



REGERINGSKANSLIET

Ministry of Sustainable Development

## Informal Ministerial meeting 23 November 2005

### Urgent Action for the Baltic - a discussion on the future

#### Conclusions from Ms Lena Sommestad, chair

Ministers and high representatives of all the states surrounding the Baltic Sea, the Nordic countries, the Helsinki Commission, the EU Commission, the UK Presidency of the EU and the incoming Austrian EU Presidency as well as representatives of the Secretariat of the Council of the Baltic Sea States met in Haga on 23 November 2005 to have an informal discussion on action to improve the environmental situation in the Baltic Sea.

There was general agreement at the meeting that the state of the Baltic Sea requires strengthened action in order to tackle the major problems: eutrophication, hazardous substances, environmental impacts of shipping and threats to fish stocks. The Baltic Sea Area is very sensitive and requires special attention due to its low salinity, relatively low number of species, its delicate ecological balance and the long water renewal time. The present state of the sea therefore demands that countries around the sea act jointly and effectively. All methods available for improvement must be considered.

It was also agreed that the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM) is the best environmental focal point dealing with the coordination of activities to improve the ecological status of the Baltic Sea.

The chair, the Swedish Minister for the Environment Ms Lena Sommestad summarised the discussions at the meeting.

#### Strengthen the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan

The upcoming HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan should be the guiding instrument for further action. A special task force within HELCOM could be set up to intensify the work. It is important that HELCOM focuses on this issue in the coming years. In order to strengthen and speed up the process countries could

provide HELCOM with extra resources and in other ways support the process.

### **Make the Baltic Sea Action Plan a joint Pilot Project**

The European Commission has presented a marine strategy package. This is welcomed and should be used also to bridge the gap to neighbouring countries, who are not member states of the EU. Due to its particular natural condition and scientifically proven critical state the Baltic Sea needs further strong efforts. It was proposed that the Baltic Sea should be a pilot project by implementing the Baltic Sea Action Plan with early delivery of joint and national strategies. EU-Russian cooperation could be further strengthened in Baltic Sea cooperation.

### **Improved decision-making and communication**

Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment and applying the Espoo Convention and the requirements under the Helsinki Convention is very important and should be used before large investment decisions affecting the Baltic Sea. Better communication between countries on good practices should increasingly be used. It is also important to involve stake-holders and the public in decision-making.

### **Apply efficient economic incentives**

When establishing and implementing EU economic funds and instruments, due regard should be paid to the state of the Baltic Sea. Existing funds could be used for improving the environmental status of the Baltic Sea Area. There is also a need to investigate the possibility of new instruments to reduce emissions and allocate investments in a cost-effective manner. One way could be to treat the Baltic Sea as a joint project.

### **Implement the Ecosystem approach**

Our seas have to be recognized as ecosystems with complex interaction between various impacts. Applying the ecosystem approach consequently means to integrate different policy sectors with the aim of achieving sustainable use and protection of the Baltic Sea. It is important to consider the risk with alien species and the impacts of climate change.

### **Stop the eutrophication of the Baltic Sea**

The algal blooms are a major problem for the marine environment and restricts the use of the Baltic Sea. The load of nutrients, both phosphorus and nitrogen, has to be reduced in major sectors including agriculture and airborne emissions from transportation as well as sewage from shipping. Investments in wastewater treatment facilities should continue and be improved in order to achieve the optimal effect for the Baltic Sea as a whole. The ongoing work on national strategy plans and rural

development programmes must ensure that development of the agricultural sector pays greater attention to the needs of the Baltic Sea. During the Polish chairmanship of the HELCOM, Poland is planning to invite the ministers for agriculture and environment to the HELCOM ministerial meeting in 2007 to jointly study the situation in the Baltic Sea Area and consider possible action to reduce the impact of the agricultural sector on the sea.

#### **Reduce hazardous substances**

Hazardous substances still constitute a threat to the biological life in major parts of the Baltic Sea Area. Further efforts must be made to minimise releases so that the content of such substances is reduced or where possible eliminated in the sea. The environmental impacts of dumped ammunition should also be considered. All fish caught for consumption in the Baltic Sea Area should have non-elevated concentrations of hazardous substances.

#### **Restore all fish stocks**

The reductions in fish stocks in the Baltic Sea Area, and in cod in particular, have contributed to serious ecosystem problems also algal blooms. Consistent action must be taken to stop the overexploitation of cod and to restore its spawning habitats. The reason for recruitment disturbances in other species must be understood and counteracted. Management of fish species should be further coordinated from an ecosystem perspective.

#### **Improve maritime safety and emergency capacity**

The dense and increasing maritime traffic in the Baltic Sea and the associated risk of incidents leading to pollution by oil or other harmful substances constitutes a continuous threat to the marine environment. HELCOM adopted a Declaration on the Safety of Navigation and Emergency Capacity in the Baltic Sea Area in 2001; this declaration must be fully implemented and the need for additional measures within this framework should be further investigated and decided. A lot of encouraging achievements and many additional efforts is ongoing and should be appreciated, however there is still room for improvement with regard to the environmental performance of ships, the safety of navigation and combating capacities.

#### **Increase focused research**

Research needs to be further focused towards optimisation of measures. The ongoing BONUS programme has constructively worked in this direction and a commitment to the further continuation of the BONUS programme could be considered. Increasing basic and applied transsectoral aquatic science is a prerequisite for cost-effective measures. Networking between researchers needs to be encouraged.

**Encourage local participation and cooperation**

Many local efforts are being made to improve the Baltic Sea ecosystem. Local stakeholders are improving agriculture and fishing practices and restoration activities are being carried out in many areas. Experience gained by such pilot projects and examples of best practice needs to be evaluated and spread around the Baltic Sea through better coordination and networking.

**Alert Heads of State and Government and sector ministries**

The strong support that the Heads of State and Governments have given to marine issues in the Baltic Sea over time is most valuable. Their commitment is necessary in order to achieve action in several sectors. They can support the financial instruments for the Baltic Sea on Nordic as well as EU level. The new EU financial perspective is an option that could be explored further in this regard. The Baltic Sea environment is not an issue for environmental ministers alone. Following the integrated policy approach and to get relevant action, a firm political commitment and practical involvement is needed from all relevant sectors. Addressing sector policies is an issue of urgency.

Haga 23 November 2005