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Welsh Government

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# Wales Sea Bass Advisory Group meeting: 31 October 2024

Notes of the meeting held on 31 October 2024.

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# Attendees

## Group

Kevin Denman (KD)  
Mark Boulton (MB\*)  
Sion Williams (SW)  
Chris Davies (CD)  
Jim Evans (JE)  
Brett Garner (BG)  
Holly Kaiser (HK)  
David Curtis (DC)  
Simon Frobisher (SF)  
Sean Dukes (SD)  
Mark Owen (MO)  
Richard Harrison (RH)  
Alex Scorey (AS)  
Kieran Hyder (KH)  
Peter Elliott (PE)

## Welsh Government

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

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## Apologies

Colin Charman  
Hannah Rudd

## Notes

### Welcome and introductions, purpose of meeting

Julian Bray welcomed everyone to the sixth meeting of the group. He noted that the SBN review is complicated, and that the agenda has been amended to include a separate discussion on options and a preferred way forward.

A member asked if AOB could be addressed at this time: Have discussions been had with KH (Cefas) about carrying out a desk-based review on maximum economic yield (MEY), as agreed in the previous meeting.

JB said this would be covered in the review of the previous actions.

A point was raised that no representatives from the commercial fishing sector were present at the WSBAG meeting on 30/04/24 and, as a result, they were not aware of the recreational sea angling data presented during the meeting and questioned its accuracy.

A member responded explaining that the data from the sea angling diaries had limitations due to being derived from a small number of anglers but was currently the best available.

Another member questioned the recreational angling data, noting that the numbers appeared higher than those for commercial fishing, suggesting that

commercial fishing might not be the primary issue.

## **Review and sign-off the actions note**

MB confirmed the notes and actions from meetings 3, 4 and 5 had been circulated with the agenda and asked if there were any matters arising from these.

The following points were raised:

- the bass FMP overview paper states 'accepted by all present'. This is not accurate, as it was agreed by a majority. It was requested that the document be amended to reflect this
- there was surprise by one member to see the inclusion of anecdotal evidence on south Wales bass stocks. Factual evidence would be preferred
- it was queried if anecdotal evidence can legitimately be included in the notes as they will be published

JB confirmed anecdotal evidence can be recorded as long as it is marked as such.

JB acknowledged a lot of information had been sent out prior to the meeting. The group was given extra time to consider the notes and actions and asked to submit any additional comments in writing within one week.

MB confirmed the updated ToR had been published on the advisory group webpage.

MB confirmed we had completed the action from meeting 5 to meet with KH to discuss the constraints on/barriers to and potential for considering alternative harvest strategies. Unfortunately, KH does not have the capacity at the moment to carry out this work. However, we have agreed to conduct a study in-house

and will have a paper to share with the group in the New Year.

Action 1: Update previous meeting notes and actions to reflect comments.

Action 2: Group to submit additional comments in writing by 7 November.

## **Bass FMP: Shore-based netting review - discuss and agree draft review paper**

JB introduced the presentation on the SBN review.

He acknowledged there was a lot of detail and noted the priorities for the discussion were:

- does it make sense?
- is it accurate as far as we are aware?
- what are your thoughts on the issues and options identified?
- have we missed anything?

JB reiterated that we will be considering all advice received from the group before seeking ministerial advice and further consultation.

Written comments received in advance from KH and CC were acknowledged and members were reminded they could submit further comments in writing by 7 November.

NW briefly ran through a timeline of events to date:

- in the 1<sup>st</sup> WSBAG meeting there was broad agreement in line with FMP to review the practice of SBN
- the last meeting highlighted the evidence gaps
- the intention is to start by reviewing shore-based nets
- a review of shallow inshore netting will be delivered separately

The presentation followed the structure of the draft SBN review paper with a pause at end of each section for comments and questions.

### **Slides 1 to 3**

No comments.

### **Slide 4: What is SBN? (Description taken from SBN review paper)**

The following points were made by group members:

- the phrasing 'a few hundred meters' is inaccurate as there are set lengths for north and south Wales
- some techniques are missing. Techniques not included are drag netting and seine netting
- there are provisions in south Wales to secure the net at regular intervals to a pad buried in the sand which is not mentioned
- the rule of thumb in north Wales is a 50-yard net as there are not the large expanses of sand required to set larger nets
- there was concern around compensation for regauging nets if MCRS was to change. An increase in MCRS could have a significant financial consequence for changing gear
- heritage netting such as stake netting in the Severn area should be considered and noted in the review

A member asked if there was evidence to confirm the text in the review about net selectivity.

