



Bass fishing opportunities for 2027

Bass Angling Conservation

Executive Summary

- The ICES advice is focused on maximising the total tonnage removed from the bass fishery and is recommending shrinking the bass stock in 2027. Bass fishery managers should instead aim to grow the stock to maximise social and economic benefits for coastal communities.
- In 2025, scientists established that:
 - ICES FMSY is not precautionary¹; and
 - fishing at ICES FMSY, with 2021- 2024 average recruitment, is expected to drive the bass stock below Blim² by 2031³.
- By 2025, fishery managers had almost doubled bass removals since 2019. Further large increases in catch limits and flexibilities were agreed for 2026.
- We advise fishery managers not to increase catch limits and flexibilities from 2026 levels and to wait and see the effects of the large increases for 2026.
- Recreational fishing limits must be non-discriminatory. Increases in commercial fishing opportunities without commensurate increases in recreational fishing opportunities may be discriminatory.
- Do not increase trawler and seiner bycatch limits or flexibilities with the intention of reducing discards – this is not working. Trawler and seiner discards have increased by over 200% since 2022.

¹ “The ICES MSY approach to reference point estimation is not precautionary” – Winker et Al 2025

² Blim is the level below which the reproductive capacity of the stock is seriously impaired. Below this level the stock may not be able to recover even if there is no fishing pressure.

³ “Effets de l’augmentation des plafonds de captures sur les stocks de bar nord et sud” – Ifremer, December 2025.

Introduction

Bass Angling Conservation is a fishing club whose members rely on “Northern Stock” sea bass fishing opportunities.

We want fishery managers to target an abundant and resilient sea bass stock that supports a high-quality fishing experience for recreational fishers and small-scale sustainable commercial fishers and maximises social and economic benefits for coastal communities. This means fishing well below the ICES FMSY and aiming for a stock level well above BMSY⁴. There is no legal requirement to fish at ICES FMSY.

The sea bass stock has recovered from a crash and now the choice now is do we:

- 1) continue building the stock and target an excellent bass fishery; or
- 2) fish at ICES FMSY and push the stock back to a low level, triggering highly restrictive emergency measures once again and throwing the bass fishery into turmoil.

Concerns about the sustainability of the ICES FMSY recommendation

Recent scientific work has raised serious questions about the ICES MSY Approach to estimating reference points (such as FMSY).

- In December 2025, Ifremer estimated that, using 2021 - 2024 average recruitment, fishing at ICES FMSY would cause the spawning stock biomass to fall below Blim by 2031.
- In 2025, Winker et al found that the ICES MSY Approach to estimating reference points (such as FMSY) is not precautionary.

There are many very serious issues with the ICES advice, including:

- ICES’ advice is premised on the assumption that fishing at FMSY will result in a stable biomass outcome in the very long term. But ICES does not check that its modelling produces this outcome. If a stable biomass outcome does not arise, then it is not possible to calculate a valid FMSY.
- ICES FMSY has a time horizon of achieving MSY in 150 to 200 years. But fishers and coastal communities want high stock levels in the short and medium term.
- Fishing at a level “F” can have a wide range of biomass outcomes, but ICES does not communicate this uncertainty effectively or provide a probability distribution for the range of possible biomass outcomes. Fishing at FMSY can result in a biomass outcome that is considerably worse than ICES indicates.

⁴ BMSY is the biomass that is capable of producing Maximum Sustainable Yield

- Fishing at FMSY does not aim to keep the stock above sustainable thresholds (Btrigger and Blim) in the short and medium term. The above-referenced Ifremer paper demonstrates this clearly.

How much sea bass should be harvested in 2027?

Although the stock is estimated to have improved considerably since the crash, it is not yet at historic biomass levels we regard as abundant or sufficiently resilient and recruitment⁵ is forecast to be low.

ICES estimates that maintaining removals at 2026 levels would result in the biomass decreasing by 1%. This suggests bass fishing opportunities for 2027 should be below 2026 levels if fishery managers wish to:

- grow the stock;
- restore the stock structure (i.e. age and size mix in the stock);
- improve stock resilience; and
- deliver more large fish that are more highly valued by recreational fishers and by commercial small-scale hook and line fishers (who receive a higher price per kg for large fish).

