

Work Plan on Underwater Noise (agreed by HOD 48-2015 and further elaborated by the Secretariat in accordance with the decisions of the HOD 48-2015)

Work Plan on preparing a Roadmap to building a knowledge base on underwater noise

Background information

In 2013, the HELCOM Ministerial Meeting agreed that:

- the level of ambient and the distribution of impulsive sounds in the Baltic Sea should not have negative impact on marine life;
- human activities that are assessed to result in negative impacts on marine life should be carried out only if relevant mitigation measures are in place.

Accordingly, the Ministerial Meeting agreed that as soon as possible and by the end of 2016, using mainly already on-going activities, to:

- establish a set of indicators including technical standards which may be used for monitoring ambient and impulsive underwater noise in the Baltic Sea;
- encourage research on the cause and effects of underwater noise on biota;
- map the levels of ambient underwater noise across the Baltic Sea;
- set up a register of the occurrence of impulsive sounds;
- consider regular monitoring on ambient and impulsive underwater noise as well as possible options for mitigation measures related to noise taking into account the ongoing work in IMO on non-mandatory draft guidelines for reducing underwater noise from commercial ships and in CBD context.

Underwater noise is an area with ongoing research projects in the Baltic Sea but as of recently with no formal agreement concluded in HELCOM how to take the work forward.

Presently, piling (impulsive noise) and shipping (continuous noise) are considered to constitute the two major sources of underwater noise in the Baltic Sea.

There are two indicators under preparation within HELCOM: “Continuous low frequency anthropogenic sound” and “Distribution in time and place of loud low and mid frequency anthropogenic impulsive sounds”.

The ongoing (by 2016) BIAS project contributes to operationalization of the indicator on continuous noise at a Baltic Sea regional level, an indicator which is mainly linked to shipping. The BIAS project will provide a sound-scape map of current ambient noise levels, establish standards for measuring noise and develop a set of GIS-based planning tools to manage underwater sound.

BIAS is not addressing the indicator on impulsive noise, for which a registry where loud noise events are archived should be implemented.

Within OSPAR EIHA group, a proposal for setting up a regional register for impulsive noise has already been agreed pending clarification of financing. Regarding the further work on the impulsive noise indicator and the registry, a meeting in the side lines of the EU TG Noise meeting at ICES headquarters, in Copenhagen, in September 2015 is tentatively planned to further discuss the registry, the visualisation element and cooperation with HELCOM.

The monitoring strategy for ambient noise has been taken forward by OSPAR EIHA meeting, and the strategy will be followed with development of the monitoring programme with a support of a possible project. Experience of Germany and from BIAS project is to be taken into account.

The recently started SHEBA project (2015-2018) is planning to investigate impacts from shipping, including underwater noise.

IMO considers issues related to the underwater noise, including adoption by MEPC 66 of non-mandatory voluntary guidelines to reduce noise from commercial shipping.

Roadmap to build knowledge base towards a regional action plan on underwater noise

A roadmap will be prepared in 2015 to guide work in HELCOM on underwater noise in a short-term 2015-2017.

The roadmap will focus on preparing a knowledge base towards a regional action plan on underwater noise in 2017/2018 to meet the objectives of the 2013 Ministerial Meeting and of MSFD for Contracting Parties being EU member states.

The implementation of the roadmap in 2015-2016 will outline activities to first of all:

1. Review existing knowledge on impact of noise in the Baltic Sea and investigate the significance of different sources of noise;
2. Finalize the indicators and make them operational.

The roadmap will also cover activities to:

- Survey possible measures to manage and mitigate relevant impacts on the Baltic Sea;
- Explore ways if it is possible to define environmental targets for underwater noise.

The work on mitigation options and environmental targets should be started with preparing an overview of measures in IMO, OSPAR and other relevant forums.

It is essential to finalize the indicators in HELCOM in order to be able to offer information on underwater noise for HOLAS II. BIAS recommendations for ambient noise monitoring will be ready for consideration by HELCOM early 2016. In the indicator 'Continuous low frequency anthropogenic sound' some first proposals from the project have been included on general monitoring issues and a potentially appropriate spatial network of monitoring stations, with the aim to support future discussion on coordinated monitoring in the HELCOM community. OSPAR is working on a registry for impulsive noise and HELCOM could benefit from this development for setting up a regional registry in the Baltic Sea.

The activities will be supported by the HELCOM Baltic Boost project.

Based on the Roadmap and the results of work in 2015 and 2016, a proposal for developing a regional action plan on underwater noise will be prepared.

Working arrangement and timetable

Pressure WG will have an overall coordinating role for the activities on underwater noise according to its ToR. State and Conservation WG is responsible for monitoring and assessment, and mitigation measures fall under responsibility of Pressure and Maritime WGs.

The Contracting Parties are invited to nominate national experts on underwater noise as a joint expert network under Pressure WG and State and Conservation WG.

A regional expert network on underwater noise exists under BIAS Project, and some experts took part in the already finalized CORESET II project. The Contracting Parties might wish to take it into account when nominating national contact points.

The first task of the nominated experts will be to draft a roadmap.

The draft roadmap will be considered by Pressure 3-2015 (7-9 October 2015) and State and Conservation 3-2015 (9-13 November 2015). The proposed Roadmap will be presented at the planned workshop on coordination of measures initiated by Gear (in October 2015) and subsequently submitted to HoDs in December 2015 for approval.

Ongoing work in OSPAR will be taken into account, with the aim to propose, as part of the Roadmap, how to mutually benefit from expertise, knowledge and technical solutions existing or proposed in the HELCOM area and OSPAR area, including possible common reporting formats and joint database.

HELCOM experts could consider attending the tentatively planned OSPAR meeting in September 2015 to discuss the impulsive noise registry and other cooperation issues.