KH confirmed there is a Cefas report regarding setting of nets and how the way they are strung can affect selectivity. Pawson also wrote a paper c. 1990 about size selectivity in relation to mesh sizes. KH will find and share relevant studies.

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Two members confirmed they are currently involved in a year 2 study with Bangor university on bycatch and the selectivity of net fishing. Staff are recording everything he catches including net data and fish data. A report will be available in the near future. This is part of a Wales wide study led by Leo Clarke, Liverpool University.

JB asked if this is a SBN or boat study – the member confirmed data on SBN and boat netting was being provided.

Action 3: Clarify other netting techniques and include in review if relevant.

Action 4: KH to share size selectivity studies.

## **Slide 5**

No comments

## **Slide 6: Current SBN Regulations**

A member disagreed with the use of 'inconsistent' to describe the differences between the byelaws in the north and south areas of Wales. Instead the byelaws were designed by regulating bodies to provide solutions to fit specific areas. He was concerned a 'one size fits all' approach may not be the best for stocks throughout Wales and that the differences may in fact be warranted.

JB asked the group to look at Table 1 and compare the differences between north and south Wales and flag anything they feel should be different.

The opinion that having the same rules everywhere unless good evidence showed local variations were needed was also expressed.

A member flagged a BNA review from c. 2021 which may have included

recommendations for nursery areas.

KH confirmed he had been involved in a review of English BNAs in 2017 and published in 2021. The report can be found here:

**Presence of European sea bass (*Dicentrarchus labrax*) and other species in proposed bass nursery areas** ([https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60d34bbbd3bf7f4bd9815009/](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60d34bbbd3bf7f4bd9815009/Presence_of_European_sea_bass__Dicentrarchus_labrax__and_other_species_in_proposed_bass_nursery_areas.pdf)

[Presence\\_of\\_European\\_sea\\_bass\\_\\_Dicentrarchus\\_labrax\\_\\_and\\_other\\_species\\_in\\_proposed\\_bass\\_nursery\\_areas.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60d34bbbd3bf7f4bd9815009/Presence_of_European_sea_bass__Dicentrarchus_labrax__and_other_species_in_proposed_bass_nursery_areas.pdf))

A member noted that changes to the boundary areas could be considered, for example to stop nets at the entrance to BNA where bass had not had a chance to disperse.

Members expressed some concern that SBN activity could take place in a BNA, while others were surprised at the lack of a catch-limit and no-take period for SBN as there is for other metiers.

## **Slide 7: Commercial bass fishing with nets**

On the point of observation and enforcement being challenging a member explained he could only viably fish with SBN in certain areas which would be known to enforcement officers. Arguably therefore the challenges to observation and enforcement could be less of an issue than suggested in the review.

A member said the Catch App does not have the ability to record shore netting.

Another member noted that although the closed season does not currently apply to SBN, he doesn't net during it and believes a SBN closed season would be easy to implement.

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## Slide 8: Recreational bass fishing

The legality of SBN recreationally was queried.

MB confirmed the current regulations allow recreational SBN but no bass can be removed by a recreational net.

A member raised concern that the traditional right to net recreationally on beaches could be overlooked, and the impact this could have on a small group of fishers with no representation. He suggested the advisory group therefore needs to drill down into this before making decisions on other people's rights and asked if the bass FMP is the correct mechanism for reviewing this.

JB confirmed this meeting was the start of the conversation. The advice and views of the advisory group were being sought and no decisions would be made by the group.

JB reiterated any proposals to introduce measures through legislation would need to be subject to public consultation before there were any changes in management. This is Gunning principle 1 – nothing is pre-determined.

Another member felt more data is needed to understand the scale of the activity before allocating appropriate resources i.e. we need to ascertain who's doing what, where and when.

