December 2025

Policy memo

In advance of the Agriculture and Fisheries Council 11–12 December 2025

Baltic Sea Centre
Stockholm University

The EU should follow ICES advice and ban all fishing for eel

The temporary fishing closures decided by the EU are insufficient to protect the increasingly endangered European eel. When the Agriculture and Fisheries Council meets in December, it must take the decisive action advised by ICES for years: a complete fishing ban.

The European eel remains critically endangered. A recently published study based on data from fishery–independent trawl surveys conducted by International Council for the Exploration of the Seas, ICES, shows that the situation in the Northern European waters has not improved since the EU eel regulation was adopted in 2007. In fact, the presence of larger eel (over 50 cm) has steadily decreased in the Baltic Sea and the southern North Sea (including the Skagerrak and Kattegat) over the past 30-35 years, implying that the risk of extinction has increased.

Since 2003, the scientific advice from ICES has been to keep fisheries and other anthropogenic impact on eel as close as possible to zero. From 2021 onwards, the advice has been strengthened further: eel catches should be zero in all habitats, including glass eel catches for restocking and aquaculture purposes.

Nevertheless, the EU, along with most member states, has continued to allow targeted eel fishing, albeit with certain restrictions. One such restriction is the seasonal closure of fisheries in marine and brackish waters, which has been in force in the EU since 2018 to protect migrating eels. However, in many member states, the implementation of these closures appears to focus more on protecting eel fishing than the eels themselves.

Scheduling of temporary closures

Ahead of 2018, the European Commission proposed to prohibit any fishery of European eel that target spawners in the Union waters of the ICES area and in the Baltic Sea. The Council of Ministers, however, decided to close fishery in the sea only for a three-month period that the Member States should schedule between 1 September and 28 February. In the regulation adopted by the Council, it was clear that the purpose of the closure was to protect spawners during their migration.

Sweden and Denmark scheduled this closure from 1 November to 31 January – a period that accounted for just 16 percent of Swedish landings and 25 per cent of Danish landings in the previous years (2013–2017).

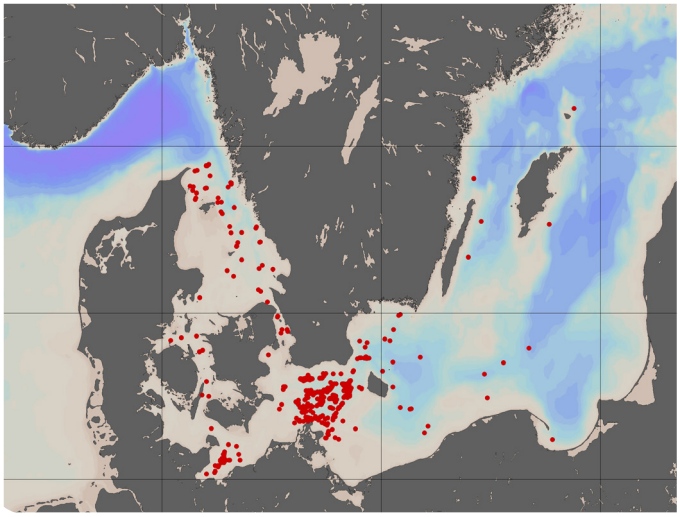
From 2019, the EU closures were extended to recreational fisheries and glass eel fisheries, and to be scheduled between 1 August and 28 February. Denmark delayed the closure to the December–February (a period accounting for 7 percent of the landings 2013–2017).

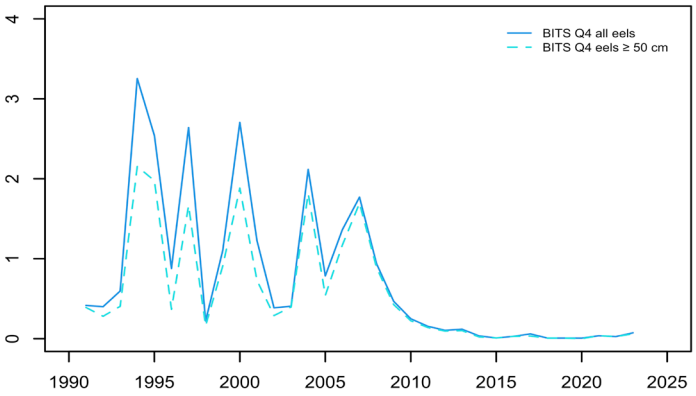
For 2022 the Council stated that the closure period should cover the period of the highest migration. Sweden and Denmark brought the period forward, but only to October–December and November–January, respectively.

