

Deliverable B1.2: Update of the Natura 2000 network in Åland, with assessment of conservation impacts for the Baltic ringed seal



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Abstract

This is a deliverable for the proposal of new Natura 2000 sites for protection of the Baltic ringed seal in Åland. The report also includes a summary of all conservation activities for the Baltic ringed seal in Åland for the species during Our Saimaa Seal LIFE project in actions A6 and B1.

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Hanke on saanut rahoitusta Euroopan unionin LIFE-ohjelmasta. Aineiston sisältö heijastelee sen tekijöiden näkemyksiä, eikä Euroopan komissio tai CINEA ole vastuussa aineiston sisältämien tietojen käytöstä.

1. Introduction

Åland is an autonomous part of Finland and Åland's autonomy gives it the right to pass laws in areas relating to the internal affairs of Åland and to exercise its own budgetary power. Åland's legislature, its "parliament", is known as lagtinget. The Parliament appoints the regional Åland Government, landskapsregeringen. Åland's autonomy is regulated by the Act on the Autonomy of Åland passed by the Parliament of Finland (1144/1991). The Autonomy Act lists the areas where the Åland Parliament has the right to pass legislation. Legislation in the field of the environment, including nature conservation falls within Åland's own legislative competence. In these areas Åland functions practically like an independent state with its own laws and administration. Consequently, decisions concerning the Natura 2000 network in Åland are taken by the Government of Åland as the competent authority.

The Government of Åland is the competent authority for the management and protection of the seal populations in the Åland, including the full processes of establishing and managing Natura 2000 sites and other protected areas. The Baltic ringed seal (*Pusa hispida botnica*) is a species requiring special protection under the section 15 of the Nature conservation Act (1998:82) for Åland, and Habitats Directive Annex II and V. The number of ringed seals in the Archipelago Sea subpopulation is low and the species, as also stressed by the European Commission (EC) as well as HELCOM, needs urgent protection. However, earlier the existing information on the distribution, abundance and important habitats of the species has been deficient for any concrete conservation actions and suitable protected areas have not been identified.

This is a deliverable for action B1 "Proposals for new Natura 2000 areas to EC". In this report we also summarise the progress made for the protection of the Baltic ringed seal in Åland by actions implemented in Our Saimaa Seal LIFE project (OSS LIFE). Deliverable A6.1, backed up with results from actions A3, C2 and D2, produced the necessary information for updates for SDFs and updated management plans for earlier established Natura 2000 sites in action A6, and establishment of new Natura 2000 areas (minimum of ca. 200 ha consisting of the most important haul-out and breeding areas) for the Baltic ringed seal in action B1. In combination, these activities improved the conservation status of the species significantly in the Åland area, and results are presented as a summarised assessment of conservation impact.

2. Overview of the progress and results of actions A6 and B1

2.1 Action A6

Inventories for identifying important areas for the Baltic ringed seal in Åland were conducted during 2021-2023, coordinated by TUAS. The inventories were based on previous data on the species from the area and extensive field surveys of the whole Archipelago Sea/Åland distribution area. In Åland province, the focus of the field surveys has been in the northeast and southeastern archipelagos which has been identified important for the species in previous studies. The field surveys were carried out mainly as boat based surveys, but also aerial surveys (2022) and camera trapping were utilised. Survey methods are described in more detail in project deliverable A3.2, and **a full report of the results can be found in project deliverable A6.1**, which was published the beginning of 2024. Summary for all the deliverables for action A6 can be found in Table 1.

The results of the survey were available for Åland already in June 2023, and a project assistant was hired to prepare for the management plan and SDF updates (action A6), and proposals for new Natura 2000 sites and management plans for those sites, which were established before this project but had the Baltic ringed seal added as conservation target for the site (B1). The project assistant worked from October 2023 to December 2024, prepared the updates and new site proposals as far

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as possible, and the actions were left for the permanent staff to be finished.

The results of the surveys were used to produce the first **conservation/management plan for the species for the whole Åland area** (deliverable A6.2). The plan was prepared during 2024-25 published for public referral for the period 19.11. – 9.12.2025 by the Åland Government. The final decision for the plan was made 18.3.2026. The delay of the preparation and publication of the plan was because several experts were able to provide feedback before the public referral, and the review of the draft management plan by a working group composed of representatives from interest groups prior to the public consultation process was protracted. Once the consultation had closed, the responses were reviewed and taken into account in the final version of the plan before it was approved. However, the plan is now the official guidance for conservation and management of the Baltic ringed seal in the Åland area.

