

# The North Sea Advisory Council



## **NSAC Advice Ref. 10-1415**

### **Comments on Sea Bass Advice 2015 and Proposal for Development of Future Advice**

This paper was approved by the NSAC Executive Committee via a written procedure on the 30<sup>th</sup> October 2015. On this occasion consensus has not been achieved therefore a majority advice paper with a minority position is presented. The UAPF have expressed a minority position in section 3.3.

#### **1.0 Introduction**

- 1.1 The purpose of this document is to provide the European Commission with an overview of current thinking within the North Sea Advisory Council (NSAC) regarding current sea bass measures, the 2016 measures, and the plans for a future Long Term Management Plan (LTMP).
- 1.2 The NSAC has been working on sea bass for a number of months. Two workshops have been held in September 2014 and May 2015 in association with the North Western West Waters (NWWAC) and Southern Western Waters Advisory Councils (SWWAC). Following these meetings sea bass has continued to be discussed during meetings of the NSAC Demersal Working Group and we have maintained a strong dialogue with the other Advisory Councils.
- 1.3 As the issue is complex, it is difficult to reach a consensus between all NSAC members within the time to contribute to the European Commission consultation by the 30<sup>th</sup> October 2015 deadline, we have structured the advice in the following way. We have listed the areas where there is currently agreement, we have listed areas where further work and discussion is required to develop the next phase of NSAC advice, and finally we have set out our requirements for the development of a Long Term Management Plan for sea bass.



## 2.0 Current NSAC Position

- 2.1 We share concern over the state of the sea bass stock and recognise that the best available science indicates that further action is needed to prevent further depletion of the seabass stock and to recover and maintain it at healthy levels.
- 2.2 We recognise that designing sea bass management is complicated for a number of important reasons:
- (i) The species is exploited by an international fleet with a diversity of métiers, both commercial and recreational. These métiers employ different gears and are characterised by distinct spatial and temporal fishing patterns and vary in terms of their dependency on sea bass;
  - (ii) Sea bass is a widely dispersed and a highly mobile species, moving between inshore nursery and feeding grounds and deeper offshore spawning grounds, but also showing strong site fidelity;
  - (iii) There are significant knowledge gaps with respect to the species biology, stock dynamics and identity, and also with respect to the commercial and recreational fisheries that exploit sea bass (e.g. their catch composition and socioeconomic constitution).
  - (iv) Finally, we lack understanding of the (potential) effectiveness and the environmental, social and economic impacts of the various management approaches and instruments. This includes the implications of unsettled issues and phase-in processes imposed by the latest CFP reforms, i.e. the landing obligation, regionalisation, multiannual plans, eco-system approach and the review of technical measures as well as provisions from the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD).
- 2.3 We agree that we will need tailor-made, métier-specific solutions. The nature of the fishery and the behaviour of the species imply that there is no single solution that is both effective and impartial. Different management instruments (e.g. MCRS, closed seasons, monthly catch allowances) will impact the involved métiers and businesses differentially both in space and time and may have unwanted knock-on environmental and socio-economic impacts. To ensure that the species is adequately protected, that the biomass is brought to a sustainable level and the short-term costs and long-term benefits of protective measures are distributed fairly across the sector we need a management approach that allows for local, tailor-made, métier-specific solutions.
- 2.4 We recommend that we move towards results based management. In practice this means that fisheries managers focus on defining the desired environmental and social outcomes of management and devolve greater responsibility to fishers to collectively work out how best to achieve these targets. We believe this approach creates a sense of shared-responsibility and takes advantage of the expert knowledge and creative/innovative potential within the sector, with more effective measures and greater compliance as a result. The Advisory Councils provide a platform that can facilitate this.
- 2.5 We recommend a precautionary yet adaptive approach to management that allows for adaptive learning and experimentation but without jeopardising the conservation requirements. Management intervention under conditions of



incomplete knowledge and environmental uncertainty means we are making decisions that have uncertain environmental and socio-economic outcomes. Therefore we recommend management approaches and measures that maintain a degree of flexibility, allowing management strategies and measures to be adjusted and fine-tuned as we progress and learn about their impacts. An adaptive approach also allows us to respond to unexpected events on the ground as these emerge.

- 2.6 We want to monitor the results of management closely across a range of environmental, social and economic variables. Results-based, adaptive approaches to management rely on good monitoring and evaluation. To determine whether management measures are having the desired effect and targets are being achieved, we need to register changes on and in the water and assess their knock-on social and economic impacts. For proper evaluation, there needs to be a good baseline study.
- 2.7 We want to improve our understanding of by-catch and discarding and post-release survival in the different commercial and recreational métiers and the effect of different management measures on this. The nature and scale of by-catch and discarding is poorly understood, as are the implications of recent management interventions such as the new MCRS. ICES considers discards to be low (~5%)<sup>1</sup>. However, discards in certain métiers can be much higher. A better understanding of fishing behaviour and the catch composition in the different métiers through space and time will allow us to identify measures that effectively reduce fishing mortality across both targeted and mixed fisheries. It is recognised that sea bass is a robust species and that discard survival in certain métiers is likely to be high. However this needs to be evidenced.
- 2.8 We need to improve our understanding of the economic dependence on sea bass of different commercial and recreational métiers and to understand short and long-term social and economic impacts of management interventions. We need to think about transitional approaches and compensatory support measures to allow these fleets to absorb these impacts and make the required adaptations.

