ask it to come with opinions. It must take the initiative.”

The BSRAC has just held its fourth General Assembly in Gdynia, Poland, where Reine J. Johansson was re-elected as chair for another three years.

Sally Clink, BSRAC executive secretary, tells *FNI*: “It’s a special time right now for us – there is so much going on. We have worked very hard on bringing together a draft recommendation from the RAC for salmon, and for the last two years the aim has been to work on a consolidated, long term management plan for the pelagic species.

“We are also looking at cod selectivity issues in the Baltic, as well as preparing for a major BSRAC conference in Stockholm in October: *Baltic Sea Fisheries: Lessons Learned and Future Perspectives*.”

Ryszard Malik, of Poland’s Association of Fishermen’s of Sea-PO, is chair of the BSRAC’s Working Group on Pelagic Fisheries. He is leading the difficult process of deciding how to allocate the Western Baltic herring stock with the Pelagic RAC.

He says: “The situation with the Western Baltic Spring spawners is very complicated, as the stock is utilised by the Baltic Sea and North Sea fishermen. WSSB have a spawning ground in the Baltic Sea, close to Rugen Island near the Polish coast. Then, aged two to three years, they swim up north to area IIIa: Skagerrak and Kattegat.

“At present the allocation is split 50-50, but it requires a lot more research from ICES and much more co-operation.”

Currently, catches of WBSS and North Sea herring in Skagerrak and Kattegat are counted against IIIa quotas; while catches in the Western Baltic (subdivisions 22-24) are counted against an EU TAC for the area.

Says Ryszard Malik: “We have agreed with the Pelagic RAC that we will work together and create a focus group involving representatives of fishermen’s organisations from each country.

“The current Marine Stewardship Council assessment of the stock is also a very important consideration. MSC certification is our destination – but it’s a matter of how we get there!”

Ryszard Malik believes the flurry of strategic activity in the Baltic region in 2009 also represents a major opportunity for regional management influence.

“From the Polish perspective, we now have a huge opportunity for growth. Following many years of separation, we can now benefit from EU membership and start to exchange our experiences.

“It is certainly a year for big discussions. We are now at the stage to start up the Polish Baltic Sea roundtable, which consists of representatives from the different fishermen organisations, scientists and NGOs.

“The RAC will stay as the advisory body for the Commission, but we must take into account that regionalisation is coming, and that more decisions will be taken in the regions closer to the Baltic Sea.

“In this way we can avoid such mistakes as the salmon drift net ban, which is the best example of the absolutely wrong decision!

“Decisions need to be taken closer to the sea. We don’t know how to do it at this moment – perhaps by a Council of Baltic Sea Ministers, for example – but we expect that the BSRAC will play the major role as the expert body.”