SDFs for the Åland Natura 2000 sites are prepared and officially submitted to the Finnish Ministry of the environment (MoE) via the ULJAS Natura 2000 management system by the Åland Government, and checked and submitted to the EC by MoE. The whole process typically takes a long time to pass: Åland Government makes their official submit to the Finnish MoE, which submit and update at the end of the year, and the results are verified by the EC the next year. In the case below the whole process took about one year and it was not possible to rectify the situation within the project duration, even though the initial updates were made in time, November 2024.

Based on deliverable A6.1, Baltic ringed seal was added as a conservation objective for three Natura 2000 sites, which had been established before OSS LIFE project (table 2). All the updates were originally submitted in the system by Åland 24.11.2024. However, due to technical issues, only one of the sites passed to the EC database. The passed site SDF update was published by the end of 2025. That was the first point in time when the failure of the update could be detected, and the SDFs for rest two have been reassessed and officially submitted by the Åland Government 26.5.2026. Along with the update, Baltic ringed seal was added to three other Natura 2000 sites, based on observations and work made outside the OSS LIFE project (table 2). Thus, the species has been added to SDF's for six Natura 2000 sites, but the final adoption of the updates by EC is still pending for five of those.

Table 1. Progress of the deliverables planned for OSS LIFE action A6, including reference to the deliverable and the date for submitting to Butler for assessment of project performance.

Deliverable as stated in the GA (responsible beneficiary)	Deliverable ID and title (date)	Submitted to Butler
Conservation/management plan for ringed seal in Åland area (Åland)	A6.2 Förvaltningsplan för österjövikare (1.10.2024, official decision 18.3.2026)	12.12.2025 (the referral version) 22.5.2026 (the final approved version)
Report on updated information on distribution and abundance, including areas suitable for ringed seal conservation in Åland area (TUAS)	A6.1 Identifying suitable areas for new Natura 2000 sites for ringed seal conservation in Åland Archipelago (1.2.2024)	5.2.2024
Update of the SDFs of the sites (Åland)	Deliverable A6.3: Updates of the SDFs in Åland (28.5.2026)	28.5.2026

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Table 2. Updated existing SAC sites where the Baltic ringed seal has been added. The column “EC status” refers to official adoption of the update by EC, as checked from the Natura 2000 viewer 20.5.2026.

* The SDF update has been prepared outside the project and is located outside the project core area.

Name of MPA	Area ha	Date when ringed seal was added	EC status
Blåskären-Salungarna-Stora Bredgrundet (FI1400012)	274,9	24.11.2024	OK
Vikarskären (FI1400067)	1718,86	26.5.2026	Pending
Långskär-Sandskär (FI1400010)	355,8	26.5.2026	Pending
Björkör (FI1400006)*	6776	26.5.2026	Pending
Skålklobben (FI1400028)*	206,58	26.5.2026	Pending
Rannö (FI1400064)*	419,83	26.5.2026	Pending

2.2 Action B1

The goal for action B1, as stated in the GA, was that key areas of ringed seals suitable for Natura 2000 sites, identified in action A6, will be **officially proposed as special areas of conservation (SAC) by the Government of Åland during the project**. A budget of 122 500€ was reserved for land purchase or compensation for private land owners for permanent conservation of the sites. In addition, all the existing Natura 2000 sites where the Baltic ringed seal was added as a conservation objective were to be re-evaluated on the basis of the project results, and the objectives for ringed seal conservation updated to the management plans of these sites. progress of the planned deliverables is summarised in table 3.

