

MEETING OF THE JOINT IFCA COMMITTEE – 18 SEPTEMBER 2014

A meeting of the Joint IFCA Committee will be held in Elizabeth II Court, Winchester on Thursday 18 September at 1400, to discuss the business on the under mentioned Agenda.

Agenda item on Bass (not the only thing on the agenda)

Report by the Chief Executive

A. Purpose of the Report

BASS MANAGEMENT

This report describes the importance of the bass fishery locally and the international decline of bass stocks. Following recent debate in the IFCA TAC, of the advice on the status of the bass stock, members are asked to review the effectiveness of management of this fishery.

B. Recommendation

The Members are asked to discuss the report and review the effectiveness of IFCA's actions in the context of the duties of the Authority and if necessary make any further recommendations.

1.0 Background

1.1 The European Seabass, or bass (*Dicentrarchus labrax* (L.)) is an important commercial fish species. It is also one of the most important fish species for recreational fishermen in the UK. This stock is in decline.

1.2 In February 2013, the international council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICES) published a benchmark assessment report for bass which indicated the stock levels were declining. It is clear from the conclusions of the ICES report that conservation measures need to be introduced at a European level. Defra is continuing to push for effective EU-wide conservation measures that will ensure the stock recovers and become sustainable.

1.3 In June 2014 ICES published its latest report on bass stocks which have continued the downward trend in numbers reported in previous years. The findings from this report were considered by the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee (STECF) who produced a series of recommendations which were discussed, in Europe, at the beginning of September 2014, when it was agreed that there is a need for urgent action to bring this stock back under sustainable management. Defra continues to work with the Commission to confirm the details of an EU package of measures to be put in place before the end of the year.

1.4 The UK has previously raised concerns over the Commission's earlier decision to refer the UK's proposed management measures to their scientific committee rather than acting immediately to protect the bass spawning aggregation areas during 2014.

1.5 The UK's position, supported by most other Member States, recommends short term action at the EU level with a package of technical measures

including closing the major bass spawning areas to all commercial vessels that target bass during the spring months to protect spawning fish, and capping the allowable monthly catch per vessel as an EU standard. Beyond any interim package that may be adopted along these lines, there is a Member State consensus that an EU management plan should be developed.

1.6 DEFRA will consider the need for domestic management of bass in the context of these discussions and the implications of delays to European action.

1.7 The cause of the decline is a combination of overfishing and recent colder winters. Further details are contained in the STECF report (*ibid.*) which were considered in detail at the IFCA TAC.

2.0 Key points

2.1 Bass is a key inshore fishery not just for Southern IFCA but for most of the IFCAs around England.

2.2 Sea bass stocks have a significant range moving far outside Southern IFCA district. Juvenile bass, up to three years of age, occupy nursery areas in estuaries whilst adults undertake seasonal migrations from inshore habitats to offshore spawning sites (where they are targeted by an international pair trawl fleet). Adult bass are thought to show site fidelity meaning that they can be locally depleted as well as suffering the effects, at a stock level, of possible recruitment and growth overfishing.

2.3 Southern IFCA have considered the threats to the bass stock and the role of the IFCA in the management of the trans boundary stock (an extract of the minutes of the Technical Advisory Committee appended to this report – held 24 May 2012 and reference is made in the draft minutes of the meeting held 28 August 2014). The Association of IFCAs has written to the (then) Fisheries Minister highlighting concerns.

2.4 DEFRA is pursuing a package of measures to manage this stock by the end of 2014 and are working constructively through the EU fisheries management system. DEFRA will update the Association of IFCAs at their meeting on 23rd September 2014 as well as providing a written response to concerns raised through the Association of IFCAs.

3.0 Economics

3.1 Bass is a key fin fish species to commercial rod and liners, netters and trawlers as well as the angling community. In 2012 the UK commercial landings of 897t were mostly into England and 131t of bass were recorded as being landed (by commercial registered vessels) into (not necessarily from) the Southern IFCA District. The value of this local fishery was £1.18 million².

3.2 Southern IFCA byelaws limit fishing effort and the impact of the activity on the stock. Byelaws restrict the size of vessel that can operate in the District (12m) – this is the smallest length anywhere in the UK, and extensive areas of the inshore area (25%) are closed to mobile fishing gear. The following areas are closed to bass fishing (either all year

or seasonally when the fish congregate in these areas): The Fleet, Poole Harbour, Southampton Water, Portsmouth Harbour and Langstone Harbour.