In May 2022 ICES noted that no overall progress had been made in achieving the objectives of the eel regulation to increase the silver eel escapement to 40 percent of the original biomass. ICES also advised that the efforts should be focused on conservation measures that, by definition, have a high probability of reducing mortality and increasing escapement.

For 2023, the Council decided to prohibit recreational fisheries for European eel at all life stages, and to extend the closure period to six months. Sweden placed this extension in January–March

Photo: Gunnar Aneer





Analysis of more than three decades of ICES Baltic International Trawl Surveys (BITS) shows that the abundance of adult eels has declined sharply in Northern European waters. From *Svedäng, 2025.*

– a period when no fishery at all was conducted – and Denmark included October, February and March,

For 2024, the Council decided that the countries around the Baltic Sea (ICES subarea 3) should agree on a six-month closure period or periods. Considering the ”potentially severe socio-economic implications of a full closure of fisheries targeting glass eel and silver eel during their main migration period or periods”, the Member States could allow eel fishing for 30 days during those periods. If no agreement was made, however, the period would be consecutive and from 15 September 2024 to 15 March 2025. Since the member states did not reach an agreement on the closure the proposed period was adopted. The same situation occurred for the 2025/26 season.

When does the eel migrate?

The purpose of the closure periods is stated to be to protect the migrating eel. According to ICES, (Special Request Advice on temporal migration patterns of European eel, 2020 and WKEELMIGRATION report, 2020), the migration period for eels close to maturation, i.e. silver eel, generally starts in September but they find it difficult to clearly define the duration of the escapement season and the peaks in migration from the different EU regions.

Eels leaving the Baltic Sea need to pass through Öresund or the other parts of the Danish straits, making these a vulnerable place for eel, as well as an historically important place for eel fisheries. This passage is mainly occurring from September to December with a peak in November. However, it is also stated in the reports that for the Northern countries, the downstream silver eel migration starts already in late summer. This is reflected in the silver eel landings that occur earlier and over a prolonged time period with increasing distance to the spawning ground (the Sargasso Sea). The presented cluster analysis shows that silver eel landings occur already in May, to increase in in July–September and peak in October.

A compilation of landing data from Denmark and Sweden, done by the Baltic Sea Centre, also shows that a significant part of the landings in the period before the EU closures were implemented (2013–2017) occurred in July and August in the northern areas (ICES 3.d25, d27, d29, d30). Assuming that fishers’ observations of when eels migrate is mirrored in the catch statistics, this would suggest that the migration period would be from July to December.

Eels are still being caught in large numbers

Although the closure periods have gradually become more aligned with the migration periods since the initial implementation in 2018, particularly in the south-west Baltic Sea region, they still do not provide sufficient protection for the increasingly threatened European eel. Increased protection (i.e. less fishing) could be achieved by bringing the period forward to 1 July–31 December, with no interruptions allowed.

According to the landing data compiled by ICES for 2024, the total amount of yellow and silver eels landed by the reporting countries was just over 1,855 tonnes in commercial fisheries, plus almost 76 tonnes from recreational fishing. Close to 1,500 tonnes were reported from EU countries. However, the real number is likely to be significantly higher, since Germany has not yet reported its figures for 2024. In their last report, from 2022, they caught 208 tonnes of eel commercially and 275 tonnes recreationally. Assuming an average weight of 1 kg, the total EU landings equate to approximately 2 million mature or near-mature eels being killed in fisheries and thus prevented from contributing to the survival of the species.

It is suspected that fisheries in some countries are now more targeted at yellow eels that are not on a migratory route. It has been shown from other areas that such an accumulated fishing mortality over several years may entirely exhaust local stocks of yellow eels. Clearly, it is pointless to protect the passage out of the Baltic Sea if most of the eels are already caught.

As for the glass eel fishery, the commercial landings reported to amounted to almost 58 tonnes in 2024, which is a marginal decrease from the 60 tonnes caught in 2017.

When the Council of Ministers meets in December to decide on eel fishing in the coming years, the only decision in line with the scientific advice would be to implement a total ban on eel fishing in marine, brackish and fresh water until there are significant signs of improvement in the entire European population.