Based on the results of the inventories by TUAS (deliverable A6.1) and preparation made during 2023-25, altogether three new Natura 2000 sites with the Baltic ringed seal as a conservation objective have been established by OSS LIFE project (table 4). The sites Storskär-Kalhära 318-405-1-45 (FI1400102, 2078,84 ha) and Hemminghårsfjärden (the water area) (FI1400103, 811,22 ha) were established in November 2024. Land purchase or compensation was not needed, as the sites were already owned by the Åland Government. The sites are adopted by EC and visible in the Natura 2000 viewer (20.5.2026). The original designation of Hemminghårsfjärden included only the water area, and the site was complemented with island and skerries purchased for the Åland Government in May 2025 to be added to the Natura 2000 site as an expansion on 7 ha in total (figure 1 and table 6). The islands and skerries are important especially as moulting and haulout habitats in the area. Furthermore, an area of 165 ha comprising islands and water area was purchased for the Åland Government in December 2025 (figure 2 and table 7) and designated as a new Natura 2000 site Själtroskär (FI1400109, 165 ha) by the Åland Government 26.5.2026.

As stated in the GA, the budget included an estimated €122,500 for compensating private landowners for approximately 200 hectares. The implementation remained well within budget: compensation for 172 hectares amounted to €106,000. The remaining areas established as new Natura 2000 sites (2,890 hectares) are owned by the Government of Åland, and therefore no financial compensation was required.

As a result, three new Natura 2000 sites have been established for protection of the Baltic ringed seal in Åland. The site designation for the purchase of the parcels (expansion of

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Hemminghårsfjärden and the proposed new site Själtroskär) is still pending in the EC system, but since the Government of Åland has decided to propose these areas as SCI sites in view of the Baltic Sea bay, they are already covered by Sections 21 and 22 of the Nature Conservation Act (1998:82) for Åland. Therefore, they are, in accordance with Sections 24a and 24 of the Nature Conservation Act, subject for the Natura assessment for all plans and projects that might affect the areas. Thus, proposals for the new Natura 2000 sites can be assessed to be completed, as the new Natura 2000 sites have been *de facto* approved by the Åland Government. The total area of these new Natura 2000 sites is 3062 ha.

All the previously established Natura 2000 sites, where Baltic ringed seal was added as a conservation objective, have new approved management plans considering the conservation of the species (table 5). Furthermore, also two of the three new sites also have management plans, and process for management plan for the sixth site is already in progress. Management plans for the three existing sites are provided as a deliverable B1.1, as stated in the GA.

Table 3. Progress of the deliverables planned for OSS LIFE action B1, including reference to the deliverable and the date for submitting to Butler for assessment of project performance.

Deliverable as stated in the GA (responsible beneficiary)	Deliverable ID and title (date)	Submitted to Butler
Proposal for new Natura 2000 areas to EC	Deliverable B1.2: Update of the Natura 2000 network in Åland (28.5.2026, this document)	28.5.2026
Updated management plans of existing areas	B1.1 Updated management plans of existing areas (9.12.2025)	12.12.2025 22.5.2026 resubmitted with the final management plans

Table 4. Established new Natura 2000 sites in the Åland area with Baltic ringed seal as conservation objective. The column “EC status” refers to official adoption of the proposals by EC, as checked from the Natura 2000 viewer 20.5.2026.

Site name (ID)	Area ha	Date when proposed as SCI	EC status
Storskär-Kalhära 318-405-1-45 (FI1400102)	2078,84	2024-11-24	OK
Hemminghårsfjärden (the water area) (FI1400103)	811,22	2024-11-24	OK
Hemminghårsfjärden (islands purchased 2025) (FI1400103)	7	2026-03-18	Pending
Själtroskär (purchased 2025) (FI1400109)	165	2026-03-18	Pending

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Table 5. Natura 2000 sites in the Åland area with a new management plan for the Baltic ringed seal compiled in the OSS LIFE project. The sites included in the deliverable are bolded.

Site name (ID)	Area ha	Date of approval by Åland government
Blåskären-Salungarna-Stora Bredgrundet (FI1400012)	274,9	11.5.2026
Vikarskären (FI1400067)	1718,86	11.5.2026
Långskär-Sandskär (FI1400010)	355,8	11.5.2026
Storskär-Kalhära 318-405-1-45 (FI1400102)	2078,84	11.5.2026
Hemminghårsfjärden (FI1400103)	818	11.5.2026

