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Press release

HELCOM approves core elements of the Baltic Sea Action Plan

Helsinki, 9th March (HELCOM) – The Helsinki Commission today officially approved the first core elements of an ambitious but realistic action plan now being developed by HELCOM to restore the Baltic Sea marine environment. The nine HELCOM Member States and the EU agreed on a common vision of a healthy Baltic Sea and a set of strategic goals and ecological objectives for achieving a commonly acceptable good status of the marine environment at the 27th annual Commission Meeting, which took place on 8-9 March in Helsinki, Finland.

Last year, the Helsinki Commission decided to develop a Baltic Sea Action Plan to ensure that all possible measures are taken to reduce pollution in the Baltic Sea and to repair the damage done to the marine environment. The HELCOM action plan, which has already been widely heralded as a pilot project for the European seas under the newly drafted EU Marine Strategy, will provide a unique opportunity to take joint wide-scale and decisive actions to achieve the ultimate target of having a healthy marine environment with balanced eco-systems for the present generation to enjoy.

"The general vision and objectives which we approved today will not only serve as a foundation for further development of this innovative environmental strategy, but within the actual plan after its adoption will dictate the need for specific actions to be taken jointly by the Baltic Sea countries in order to restore the environment," said the Executive Secretary of HELCOM, Ms Anne Christine Brusendorff. "With this ecosystem approach protection of the marine environment is no longer seen as an event-driven pollution reduction approach to be taken sector-by-sector. Instead, the starting point is a common understanding and definition of a sea with a good ecological balance, which is deciding the further needs for reductions of pollution loads as well as the level and extent of human activities. This approach paves the best way to ensure a holistic and integrated policy approach," underlined Ms Brusendorff. "This will also mean that we will see changes in the HELCOM approach on how to achieve a healthy Baltic Sea. HELCOM will no longer aim at "one-size-fits-all solutions", but will aim at tailor-made solutions with the responsiveness of the marine environment as the starting point," she added.

The next most important step in the development of the Baltic Sea Action Plan, which is expected to be finalised and adopted by HELCOM in the latter part of 2007, will be to identify and detail the kind of actions needed to achieve the environmental objectives within a given timeframe for each of the main environmental priorities: curbing eutrophication, preventing pollution involving hazardous substances, improving safety of navigation and accident response capacity, as well as halting habitat destruction and the decline in biodiversity.

The annual meeting of HELCOM also approved the establishment of an *ad hoc* Task Force for the development of the Baltic Sea Action Plan. It will consist of representatives nominated by the HELCOM Member States and also other interested stakeholders, including representatives of NGOs and the private sector. One of the main objectives of the *ad hoc* Task Force will be to ensure political commitment to the development of the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan thereby maintaining a link between scientific work and relevant political processes.

The annual Commission Meeting considered the outcome of the Stakeholder Conference on the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan, held on 7th March in Helsinki. The main objective of this Conference - attended by leading environmental scientists, government officials, business leaders and representatives of major regional organisations - was to inform on the purpose and foreseen activities within the plan, and to get input and commitments to its development at the local, national, and regional levels as well as from the private sector. The concept of the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan presented at the Conference received overwhelming support. Commenting on the plan among other keynote speakers, the State Secretary from the Finnish Ministry of the Environment, Mr Stefan Wallin particularly underlined that the preparation of the HELCOM action plan must be open-ended and transparent. "We must use this opportunity of preparing this new Baltic Sea Action Plan to make it as comprehensive and, at the same time, as realistic and action-oriented as possible..," he added. The EU representative expressed full support for the HELCOM plan. The Head of the Water and Marine Unit in the Directorate General for Environment at the European Commission, Mr Peter Gammeltoft said that the European Commission "strongly backs the BSAP (Baltic Sea Action Plan) and intends to take an active part in its development over the coming months." He underlined that the plan under preparation "is the cornerstone for further action" in the Baltic Sea region. "It is also fully in line with the EU Marine Strategy," he added. "The BSAP will apply the ecosystem-based approach to the management of the Baltic Sea. In setting a definition of 'good ecological status' for the Baltic Sea as well as specific environmental targets and necessary measures, the BSAP will be instrumental to the successful implementation of the (EU Marine) Strategy in the region. The BSAP therefore makes HELCOM a front-runner and a model to follow among regional seas conventions in Europe," Mr Gammeltoft said.

The HELCOM annual meeting also discussed working programmes, intersessional work and ongoing projects, including the GEF/World Bank funded Baltic Sea Regional Project, as well as the activities of HELCOM subsidiary Groups, and adopted an updated HELCOM Recommendations which requires HELCOM countries to limit emissions into the atmosphere and discharges into water from incineration of waste.

Note to Editors:

The Helsinki Commission, or HELCOM, works to protect the marine environment of the Baltic Sea from all sources of pollution through intergovernmental co-operation between the countries bordering the sea - Denmark, Estonia, the European Community, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia and Sweden.

HELCOM is the governing body of the "Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area," more usually known as the Helsinki Convention.

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