There was a discussion about the size of nets used in SBN and the following points were made:

- shore-based netters often netted alone and had to be able to carry the nets to position on the beach
- the capture area for a seine net is about the size of an Olympic swimming pool
- some netters use 200m but generally 190m ensures a netter is working

within the restrictions. Another member stated he often uses 2 x 100m instead of a single 200m net as it is safer, lighter and easier to clean

- net size will vary depending on conditions on the day
- critical to be there when net is uncovering as seagulls will destroy catch during the day and at night, foxes will take the catch. Therefore, undersize fish can be cleared from the net quickly and in most cases, returned alive
- legislation needs to be conducive and sustainable for industry
- considered to be a highly sustainable fishing method if it is done right and it also yields a high-quality product which affects the price

## **Slide 9: Bycatch**

The response from Natural Resources Wales (NRW) is included in the SBN review paper as annex 1.

NRW cannot be confident of adequate protection outside of restricted areas due to the absence of data.

Whilst appreciative of NRW's assessment, one group member felt that further evidence is first needed to support assumptions in the response. He hoped that research pending in Spring 2025 will answer some of the questions.

## **Slide 10: Issues Identified**

JB asked members of the group if they agreed with the issues identified in the review.

The following points were made during the discussion:

- additional evidence is needed on commercial and recreational SBN activity to be able to address the issues
- introducing a form of reporting would be significant

- MEO coverage does not appear to be adequate across the board
- precautionary principle is enshrined in law
- a HRA would be needed for any change of regulation of the fishery
- voluntary reporting is not ideal but is an improvement on the current position.
- Regional elements need to be considered
- time frames, FMP objectives and priorities should be made clear
- there is a common belief in south Wales that the BNA regulations for netting from boats also applied to SBN and there was no SBN fishing in BNAs in the south
- EU funded project in Norway – Everyfish – looking at electronic reporting and approaches with an REM type methodology. Cefas are involved with REM technology and recreational activity. It includes recreational fishing reporting through app-based approaches with automated image analysis. The IT side is relatively easy, but engagement is more challenging. KH offered to talk more about this system and others
- salmon cannot be taken so there is no reporting method. If there was a reporting method, at least there would be some data to support arguments
- rules need reviewing and the evidence gaps need identifying
- what stands out is the lack of data on this fishery i.e. 50 nets is an estimate. There is no data on socio-economics, and we don't know what the target species are, what people are catching, what times of year they are catching and their interactions with other fishing methods
- potential for conflict with recreational SBN
- these things would be considerably clearer if we had a catch app
- modifying the existing system sounds possible, but adoption is an issue
- the numbers of netters/evidence will dictate the size of the solution

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# **Bass FMP: Shore-based netting review - Discuss options for a preferred way forward**

## **Slide 11: Potential options to resolve issues**

### **Option 1: No change**

It was agreed that this option is unfavourable as it will not address or resolve any of the issues that have been identified to date.

### **Option 2: Introduce voluntary measures**

Option 2 was considered an improvement, although some members felt there would be a reluctance to voluntarily provide data.

Other members felt this could be pursued in the short term as quick way to start getting data.

A member suggested netters might be keen to establish a track record, in case this might be required for a future management regime. It also legitimises the fishery.

Another member suggested that the consensus among commercial fishers was there was a need for user-friendly recording mechanism and there were fishers who would volunteer to take part in a pilot scheme.

### **Option 3: Introduce measures through legislation**

It was broadly agreed that the current byelaws and legislation need tidying up.

A member encouraged the idea of introducing measures through legislation and that enabling adaptive management was key to good management of the fishery.

JB explained the principle of adaptive management based on evidence and scientific advice and, where a fishery had registered permit holders, informal consultations could be held reducing the consultation period from 12 weeks to 2 weeks.

JB asked members whether they thought fishers would respond to a call for evidence as a mechanism for gathering data.

The consensus of the group was that a call for evidence would be a good mechanism for gathering the initial data and were confident fishers would engage with it.

Data gathered through a call for evidence would inform further assessments and aid future management proposals.

### **Next steps, any other business and close**

JB thanked all for their contribution and reiterated that no assumptions were being made about what comes next.

The policy team will work up a draft call for evidence for discussion with the group at the next meeting.

No other business was raised.

# Actions

1. Update previous meeting notes and actions to reflect comments. MB - completed November 2024.
2. Group to submit additional comments in writing by 7 November. All - completed 7 November 2024.
3. Clarify other netting techniques and include in review if relevant. NW - ongoing.
4. KH to share size selectivity studies. KH - ongoing.

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