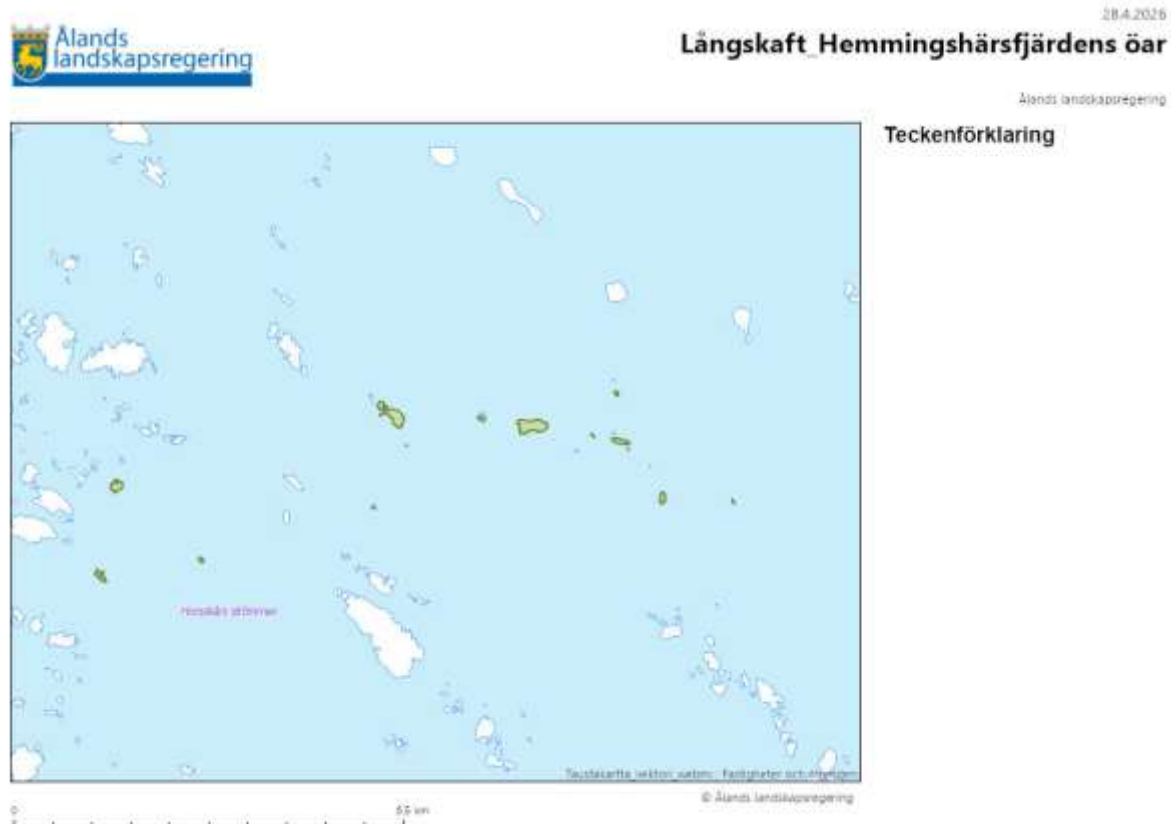


Figure 1. Map of the land areas purchased to be added to the Natura 2000 site Hemminghårsfjärden FI1400103 as an extension.

Table 6. Data for the land areas purchased to be added to the Natura 2000 site Hemminghårsfjärden FI1400103 as an extension.

Name	A part of a parcel named “Långskaft,” that after the land division is a part of
Property ID	Hemminghårsfjärden FI1400103 with a new property ID 318-407-8-16
Date of purchase	2025-05-06
Size	7 ha of islands of skerries
Amount €	50 000 euro
Background and justification for the purchase	A property that, upon division, was incorporated into Hemminghårsfjärden and added to the area because these islands and skerries that are important for the Baltic Ringed Seal hauling and moulting.
Decisions made to designate the area as a protected area	Included as an expansion of the Hemminghårsfjärden FI1400103 Natura 2000 site 2026-03-18, due to the Baltic Ringed Seal. The site is bought for nature conservation purpose and because of the proposal to a SCI, it is already included in Natura assessment according 24a and 24b§ Nature Conservation Act (1998:82) for Åland.

