



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

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Wales Sea Bass Advisory Group meeting: 16 April 2024

Notes of the meeting held on 16 April 2024.

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Attendees

Group

Simon Frobisher (SF)

Colin Charman (CC)

Hannah Rudd (HR)

Peter Elliott (PE)

Mark Boulton (MBn)

Jim Evans (JE)

Richard Harrison (RH)

Brett Garner (BG)

Holly Kaiser (HK)

Andrew Davies (AD)

Kieran Hyder (KH)

Sion Williams (SW)

John O'Connor (JOC)

Welsh Government

Julian Bray (Chair) (JB)

Michelle Billing (MB)

Alun Mortimer (AM)

Tim Croucher (TC)

Matt Sayer (MS).

Apologies

Kevin Denman (KD)

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Richard Strudwick (RS)
David Curtis (DC)

Notes

Welcome and introductions, purpose of meeting

Julian Bray welcomed everyone to the third meeting of the group and introduced members attending for the first time. Thanks for constructive input in between meetings also.

A webpage for the group is now live and minutes will be uploaded in due course.

Following a short discussion, the agenda has been tweaked. KH's presentation will focus on ICES assessments of bass stocks and he will take questions throughout rather than separately.

Further meetings will be arranged to consider the socio-economic evidence and other scientific evidence before moving on to other topics.

Review and sign-off the actions note and overview

Michelle Billing reviewed the actions:

- in the meeting on 27 February KD offered to approach a shore-netter who may be interested in joining the group. Officials have not been approached by any shore based net fishers to date. MB will follow up with KD
- secretariat has not sent IM's sea bass presentation slides yet because it was agreed that there is further to discuss on the topic. IM will lead another

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discussion at a future meeting so will send all paperwork together. Carry over action

- the sea bass FMP Overview paper was accepted by all present

The notes from 27 February were accepted as true record and no issues were raised.

Presentation – ICES assessment and socio-economic data Including Q&A and discussion

Kieran Hyder (KH) is principal fisheries scientist at the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS). KH delivered a presentation and answered questions on how ICES gather and use evidence for the sea bass stock assessment.

Slides from the presentation have been shared with the group.

The following points summarise the presentation and discussion:

- ICES is an organisation based in Denmark which brings together groups of independent experts into marine science networks. Representatives from approximately 60 different countries contribute towards evidence, analysis and advice
- ICES run an annual advice cycle including a data call and analysis using an assessment model. Periodically the model used in the advice cycle is reviewed and updated in a process called benchmarking. The sea bass assessment model is undergoing benchmarking now. It started in November 2022 and is expected to be completed in time for 2026 catch advice (around June 2025)
- every stock assessment is different. There are different types of advice and assessment but most give assessment of spawning stock biomass, exploitation rate and reference points. Uncertainty increases where there is

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less information available for the assessment

- seabass assessment includes several types of data including biological data (such as age, maturity, growth) as well as landings data, recreational catch and survey data. Each data set has its own idiosyncrasies. Commercial catch data in the model comprises 6 fleets: UK Otter Trawl, Lines, UK Mid-Water Trawl, French, Recreational, Other. Likely the French fleet will be broken up as part of benchmarking
- where there are disagreements about the assessment or advice, a consensus is usually possible by reviewing the data and through rational argument but there can be a vote carried by majority
- benchmarking can be triggered in several ways including by requests from coastal states, such as the UK or the EU. Sometimes this occurs because issues with the existing model become apparent which need to be addressed. The existing model is used until the benchmarking process is complete and a new model is agreed. It is hoped that a new model for sea bass will be in place for 2026 advice. In the case of sea bass, the list of issues, which includes commercial landings and discards data and recreational data needed to increase confidence in the annual assessments, modelling discards, adult survey index, recruitment index and mixing between stocks, has grown to the extent that they need addressing in a revised model
- it was noted that sea bass catch advice has fluctuated a lot recently. The example of pollock was used - from 9000tn last year to zero catch this year and the question of confidence in the data was raised. KH explained that he is confident in the data. The Northern sea bass stock covers a large area (ICES areas IVb, IVc, VIIa, VIId, VIIe, VIIf, VIIg, VIIh). The fluctuations in advice might not be the same across the whole area and how the advice is implemented by fisheries management makes a difference
- despite ICES being funded by governments, there is no pressure to produce particular results. It would be difficult to influence the process due to the number of different countries and different data sets involved. Assessments and advice are peer reviewed by independent experts as well