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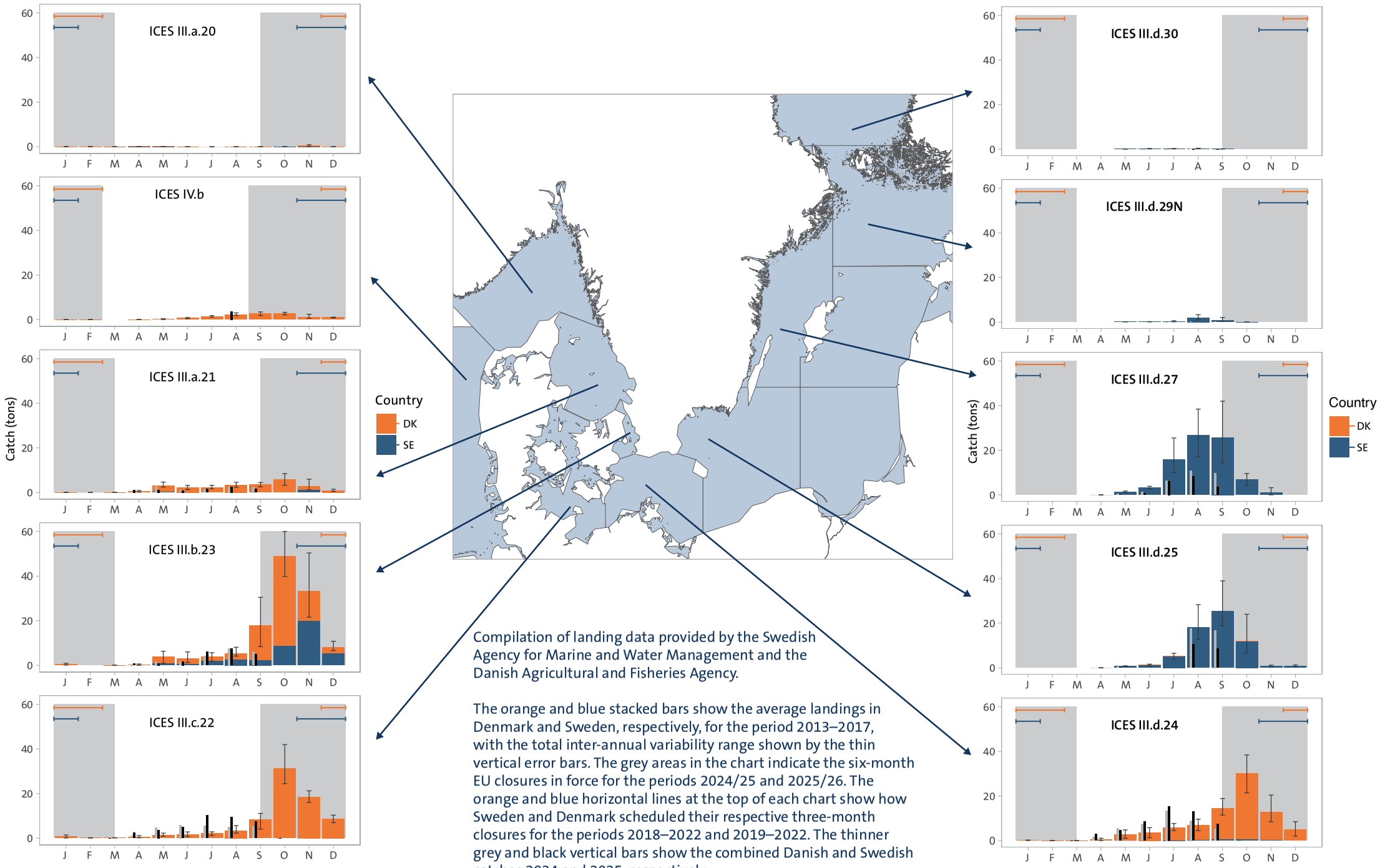
Landings of eel in Sweden and Denmark before the EU closure periods



Compilation of landing data provided by the Swedish Agency for Marine and Water Management and the Danish Agricultural and Fisheries Agency.

The orange and blue stacked bars show the average landings in Denmark and Sweden, respectively, for the period 2013–2017, with the total inter-annual variability range shown by the thin vertical error bars. The grey areas in the chart indicate the six-month EU closures in force for the periods 2024/25 and 2025/26. The orange and blue horizontal lines at the top of each chart show how Sweden and Denmark scheduled their respective three-month closures for the periods 2018–2022 and 2019–2022. The thinner grey and black vertical bars show the combined Danish and Swedish catches 2024 and 2025, respectively.