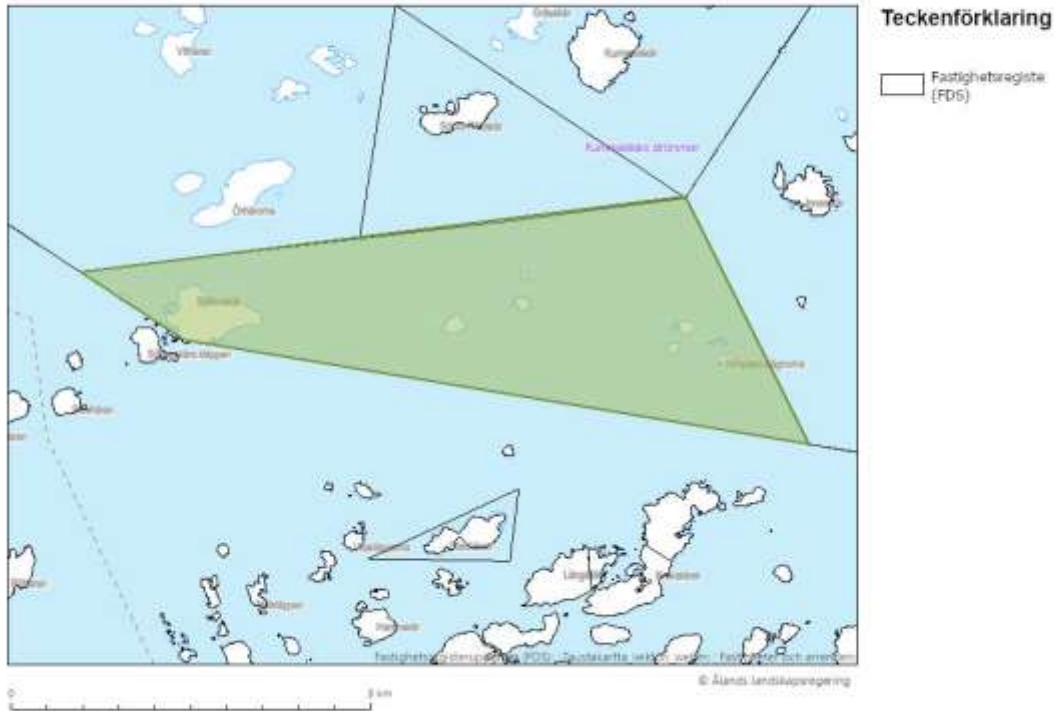


Figure 2. Map of the area purchased to be established as Natura 2000 site FII400109 Själtroskär.

Table 7. Data for the area purchased to be established as Natura 2000 site FI1400109 Själtroskär.

Name	Själtroskär (yet undivided part of Södra Näsudden)
Property ID	318-407-8-10-M601
Date of purchase	2025-12-17
Size	165 ha
Amount €	56 000
Background and justification for the purchase	An marine area with islands and skerries within the area that is pointed out as important for the Baltic Ringed Seal population in Archipelago Sea,
Decisions made to designate the area as a protected area	Approved as a Natura 2000-site FI1400109 Själtroskär by a decision of the Government of Åland 2026-03-18. The site is bought for nature conservation purpose and because of the proposal to a SCI, it is already included in Natura assessment according 24a and 24b§ Nature Conservation Act (1998:82) for Åland.

3. Summarised assessment of conservation impacts

As a result of activities implemented in OSS LIFE actions A6 and B1, altogether 3 new Natura 2000 sites (total area 3062 ha) have been established for conservation of the Baltic ringed seal in the Åland area, and the species has been added as a conservation objective to 3 more Natura 2000 sites within the project. The sites established for the species are located within the identified important moulting area, and presumably also support breeding of the species (figures 3-5). Five of the six sites mentioned above have approved management plans, and a conservation plan for the species in the whole Åland area covers the needs outside the established Natura 2000 sites. In addition, Baltic ringed seal was added to three other Natura 2000 sites, based on observations and work made outside the OSS LIFE project. Management for those sites will be updated in the future.

Even though the site adoption process by EC is still pending for most of the updated/established sites, the results are secured by approved decisions by the Åland Government and conservation targets for the Baltic ringed seal can be considered to be well met within the current Natura 2000 site network for the Åland area. The pending processes will be dealt within the next year as After LIFE implementation, as only the EC adoption of the sites is still pending. The published SDF is attached to deliverable A6.3, along with a letter from the Åland Government to the MoE describing the content of the latest update. The complete content of the Natura 2000 network after the submitted updates can be viewed in Annex 13 to the Final Report.