Fishery managers should pay close attention to Ifremer paper and aim to set fishing opportunities considerably below ICES FMSY.

We have not yet seen the full results of the large increase in catch limits for 2026. We recommend extreme caution in setting catch limits for 2027, in case the effects of the 2026 increases turn out to be larger than expected.

How should sea bass fishing opportunities be allocated in 2027?

There are two fundamental principles when considering how fishing opportunities are allocated:

1. allocations must take into account the sustainability of the fishing method
2. allocations must be fair.

If fishery managers decide, against our advice, to increase sea bass fishing opportunities for 2027, recreational fishing and commercial hook and liners should receive priority treatment since they are the most sustainable forms of sea bass fishing and deliver the greatest social and economic benefits.

⁵ Fish growing and joining the spawning stock

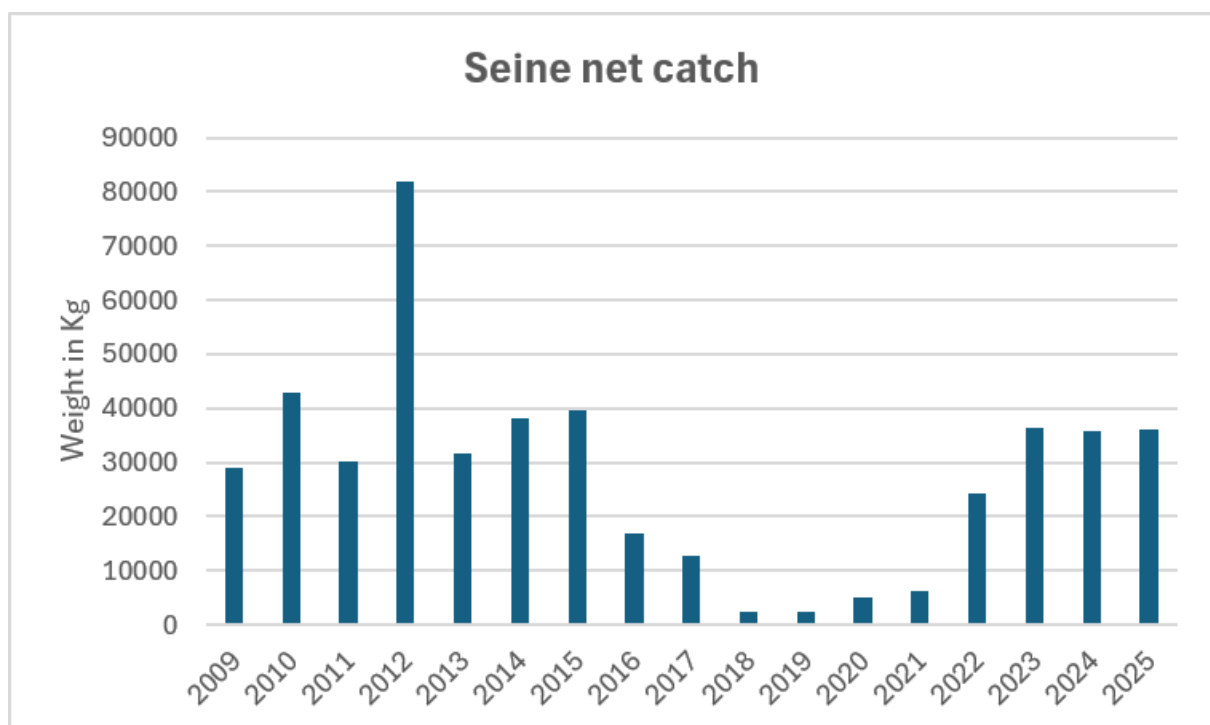
For many years⁶, recreational fishers were discriminated against when fishery managers increased sea bass fishing opportunities for commercial metiers. We remind fishery managers of the Western Waters Multi-Annual Plan requirement that recreational fishing limits should be “non-discriminatory”.

