

Bass Management Group (BMG) Meeting

2 Marsham Street, London

Friday 8 November 2024 - (10.30 am – 2pm)

Attendees: Martin Underwood (**Defra Chair**), Phil McBryde, Grant Horsburgh, Peter Elliott (**Defra**), Chris Collins (**Marine Management Organisation**), Rob Pearson (**Sussex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority**), Richard Stride (**South Coast Fisherman’s Council**), Martin Peverly (**Natural England**), Chloe Rogers (**UK Association of Fish Producer Organisations**), Mike Cohen (**National Federation of Fisherman’s Organisations**), Nathan Wyer (**Welsh Government**), Jean Duggan (**Royal Society for the Protection of Birds**), David Curtis (**Bass Angling Conservation**), Hannah Rudd (**Angling Trust**), Stephen Pitts (**Bass Anglers’ Sportfishing Society**)

Online: Kieran Hyder (**Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science**), Andrew Pascoe (**Cornish Fish Producers Organisation**), Rob Thompson (**Professional Boatman’s Association**), Simon Toms (**Environment Agency**).

Apologies: Neil Witney (**Commercial Fisherman**).

Agenda:

1. Defra welcome and housekeeping
2. Round table, introductions and ambitions for the group, Terms or Reference
3. Defra update on Bass Fisheries Management Plan (FMP) and measures
4. UK-EU Specialised Committee on Fisheries and annual negotiations update
5. Next meeting
6. AOB

Notes and Actions

1. Defra welcome and housekeeping

The Chair welcomed members to the meeting. Stating the purpose of the group is to bring bass stakeholders together for future working, and to promote collaborative, integrated management of bass stocks in order to support delivery of the commitments set out in the Bass Fisheries Management Plan (FMP).

2. Round table, introductions and ambitions for the group, Terms or Reference

The Chair prompted a roundtable of member’s introductions and any aspirations they held for the group. Common themes included: economic, social and ecological sustainability of bass stock, reducing bycatch, protection of sensitive species, maximising benefits for coastal communities and co-designed management that works for all sectors.

The Terms of Reference (ToR) were introduced for the Bass Management Group and set out that attendance at this group was based on their expertise, wide networks and have previously been actively responsive with Defra in the Fisheries Management Plans process. Emphasis made that this is a collaborative group and not simply Defra led.

Comments on Terms of Reference:

- Sharing of information: It was agreed that transparency is important, and the agenda and minutes of the meetings should be shared through members networks and Defra will make them publicly available, likely through the Fisheries Management Blog. The group will need to maintain discretion over disclosing any information that still requires a collective group position or Ministerial decisions to avoid any misinformation.
- Declarations regarding conflicts of interest were required from the group initially and group members would be asked to update the group on any changes in circumstances at the beginning of each meeting.
- It was noted the Bass Management Group needs to be kept small and well balanced, so Defra aren't considering adding any additional members at this stage.
- It was suggested it might be helpful for other representatives outside of the membership of this group to join specific task and finish groups where their expertise would be valuable for example to cover the wider supply chain.

3. Defra update on Bass Fisheries Management Plans and measures

There was a presentation covering the Bass Fisheries Management Plan and measures that are currently underway by Defra. **Action - slides from this presentation - attached.**

There was a presentation on the Bass Fisheries Management Plan evidence gaps. **Action - slides from this presentation - attached.**

Group comments:

- Concern surrounding bycatch of sensitive species including salmonoids, especially in relation to shore-based netting.
- Cefas has carried out historical socio-economic research on angling in general. In relation to bass, they have carried out resilience in coastal communities and compliance research. Economic impact is measure in terms of GVA.
- Currently 2000 people complete the Sea Angling Diary each year, which is a platform for recreational anglers to record their catches on. Would like to see this data set increase. Cefas currently holding catch survey with recreational anglers for shore-based angling that will help to identify further gaps in data.
- There was a proposal that the Cefas review of BNAs did not appear to have been followed through on and that this was a missed opportunity – **Action - Cefas to respond to this statement.**
- During the discussion on 'quick wins' it was proposed that the MCRS could be increased to 45cms with little opposition from stakeholders, who although initially being sceptical, could now see the benefits that increasing the MCRS from 36cm to 42cm had brought to the stock recovery.
- During discussion it was expressed by the group that there was ambition to proceed with delivery at a timely pace, but members also expressed the need for caution of moving too quickly.

- There is a large European project which recently reported on bycatch in inshore coastal gillnets, which could be circulated to the group. – **Action - EA (Simon Toms) to provide this report to the Group.**

Cefas described the ICES bass benchmarking process due to conclude this year to the group.

Discussion for task and finish groups.