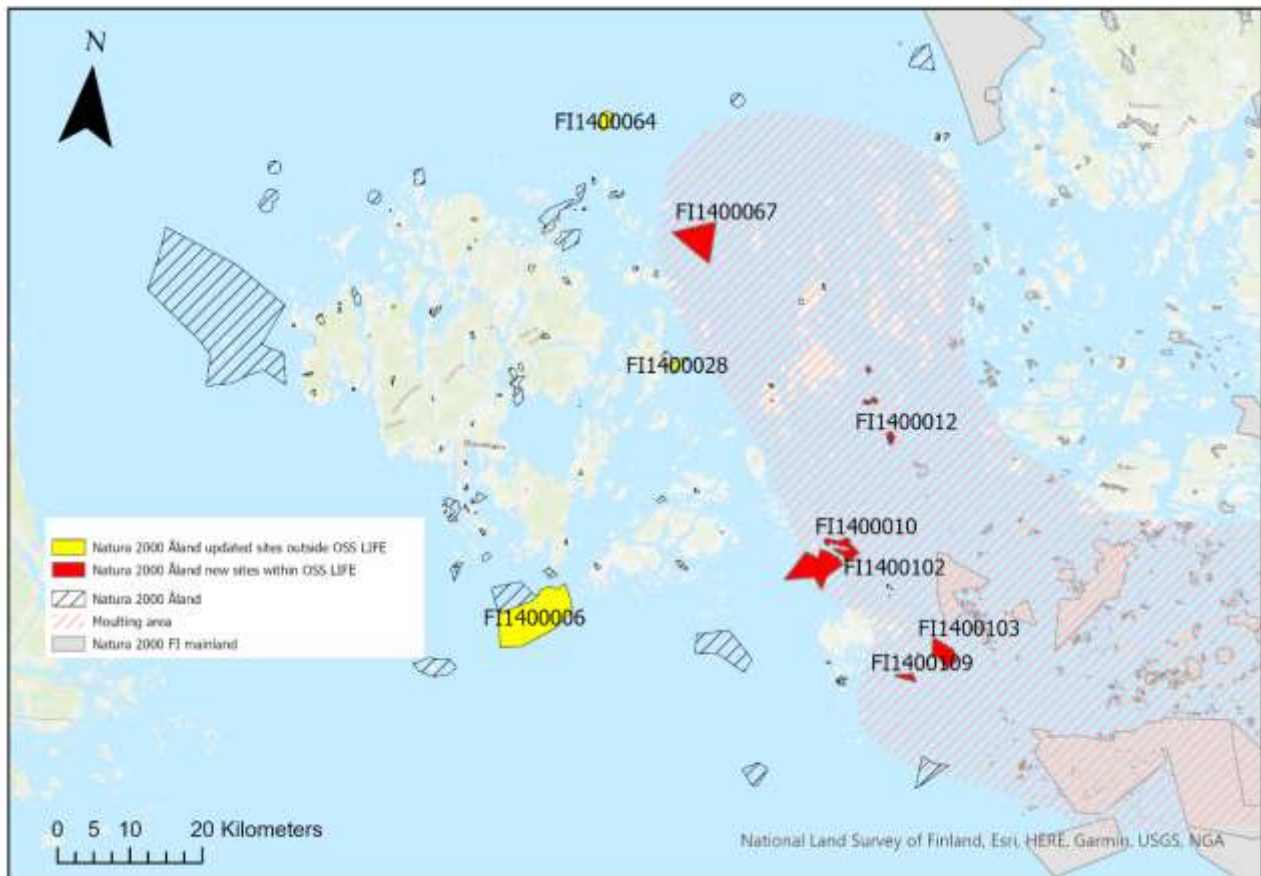


Figure 3. Map of the Natura 2000 sites with Baltic ringed seal as conservation objective after actions taken by the Åland Government in OSS LIFE project. For figures 4-5 the Natura 2000 network is shown with different symbols for Åland and the Finnish mainland, the sites of interest are highlighted in red, and the moult area of the Balric ringed seal identified by TUAS is shown in the background. Figure 3 also includes three sites with Baltic ringed seal added as a conservation objective outside the project (yellow).