Problems in the sea bass fishery

High Levels of Bycatch

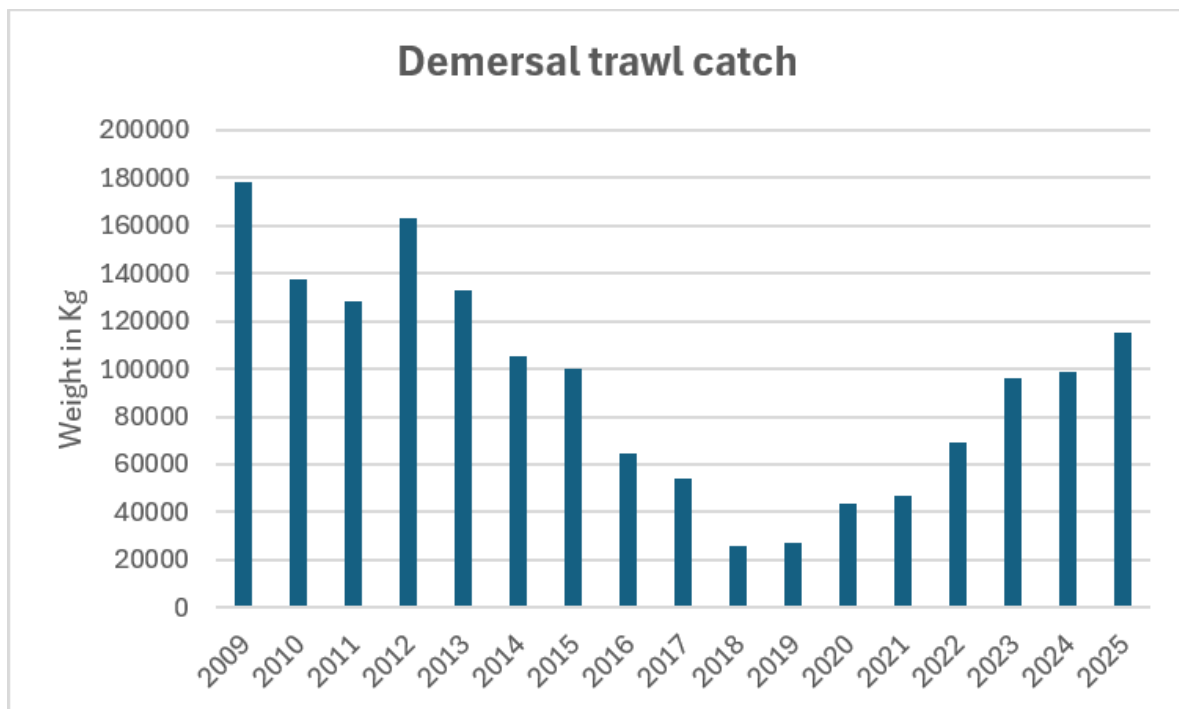
The UK landing data shows that in 2023 to 2025, seiner’s landings of sea bass were broadly at the levels they were at before the restrictions were applied from 2015 - when seiners were allowed to target sea bass. Seiners are now restricted to landing unavoidable bycatch only, so we would expect their landings in recent years to be below the levels when they were permitted to target sea bass, but this does not seem to be the case.

These data raise the question of whether unavoidable bycatch limits for trawlers and seiners are now permitting the targeting of bass, rather than reducing discards.



⁶ 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025

UK demersal trawler landings show a similar picture. 2025 demersal trawler landings were above those in 2014 and 2015 and nearly at the levels of 2013 and earlier.



With the large increases in trawler and seiner catch limits for 2026, it may be that their 2026 landings will be on a par with landings before the restrictions.

Many thanks to the Bass Anglers Sportfishing Society for analysing the UK landing data and providing these charts.