3.3 4000 tonnes of bass were landed (in the commercial fishery) in ICES Divisions IVbc, VIIa, and VIId–h (Irish Sea, Celtic Sea, English Channel, and southern North Sea) in the same period. This is the area to which the STECF report relates. Thus the landings in the Southern IFCA District represent 3.3% of the total landings in this stock region (though there remains some uncertainty about the mixing of stocks)³.

3.4 The estimated annual kept catch of sea anglers in England is 230 – 440 tonnes⁴. The majority of anglers undertake catch and release, meaning the estimated actual catch is much higher.

3.5 It is clear that sea anglers make a significant contribution to the local economy (through both direct and indirect costs associated with the activity) and this contribution is likely to be particularly important 'out of season' in our seaside towns⁵. The Southern IFCA District is one of the most important charter angling destinations in the country with an estimated 100+ vessels operating from ports in Hampshire, Dorset and the Isle of Wight. Bass is important to this fleet: according to the most recent national survey of charter boat fishers (Sea Angling 2012) the majority of the bass catch took place in Area VIId and Area VIIe (Eastern and Western Channel respectively). Where on average, 2.3 bass were caught on every charter boat trip, equating to approximately 0.3 bass per angler per trip and the release rate was 40%.

4.0 Minimum Size.

4.1 A minimum legal size (MLS) of 36 cm was introduced in 1990 to protect the stock, along with a range of other measures. The Minimum Legal Size of bass, which is currently set at the EU level, is presently below the size⁶ at which at least 50% of the stock have the opportunity to reproduce. Many adult female bass do not breed until they are at least 40-45 cm.

4.2 Sport fishing bodies, whose members highly value the challenge offered by larger fish, have campaigned to increase the MLS for bass. Increasing the MLS to 45 cm will help to ensure that more females can breed before they are caught. Such a change would have economic implications for some commercial fishermen.

4.3 As with any trans-boundary fish stock introducing fisheries management measures within the Southern IFCA district could help provide some protection, but this is unlikely to protect the stock from the effects of recruitment overfishing.

4.4 There remains uncertainty in the value of unilateral intervention in the form of either raising the Minimum Legal Size, or creating refuge areas, (the two most obvious options) by the IFCA to contribute to the stock recovery and the short and long term economic benefits of any such intervention.

5.0 Bass Nursery Areas

5.1 To protect from the effects of growth overfishing IFCA are responsible (with partners) to enforce a network of 39 [Bass Nursery Areas](#), of which 5 are within the Southern IFCA District and which will make a significant contribution to the protection of the juvenile stock.

5.2 There will be changes to the current minimum legal sizes and the establishment of minimum conservation reference sizes which will be set on biological grounds and be implemented as part of the reformed CFP.

6.0 Actions

6.1 To support the IFCA's duty, under section 153 2(a) of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 IFCA's, to 'seek to ensure that the exploitation of sea fisheries resources is carried out in a sustainable way', through existing work streams and activities the IFCA is:

6.1.1 Supporting and encouraging DEFRA's national and international approach to sea bass management.

6.1.2 Working with and through the Association of IFCA's to promote bass management and develop and coordinate a possible IFCA lead approach.

6.1.3 The principle funder of the continuation of the Solent Bass Survey – a key dataset to inform future bass assessments (the survey had previously been cancelled, by CEFAS, due to insufficient funds).

6.1.4 Working on a regional basis with our neighbouring IFCA's to develop coordinated management through the review of byelaws process and reviewing the effectiveness of all byelaws including Minimum Legal Size restrictions, which go beyond the national and international regulations.

6.1.5 Reviewing the effectiveness of the Bass Nursery Area Legislation and reviewing the management of risks to these areas.

6.1.6 Requesting further information on the contribution of management of known adult congregation areas.

The Authority is asked to DISCUSS and consider the effectiveness of the actions and make any further recommendations.

Robert Clark
Chief Executive

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985 List of Background Papers

1. Marine and Coastal Access Act, 2009. 2. Armstrong, M., Brown, A., Hargreaves, J., Hyder, K., Pilgrim-Morrison, S., Munday, M., Proctor, S., Roberts, A., Williamson, K., (2013) Sea Angling 2012 – a survey of recreational sea angling activity and economic value in England. Defra under contract MF1221. Available ONLINE <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140108121958/http://www.marine-management.org.uk/seaangling/documents/finalreport.pdf>