



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

MEETING, DOCUMENT

Wales Sea Bass Advisory Group meeting: 27 February 2024

Notes of the meeting held on 27 February 2024.

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Contents

[Attendees](#)

[Notes](#)

[Actions](#)

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Attendees

Colin Charman (CC) - Natural Resources Wales (NRW)
David Curtis (DC) - Bass Angling Conservation
Kevin Denman (KD) - South Wales and West Fishing Communities
Sean Jukes (SJ) - Bass Anglers' Sportfishing Society
Jim Evans (JE) - Welsh Fisherman's Association
Simon Frobisher (SF) - recreational angler
Jack Bailey - British Spearfishing Association – South West Wales
Rich Harrison (RH) - spear fisher
Holly Kaiser (HK) - Seafish
John O'Connor (JOC) - Angling Cymru Sea Anglers
Hannah Rudd (HR) - Angling Trust
Richard Strudwick (RS) - recreational angler
Sion Williams (SW) - Llyn Pot Fisherman's Association
Ian McCarthy (IM) - Bangor University

Welsh Government:

Julian Bray (Chair) - Head of Domestic Fisheries Policy & Management
Michelle Billing - Fisheries Policy Manager
Matt Sayer - Senior Policy Analyst
Alun Mortimer - Fisheries Policy Manager

Apologies:

Mark Bolton (MBn) - fisher
Nicola Cusack - MCSUK
Brett Garner (BG) - Llyn Fishermen's Association
Andy Davies (AD) - Bass Anglers' Sportfishing Society

Notes

1. Welcome and introductions - purpose of meeting

JB opened the meeting and introduced the members attending for the first time. The focus for this meeting is exploring the existing scientific evidence in relation to Sea bass stocks in relation to Wales with presentations from Fisheries Division science team (MS) and our independent scientific advisor (IM).

2. Review and sign-off the actions note, Bass FMP Overview and Terms of Reference

MB confirmed that all the actions from 23 January meeting have been completed and the group were asked for any comments.

No issues were raised with the notes for the 23 January meeting and it was confirmed as an accurate record.

DC felt the published Bass FMP document did not reflect the input from stakeholders through the Policy Lab process. As such the priorities then reflected in the Bass FMP Overview paper were not something he could sign up to. For example, the Fisheries Act mandates aiming for MSY of the fishery as a standard, the FMP could have gone further by requiring UK and Welsh Governments to target socio-economic benefits too.

JB advised that now the Bass FMP has been publicly consulted on and published, it is a bit late to revise the final wording and the priorities for Wales in the FMP Overview reflected the priorities in the published Bass FMP.

JB asked DC to put his concerns in writing to him for consideration.

ACTION 1: DC to put concerns over the published Bass FMP in writing to JB at the earliest opportunity.

No other issues were raised with the FMP Overview.

It was noted that the independent scientific adviser role is missing from the membership table in the ToR.

ACTION 2: Add independent scientific advisor details to the ToR

SW raised concern about the balance between commercial and recreational representatives on the group. The current split is 8 recreational representatives and 7 commercial representatives.

MB explained officials recognised concern relating to the balance of representation and considerable effort had been made to encourage engagement from various groups. Officials regard an 8:7 split as reasonable balance but it is important to note that differences of opinion on any particular issue under consideration will not be weighted based on numbers for or against whether by sector or otherwise. Points raised in discussion will be considered on their substance and merit.

SW also raised concern about the inclusion of spear fishers in the group, suggesting it is illegal under retained EU law.

It was agreed spear fishing is legitimate recreational activity but that the law could be clearer. No request was made for either of the spear fishing representatives to leave the group.

It was raised that commercial shore based net fishers were not represented on the group, and KD offered to approach a commercial shore based net fisher.

JB confirmed that they would be welcome to submit an expression of interest in joining the group.

SW confirmed he was satisfied with the outcome of the discussion.

Action 3: KD to approach shore-based net fisher to contact the Secretariat if interested in submitting an EOI to join for officials to consider.

The point was also made that wider public representation including from the tourism sector would be beneficial for socio-economic perspective.

JB reiterated that while this will be considered, in the short term it is important to keep discussion focused on the agreed priorities (see note of meeting 1).

HR noted the Angling Trust has some figures on tourism associated with the recreational fishery which could be shared.

3. Presentation: Evidence briefing – Sea Bass FMP - Matt Sayer

MS delivered a presentation on evidence priorities.

Key points:

Bass is an international stock. ICES gather data and provide advice for areas 4.b–c, 7.a, and 7.d–h. Catch limits for commercial UK fishers are based on this advice and negotiations with the EU.

The spawning stock biomass is probably the best measure to explain the state of the stock. The data gathered over the past 25 years shows spawning stock biomass since 2009 has decreased with a slight recovery more recently. Likely this is due to conservative catch limits but despite this recruitment figures have remained quite low.

The three evidence priorities identified for Wales from the FMP are:

1. Strengthen our evidence base to inform how we manage the bass fishery

2. Understanding the social, cultural, and economic benefits of bass fishing
3. Review most appropriate closed season for the stock.