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- ICES assessed four distinct sea bass stocks: West of Scotland and Ireland, Northern, (which includes Celtic and Irish Seas), Biscay, and Iberian. Biscay and Northern currently use similar assessments because they were developed with the same benchmark
- in response to a question on the impacts of climate change and pollution on stocks, KH advised that all ICES advice is supposed to be 'climate smart'. It does appear that sea temperature affects sea bass stocks. For example, two consecutive cold years and particular prevailing wind direction can affect recruitment
- it was noted that bass stocks in the Welsh zone had been observed to respond to changes in weather patterns. One member suggested the seasons were not so defined and this was affecting the pattern of the stock, and that it appears warmer seas were resulting in more bass but further from shore as well as stock movements changing. It was also suggested that more localised and regional data was needed to be able to manage stocks effectively
- there was a recent workshop on including fisher observations in modelling in October. HR shared the **ICES website** (<https://www.ices.dk/community/groups/Pages/WKAFPA.aspx>) and **report** (https://ices-library.figshare.com/articles/report/Workshop_on_accounting_for_fishers_and_other_stakeholders_perceptions_of_the_dynamics_of_fish_stocks_in_ICES_advice_WKAFPA_/24866088)
- sea bass abundance also affects the numbers of prey species. As well as species distribution models there are food web models and ecosystem models. Because bass is a non-quota stock, it does not tend to be included in the mixed fishery advice but that may change
- data on recreational fishing suggests it comprises approximately 27% of the sea bass fishing mortality. This is based on survey data from England, France, Belgium and the Netherlands from 2012 and since. Although recording and reporting requirements are stronger for commercial fishing, the assessment model shouldn't be skewed because figures are corrected for illegal recreational fishing observed
- recreational fishers can record catch in the Sea Angling Diary (discussed in

previous meeting). Enforcement is difficult. Legislation could be clearer to make fishing easier to enforce but ultimately need to foster culture of compliance. Catch and release rate is estimated to be 90-95% which has improved even since 2016 when the Sea Angling Diary started to build timeseries

- recent history of sea bass stock is that there was limited evidence until stocks experienced pressure in the 2010s. Prior to 2015 sea bass was not subject to the EU data control framework or other elements of the common fisheries policy. ICES were asked to assess in 2012. Last benchmarking exercise was in 2018. It is not clear why recruitment has not improved recently following catch advice being set below MSY. It will be important to continue monitoring and improve the timeseries of the data. **ICES website** (https://ices-library.figshare.com/articles/report/Sea_bass_Dicentrarchus_labrax_in_divisions_4_b_c_7_a_and_7_d_h_central_and_southern_North_Sea_Irish_Sea_English_Channel_Bristol_Channel_and_Celtic_Sea_/21840747?backTo=/collections/ICES_Advice_2023/6398177) has the graphs and reference point info available to public
- it would be good to include environmental signals to account for warm or cold years in the assessment but it might not be possible. KH advised that impact of environmental markers could be reflected in the ICES discussions and even if it isn't possible to formally incorporate into the new model, it might be possible to consider the potential impacts when undertaking the assessment
- it is likely that the lower catch is contributing to the recovery of the stock. Anecdotally shoals of bigger sea bass have been observed
- more localised data and advice for the Welsh zone was raised as desirable
- two approaches are being considered for the model in benchmarking. A single model with 3 stock areas, Celtic and Irish Seas, Northern and Biscay with mixing between stocks. Alternatively, could have 2 stock areas, Northern (including Celtic and Irish Seas) and Biscay but where catch advice is apportioned to separate areas. Hopefully by this time next year we'll have an improved model

Any other business and close

JB thanked KH for an excellent presentation.

Following a brief discussion it was agreed that the next meeting will focus on socio-economic data and more scientific data before moving on to other topics.

Meeting closed.

Actions

No specific actions were recorded other than to arrange a further meeting to focus on evidence.

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