The draft one-page task and finish documents tabled for this meeting by Defra set out specific short-term measures identified in the FMP for delivery by the Bass Management Group. The short-term measures were brigaded into five themes: i) authorisation review, ii) evidence review, iii) closed season review, iv) gear and developments to reduce bycatch and discards, and v) netting review.

There was considerable discussion on which issues should be prioritised by the Group and Bass Angling Conservation proposed this should be done by reference to: 1) what is the expected benefit (to stock size or socio-economic benefits); and 2) how easy it is to decide on, gather evidence for, and implement a particular action.

The process for decision-making in the Bass Management Group, and task and finish groups, will be that if agreement on making recommendations on measures or from reviews can't be reached then Defra (and ministers where appropriate) will have the final say.

The group expressed support for the task and finish group approach, with a consensus that groups need to be small, agile, and have proactive members who will communicate and collaborate with each other as well as be able to make recommendations. This will include the inclusion of subject-matter experts from outside of the Bass Management Group.

There is acceptance amongst the group that this will be a lengthy process, and not to set unrealistic timelines. Setting realistic goals, sequencing and prioritising work is important for delivery.

Priority for gear development and netting review groups to be established, as intertidal/shore based netting review is already being conducted by Defra.

Increasing the MCRS to 45cm

It was suggested that the economic impact of a 3cm increase in the MCRS would be low and that this could be a "quick win". Anecdotally, a lot of 37cm to 43cm bass are currently being released (the implication being that these bass would benefit from further protection. It was noted that an increase in the MCRS would need to be accompanied by an appropriate increase in netting mesh sizes, to avoid killing undersized bass in nets. A member advised the cost of changing nets to a larger mesh size was low.

Authorisations

- Collective agreement that the ICES benchmarking exercise would be preferable before progress can be made. Cefas confirmed that the benchmarking exercise outcomes won't be fully known until June 2025.
- MMO have agreed to chair the authorisations review task-and-finish group.
- MMO will progress group at earliest opportunity to establish pace of delivery.

Evidence

- Evidence will underpin every group and every decision. Therefore, it's important that the evidence group start work asap in support of other groups - sequencing is key to planning.

Question was asked as to what the evidence baseline is. This will be established at the first evidence task and finish group meeting.

- Cefas have agreed to chair the Evidence group.

Closed Season

- Cefas noted that spawning progresses from the bottom of France to the Southwest of England and then to the rest of the country.
- The key question raised was what do we want the closed season to do? Should it protect bass during spawning, or should it prevent the targeting or catching of bass when they are shoaling and migrating to and from spawning areas?

Compliance

- Need to focus on Goal 4 (ensuring full compliance with bass regulations) suggested as being a priority.
 - i. The sectors need to follow and comply with the regulations,
 - ii. IFCA and Marine Management Organisation to set out what they do, how they are joined up and improved action on how enforcement activity is publicised.
 - iii. Government and sector to collaboratively improve sign posting and communications around what's a.) best practice, and b.) new guidance out of this process.
- Ensure full compliance with current regulations – need more effective enforcement (Compliance) which is facilitated by clearer guidance and signposting.
- Better signposting needed for recreational fishers as well - Cefas confirmed that they are currently carrying out research in order to better understand recreational angler's compliance.

Actions:

- Defra to bring figures on landings from nets and hook and line gears in previous years to next meeting to provide accurate view of fishery to the Bass Management Group.
- Defra to review the Bass Fisheries Management Plan priority goals with consideration to the formation of task-and-finish groups and sequencing of future work and bring findings to the next BMG meeting.
- Bass Management Group members to consider groups they should be part of and any external experts they may wish to propose are included.
- Add Marine Management Organisation enforcement colleague to the Bass Management Group to provide insight into compliance and enforcement.

4. UK-EU Specialised Committee on Fisheries and annual negotiations update

Defra provided an update on the UK-EU annual negotiations meetings on a number of quota and non-quota stocks that had taken place that week and were continuing through November and December. Advised that current ICES headline advice for bass allows an increase of up to 7.7% in removals for 2025, but that recruitment is still a concern.

A member noted that the bass stock was still at an unsafe level and following the ICES headline advice was expected to shrink the stock by 7.2% in 2025 at a time when we should be seeking to

at least keep the stock at the same level or increase the stock. Cefas explained that when they run Defra through the ICES advice, they go through all the catch scenarios in the ICES advice, not just the headline advice.

On the UK-EU Specialised Committee for Fisheries (SCF), improving the bass ICES allocation tool is currently one of about nine joint UK/EU work requests ICES is fielding. Due to workloads and resourcing the bass benchmarking process will need to be finished before progressing with the allocation tool. Discussions will also be carried out on shore-based netting.

5. Any other business

No comments.

6. Next meeting

- Next Bass Management Group meeting will occur in February 2025. Defra to organise next meeting date and send out minutes and presentations from this meeting to group members.
- Defra to update group on the approach to task and finish groups before next meeting.