Several projects are underway already at UK or Wales level, including recreational sea angling diary and catch wise project.

Benchmarking of the scientific assessment for bass is underway to ensure full stock is being considered.

The following points were discussed:

Potential causes of the low recruitment to the stock, such as climate change, should be accounted for to make sure ICES are providing the correct advice.

Balancing the evidence on spawning stock biomass, recruitment and mortality suggests the future trend for the stock. Catch limits are currently conservative until it is clear the stock is recovering.

Survey samples for the ICES advice are taken from across the UK, including Wales but can't specify the sample locations. The stock crosses administrative boundaries and, while more information about the stock in the Welsh zone would be useful for a variety of reasons, the ICES advice covers 4.b–c, 7.a, and 7.d–h ICES areas and Total Allowable Catches are set for that area.

It was only relatively recently that bass became a commercial stock in the UK. Need to account for fact that data samples have been limited.

Ongoing benchmarking exercise will be based on historical and existing catches but generally favour more recent evidence. Benchmarking means re-examining existing assumptions and checking they are still sound.

Concern raised that some commercial fishers may be targeting bass through shore netting even though bass should only be bycatch. This is an enforcement issue. Bycatch is included in the mortality figures. A future meeting will consider

regulations.

Catch wise is a tool to 'ground proof' the sea angling diary data with on-site survey and has demonstrated good agreement. Members requested further information about this scheme which may be a topic at a future meeting.

ACTION 4: Share evidence briefing slides

4. Presentation: Spawning and movement in Welsh Sea bass - Ian McCarthy

IM delivered a presentation on bass biology and stock movement in and around the Welsh zone. A report the slides are based on is due to be published shortly so will share that when available.

Collaboration with the Welsh Government and fishers has facilitated the data gathering and analysis.

IM provided some detail about the key features of the species and stock, such as: assessing age and size at maturity, spawning season, migration patterns, stock structure.

Key points relating to bass in the Welsh zone (Irish and Celtic Seas):

Water temperatures of 9.5°C trigger spawning so timing can vary from year to year. If looking at a closed season, March to May is likely to encompass the spawning period in Wales rather than the current February to March closed season which might be more appropriate further south.

A recent survey impacted by Covid found the size at which 50% of bass matured was 383 mm for females and 340mm for males.

Some evidence to show some bass are 'resident' (i.e. feed in Welsh zone) and

some 'transiting' through Welsh zone between feeding, spawning and overwintering grounds. Some evidence to show some bass migrate to other areas around UK making assessing stock structure difficult.

Examining stable isotope ratios for carbon and nitrogen can indicate whether bass are feeding in different areas or similar areas. There appear to be feeding grounds in both North and South Wales.

One factor that may cause variation in recruitment to the fishery in the Welsh zone is wind direction when spawning occurs – either towards Ireland or towards Wales. Need more information and a consistent survey on recruitment in Wales.

Published paper earlier this year using tracking model. More work needed, for example on electronic tagging, cellular analysis.

IM appealed for bass fishers from south Cardigan Bay to help gather samples from that area.

ACTION 5: Share Bangor University presentation and related links when they become available.

The following points were discussed:

Understanding of the stock relative to historical view is similar. Some of the older studies, also identified spawning in March to May and it can vary from year to year. Think the current closed season (February and March) was intended to prevent fishing further south. However, there clearly isn't a one-size-fits-all across the stock assessment area.

Climactically, as average temperatures increase, might get more spawning in Wales.

Evidence for the Welsh zone needs to robust to underpin any changes in management measures. Quality of assessment at international level is

considered good. Real challenges are about political issues around setting allowable catch levels. One of the evidence gaps is recreational fishing data – hence our focus on catch diary.

The pros and cons of changing MCRS/MLS were discussed. Size at maturity varies across the stock and evidence is based on relatively small sample size. Bigger fish will spawn more times which would improve recruitment.

Bass seem to spawn in one area and the nurseries are in different areas. Need to consider areas closed to fishing and when closed season should be – fishing bass prior to a seasonal closure may limit the benefit of the closure.

When bass are present does seem to be getting earlier in the year so need to consider future proofing the season.

Fish tracking data for Welsh zone could be improved as recent project was affected by covid pandemic shutdowns.

MS – raised that when plans are developed, it will be necessary to consider resource allocation to ensure the Welsh Government prioritises realistic actions with greatest benefit to Wales.

IM invited further questions by email. Secretariat can collate questions from members and forward on.

5 & 6. Next steps, AOB and close - Julian Bray

Members were reminded to send accept/decline responses to meeting requests. The original intention was to focus on regulations in the next meeting, however, it is clear there is more to discuss on evidence. The group agreed in the 3rd meeting the discussion should continue to focus on evidence.

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Actions

1. DC to put concerns over the published Bass FMP in writing to JB at the earliest opportunity.

DC - Complete

2. Add independent scientific adviser details to the ToR. MB - Complete

3. KD to approach shore based net fisher to contact the secretariat if interested in submitting an EOI to join for officials to consider. KD - Ongoing

4. Share evidence briefing slides. MB/MS - Complete

5. Share Bangor University presentation and related links when they become available. MB/IM - Ongoing.

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