



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

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Wales Sea Bass Advisory Group meeting: 17 September 2024

Notes of the meeting held on 17 September 2024.

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Attendees

Group

Kevin Denman (KD)
Sion Williams (SW)
Chris Davies (CD)
Jim Evans (JE)
Brett Garner (BG)
Felix Ameye (FA)
Teddy Whittalls (TW)
David Curtis (DC)
Simon Frobisher (SF)
Richard Strudwick (RS)
John O'Connor (JOC)
Andy Davies (AD)
Hannah Rudd (HR)
Alex Scorey (AS)
Ian McCarthy (IM)
Kieran Hyder (KH)

Welsh Government

Michelle Billing (MB)
Julian Bray (JB)
Barrie John (BJ)
Matthew Sayer (MS)
Seb Evans (SE)
Nathan Wyer (NW)

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Apologies

Colin Charman
Holly Kaiser

Notes

Welcome and introductions, purpose of meeting

Julian Bray welcomed everyone to the fifth meeting of the group and introduced members attending for the first time – Chris Davies (representing shore-based netters) and Nathan Wyer (Fisheries Policy Manager, Welsh Government).

Review and sign-off the actions note

Michelle Billing apologised for the delay in sending out the notes from meetings 3 and 4 and confirmed that they will be sent with the notes from this meeting.

It was confirmed that the actions from the previous meeting have been addressed and that the terms of reference have been updated, although these have not yet been published on the website.

Action 1: Circulate notes of meetings 3 and 4 with meeting 5 note before the next meeting.

Action 2: Publish updated Terms of Reference on WG website.

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Overview note

MB raised the matter of agreeing and signing off for publishing the FMP overview note which had been circulated in January.

A concern had been received that the note reflected the bass FMP, but the FMP doesn't reflect stakeholder feedback, particularly that the action to consider alternative harvest strategies was misclassified in the bass FMP as a mid to long-term priority. The argument was made that MSY shouldn't be used and to allow the bass stocks to rebuild a long-term strategy is needed.

MB explained the Fisheries Act 2020 requires us to maintain fishing at MSY. The short-term action in the FMP is to continue allocating catch in accordance with the current ICES advice while we consider how to fill the evidence gaps required for improved stock assessment.

In discussion the following points were raised:

- it's a precautionary requirement to maintain stock to deliver MSY and it should be possible to aim for a more ambitious stock under the current rules without issue
- there has been no suggestion so far as to how benchmarking will help maximise harvest strategy. From a scientific stance, it is not possible to fill gaps if you don't know what gaps need filling
- benchmarking is a management decision and what is generated at the benchmark will be a catch limit/TAC that will satisfy the ICES MSY approach. Considering alternate harvest strategies is not part of that decision

KH has written a note for Defra highlighting the challenges of moving to a large stock strategy for bass. It was suggested that something could be done to better understand the ask and the 'art of the possible' within the legal framework we have.

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A desk-based review with limited resource could look at the constraints on, barriers to and potential for other strategies, for example, a lack of socio-economic data might be a barrier, and this could drive future evidence studies.

A group member proposed the wording in the overview be changed to *considering alternative harvest strategies*.

JB acknowledged there isn't the level of priority around the issue which some members would like to see but reiterated fishing would be maintained at MSY while the short-term action to address the evidence gaps identified in the evidence discussion paper was carried out. With the need to complete this and see the outcomes of the ICES benchmarking exercise consideration of alternative harvest strategies need to be a medium to long term goal.

A member reported they are seeing significant numbers of bass of all sizes and considered this to be a positive picture for the future.

NB: This is anecdotal and no supporting evidence was presented at the meeting.

JB committed to an action to follow up the discussion of a desk-based review with KH.

JB asked if there were any other objections to publishing the overview note.

A member noted in the chat bar that he had some concerns but was happy to proceed at this point.

No further objections were made, and it was agreed to publish the overview paper.

Action 3: Publish Overview paper on WG website.

Action 4: Arrange a meeting with KH to discuss a desk-based study exploring

the constraints, barriers and potential for alternative strategies.

Action 5: Amend 'strategic' to 'alternative' harvest strategies in Overview.

Bass FMP: Evidence priorities in Wales

MB presented the evidence discussion paper. The paper identified potential actions for prioritisation which have come out of previous group discussions.

The paper had been shared ahead of the meeting for members to consider the potential actions and submit their top 5 priorities for discussion at the meeting.

MB emphasised that although there had been a limited response this didn't mean nothing would be done - the paper was intended as a way of getting a feel for views of the group and starting conversations.

Key points from the discussion were:

UK commitment to introduce catch reporting for shore-netting

Query as to when this would be implemented. JB confirmed this was included under the FMP action to review shore-based netting and that a paper would be presented to the group before the next meeting.

A member indicated catch reporting would be welcomed by shore-netters as long as it was user-friendly and ideally electronic. A reporting system could generate recognition for the fishery, demonstrate a track record and feed into science data.

MS explained that catch reporting to the EU was done at UK level, and that better reporting to improve the data was needed from England, Wales and France.

Timing and duration of closed seasons

IM has previously produced a heat map showing where spawning takes place, using 2 years' worth of data from 6 different nurseries and predicts where larvae might have originated from. Mapping suggests it predominantly occurs close inshore north and south.

In south Wales, the model predicts spawning in areas already known for bass spawn. This provides confidence for the north Wales modelling which suggests recruits are coming from the Irish sea rather than Celtic Sea.