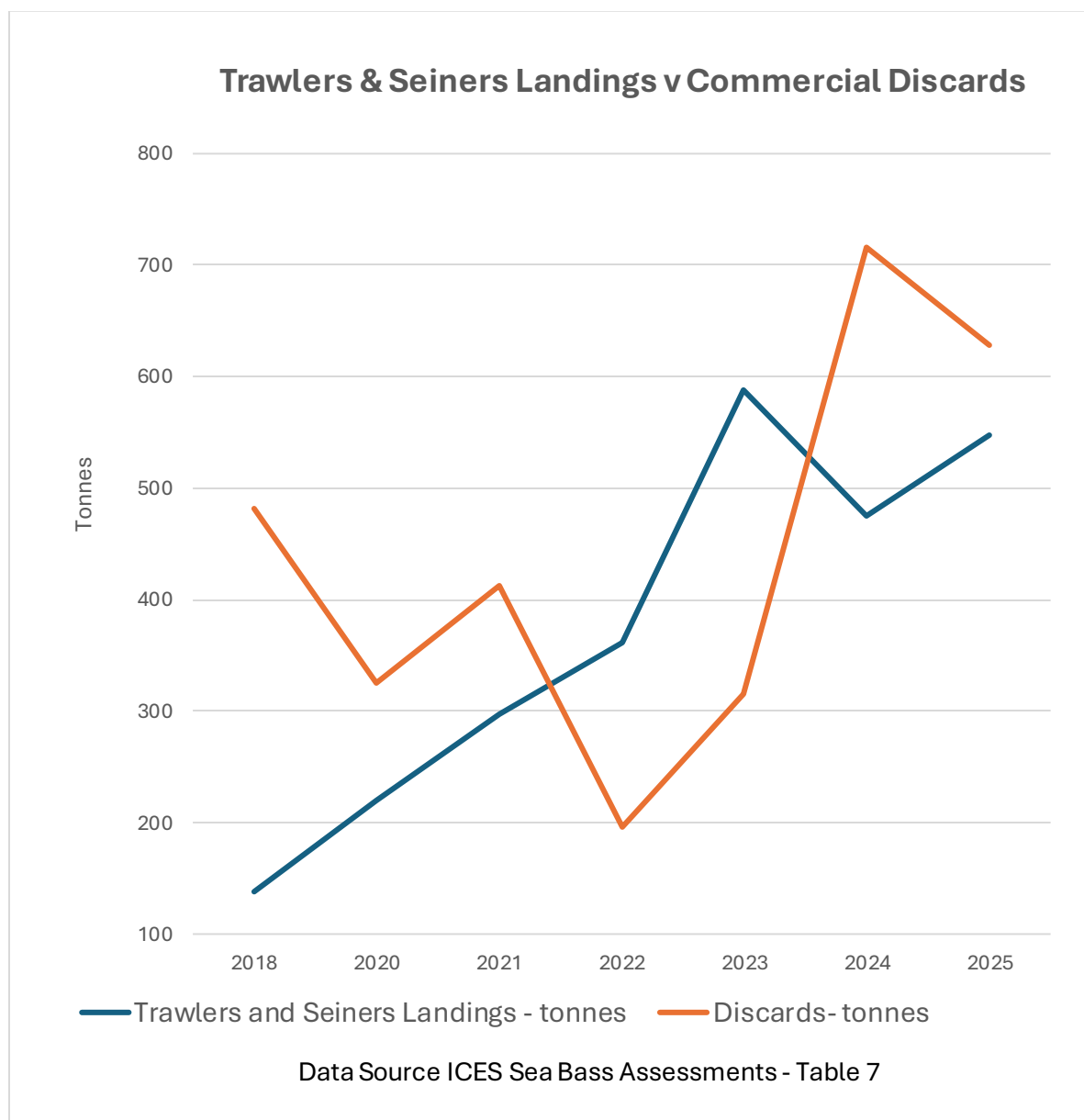
Discards

In recent years, fishery managers have increased trawler and seiner catch limits, following the logic that allowing more bycatch to be landed should reduce discards.

But unfortunately, this logic has not delivered the desired result - trawler and seiner landings have increased as catch limits have increased, but estimated discards have jumped more than 200% since 2022.

Trawler and seiner sea bass landings are now back at pre-restriction levels and yet discards are now at the highest levels ever estimated by ICES.

We recommend exploring other methods of reducing discards, such as spatio-temporal measures, rather than increasing trawler and seiners catch limits further.



Sea bass catch allocation tool

The Catch Allocation Tool has been under development since 2019.

In 2021, the Specialised Committee on Fisheries prioritised the improvement of the tool.

In 2022, COM told the NWWAC “We are currently engaging with the UK in the Specialised Committee on Fisheries (SCF) to agree on a terms of reference, requesting ICES to adapt and improve the tool, with the aim of having a well-functioning tool ready for the next round of consultations.”

But it is now the end of August 2026 and there is still no improved tool. We understand the tool will not be available for setting sea bass fishing opportunities for 2027. This represents a failure to deliver an improvement that was identified as a priority by the Specialised Committee on Fisheries in 2021.

We repeat our call for professional project management: publish a timetable for delivery and milestones by which to measure progress.