Figure 3. Map of the new Natura 2000 sites with Baltic ringed seal as conservation objective, approved by Åland Government in OSS LIFE project.

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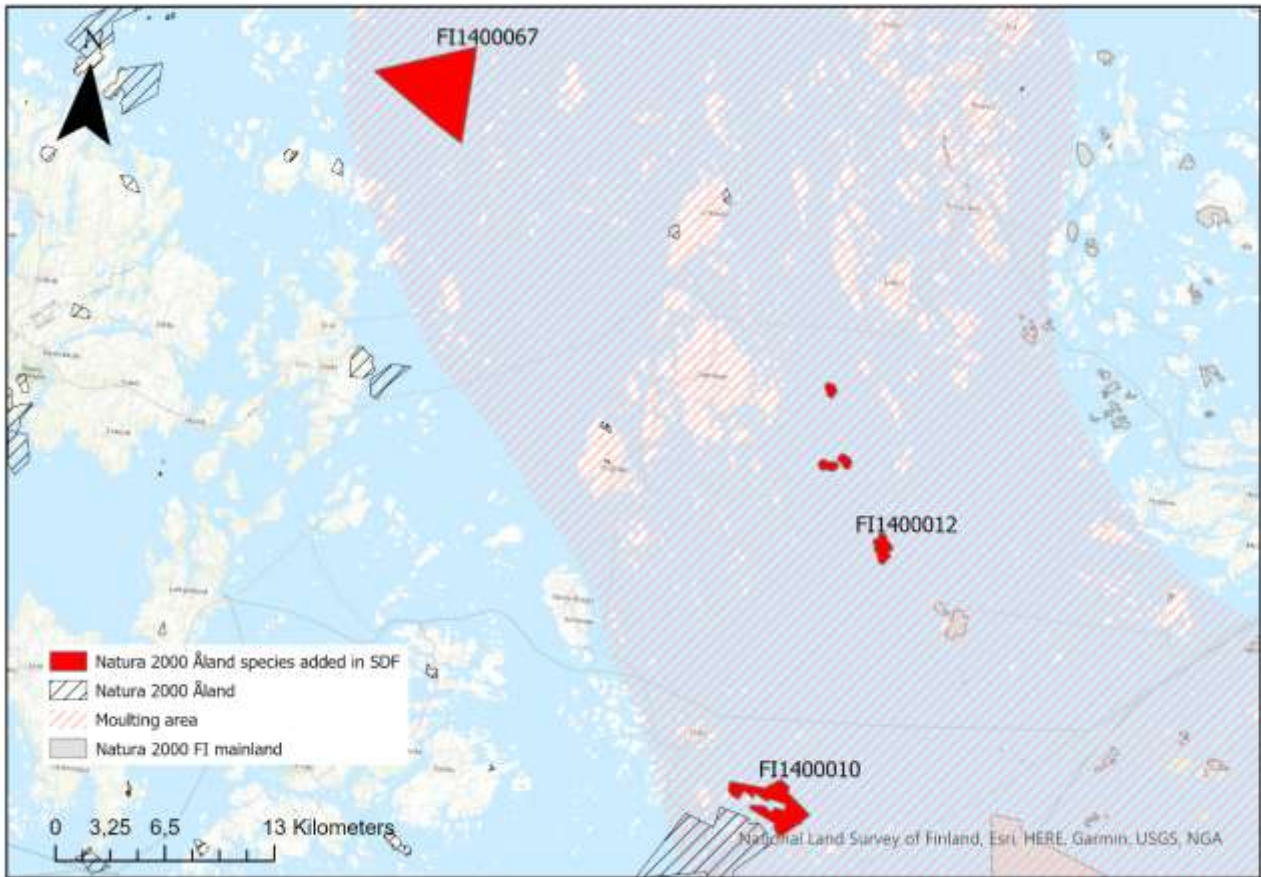


Figure 3. Map of the Natura 2000 sites where Baltic ringed seal has been added as conservation objective, approved by Åland Government in OSS LIFE project.