Timing and length of spawning season varies from one year to next and where larvae end up depends on factors such as weather patterns. Data suggests spawning areas are separate i.e. north, mid, south Wales.

IM was content that the peak spawning months are April and May, and that sufficient evidence already exists to prove this, however, there would need to be a review of the socio-economic knock-on effect of changing the closed period.

A member confirmed he is working with Bangor University monitoring catches from boat netting activities on bass inshore. A camera is fitted on the net hauler to monitor catch and bycatch remotely, providing data on mesh size, lengths and soak time as well as environmental DNA sampling.

It was also noted that the spawning period might not match the fishery management no-take period and questioned what the aim is as fishery managers and what 'levers' could be pulled, and when to manage the fishery.. It was also pointed out that timing of spawning is not the only factor to consider; the timing of fishing on aggregating fish, which might begin as early as October or November, is also important and it would be useful to review landing data.

JB confirmed that due diligence and a regulatory impact assessment would be

carried out on any potential actions.

Bass nursery areas (BNAs)

The point was made that BNAs are not designed to protect spawning but are to provide protection in areas where most fish are below MCRS.

It was suggested that if numbers are increasing, it stands to reason that these are linked to BNAs as they have now been here for some time.

Socio-economic review

It was suggested by a member that an increase in rod-and-line fishing doesn't necessarily benefit the Welsh economy, as the gear is often sourced online from global suppliers. It was suggested that this be reflected in a socio-economic review.

Potential recreational angling actions

A suggestion was made that the 3 actions could be grouped together as they all relate to similar things.

A member reiterated the fact that the group can't control matters outside of the Welsh zone so discussions must be regionally specific apart from cross boundary stock.

Discards

It was suggested Wales doesn't seem to have the same problems as SW England and that discards are a small issue in the Welsh fishery.

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MS stated little is known about discards so the primary aim should be to establish a baseline then build on it. ICES also highlighted discards.

The point was made that the mesh size of the net determines the size of fish caught, allowing small and undersized fish to pass through and bigger fish “bounce off”. A member said that when the MCRS was increased to 42cm discards were 50% -70%. But then fishers moved from a 4.0 inch mesh size to a 4.5 mesh size. Now the average size of bass is 40-45cm, but commercial fishers aren't catching them due to the larger mesh size. Another member said they are seeing lots of small bass but insufficient large and very large bass.

Agreed evidence priorities

The group discussion concluded the evidence priorities should be:

- gather quantitative data on shore-netting activity including bass removals to inform stock modelling and also to understand potential risks to protected species
- conduct a socio-economic review, including the collation and assessment of existing studies and the commissioning of new evidence gathering where required, of the contribution recreational and commercial bass fishing make to the Welsh and local economies
- review Bangor University work on spawning behaviour/timing and recommend if it is sufficient to underpin a legislative change in the closed season. If it is not, commission additional work to ensure it is sufficient
- improve the quality of the analysis of recreational data by increasing the level of participation in the sea angling diaries, explore opportunities to strengthen existing or develop new recreational recording systems and encourage UK and EU partners to support recreational data collection

Shore-based netting review: Introduce review and proposed meeting dates

Julian Bray confirmed the next meeting would focus on shore-based netting in more detail and that a discussion paper will be circulated in advance.

Dates of October 8th and 31st were proposed for the next meeting.

JB emphasised that if members can't attend a meeting, comments in writing are very much welcomed.

Next steps, any other business and close

A group member pointed out that the ICES assessments showed there was only a 3% growth in stock in 2023, and growth was expected to decrease to 0.25% in 2024. The ICES June 2024 advice says that 2020 and 2021 recruitments (i.e. year classes) were higher than the recent average, but this isn't what the Solent pre-recruitment says. The 14% recommended uplift in Total Removals is based on an ICES Advice Rule that ICES WKREBUILD2 says needs amending. The member's opinion was that this raises a red flag over the recommendation in the ICES bass advice.

Another member suggested the lack of catch returns could be due to a decline in commercial fishers. If fisher numbers were the same, then landings would be up.

The member was also frustrated as a commercial fisherman that ICES advice is based on catch returns and one model in the Solent.

Acknowledging it was controversial opinion, it was suggested the MCAs focus

on improving FV safety has had the unintended consequence of putting commercial fisherman out of business, the result being more angling boats than commercial.

KH explained this is a complicated question as the ICES assessment isn't just informed by the Solent survey but also includes landings data. The Solent survey also assumes a degree of error which is accounted for in the model. A variety of different data sets generate the model, which is why it does not match completely. In terms of the rebuilding of stocks, outputs from the workshops haven't come through into ICES advice yet and until this is done, the catch advice will be based on this model.

It was noted that how advice is taken forward is a management decision so discussions must be between Defra and others.

Members were pleased to see investigations with Bangor university into maximum and minimum sizes.

It was also emphasised that the stock does move, so it's important to look at stock structure in other places and link up. Looking from a UK wide perspective then focusing down to Wales could be beneficial.

JB thanked all members for their valued input.

Actions

1. Circulate notes of meetings 3 and 4 with meeting 5 note before the next meeting. MB - ongoing
2. Publish updated Terms of Reference on WG website. MB - completed 18/10/2024.
3. Publish Overview paper on WG website. MB - Update at next meeting.

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4. Arrange a meeting with KH to discuss a desk-based study exploring the constraints, barriers and potential for alternative strategies. NW/MS - completed.
5. Amend 'strategic' to 'alternative' harvest strategies in Overview. MB - completed 17/10/2024.

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