### 3.0 Areas the NSAC will continue to work on

- 3.1 A debate continues within NSAC about whether an incremental approach to reaching the  $F_{msy}$  target is appropriate in the case of sea bass. ICES advises on the basis of the MSY approach and adopts a cautious response in cases where the spawning stock falls below MSY  $B_{trigger}$  so as to reduce fishing mortality to allow a stock to rebuild<sup>2</sup>. For 2016 this means that ICES recommends total landings of no more than 541 tonnes. This would require a reduction in landings of 80% relative to 2015<sup>3</sup>. Clearly, such reductions will have significant immediate social and economic ramifications for businesses and the families and communities that they support, particularly, where businesses are highly dependent on this particular species. To halt the decline in the stock and promote its recovery, we recognise that something urgently needs to be done to reduce catches and bring down fishing mortality to a

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<sup>1</sup> ICES Advice 2015

<sup>2</sup> The advice rule that is applied by ICES for long-lived species when the biomass is below MSY  $B_{trigger}$  is:  $F = F_{msy} \times SSB/MSY B_{trigger}$  [See chapter 1.2 Advice Basis of ICES Advice 2015, Book1](#)

<sup>3</sup> Based on a preliminary estimate of total landings of 2698 tonnes in 2015 (ICES, 2015)



sustainable level. However, consideration must be given to the businesses and communities most impacted by changes to the management of this fishery. Importantly, we need to better understand the social and economic ramifications of all measures and influencing factors, positive and negative, in order to identify how we can minimise these impacts whilst safeguarding the future of the stock.

- 3.2 NSAC is also considering whether more flexibility<sup>4</sup> in the catch limits is feasible and desirable from an economic as well as an environmental perspective. This flexibility is considered important to businesses to allow them to plan their fishing activities and to absorb the impacts of bad weather and other unexpected events. We need to understand how this flexibility could influence discard mortality and if it can be applied without compromising conservation objectives and without undermining effective monitoring and control.
- 3.3 NSAC would like to examine the contribution that additional protection of spawning aggregations could make and request that further research is completed to identify what instruments are most effective to do so. We believe that seasonal closures may be an effective tool to do this, but this area needs more research, as we do not fully understand spawning behaviour in sea bass and 'the geography' of its reproduction. One member, the Union des Armateurs à la Pêche de France, does not agree with this and have opted to take a minority position<sup>5</sup>.
- 3.4 NSAC members recognise the need to strengthen stock assessments and want to actively engage with scientists to address these data and knowledge gaps building on existing good practice such as the [BARGIP](#) and [C-Bass](#) projects. To strengthen stock assessments and identify sensible stock protection measures we need to understand what is driving recruitment and achieve a more profound understanding of stock identity, feeding and breeding grounds and migration patterns. We also need more a comprehensive and complete time series of fishery removals. To these ends, we recognise the need to work together with scientists and to explore ways to improve catch and discard data in commercial and recreational fisheries. We will discuss how fully documented fisheries can be applied in sea bass fisheries. We need to assess the significance of the data gaps created through certain regulations<sup>6</sup> that provide exceptions to the obligation to record and report catches. There is a debate how to best monitor recreational catches and the EAA is actively exploring this issue with its members and scientists. Currently recreational catches are estimated on the basis of sampling. The best approach to

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<sup>4</sup> For landings allowances specified per quarter rather than by month.

<sup>5</sup> The UAPF believes that the winter fishery targeting sea bass does not catch juveniles, does not lead to discards, and is not the only one to catch adults and that catching these adults before, during or after spawning has the same results in terms of fishing mortality. It reaffirms that the impact of the winter fishery targeting sea bass on fishing mortality can be fully controlled through a fair allocation of annual quotas by Member States to the boats that would be authorised to catch more than a given tonnage, the ad hoc figure depending on the fishing mortality to be reached.

<sup>6</sup> REGULATION (EU) 2015/812 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 20 May 2015 amending Council Regulations (EC) No 850/98, (EC) No 2187/2005, (EC) No 1967/2006, (EC) No 1098/2007, (EC) No 254/2002, (EC) No 2347/2002 and (EC) No 1224/2009, and Regulations (EU) No 1379/2013 and (EU) No 1380/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council, as regards the landing obligation, and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1434/98 Article 7(2) (2)



monitoring catches depends both on the quality of the data produced through different approaches and the costs associated with it.

- 3.5 NSAC members recognise that effective fisheries management relies on a high level of compliance with the rules in force. We need to understand better how fisheries are currently performing with regard to this and identify any problems. These insights can be used to design mechanisms for compliance and to develop management measures in such a way that they can actually be easily and effectively monitored and enforced.
- 3.6 National legislation needs to make a stronger and less ambiguous distinction between recreational and commercial fishing. According to EU legislation recreational fishing distinguishes itself from commercial fishing by the fact that fishers do not sell their catch (they do not fish for economic gain). This distinction is less clear in national legislation, where in some cases selling catches by fishers without a commercial license is permitted. For example in the UK commercial licences are only available to commercial fishers who fish from a motorised vessel. This ambiguity and others thwarts attempts to effectively manage sea bass fisheries.
- 3.7 We want to improve our understanding of targeted and non-targeted fishing activity. Currently 41% of the total catch is assumed by the STECF to be caught in “non-target fisheries” (bottom trawls and standing nets)<sup>7</sup>. However, there is evidence that there is targeted activity within these mixed fishery métiers, both at the haul and the trip level. We need to quantify this and understand fishing behaviour in all mixed fishery métiers to understand how these and transitions to new gear types and innovations are impacting the stock and how they can contribute to stock recovery.
- 3.8 We want to identify and encourage best practices that improve selectivity and reduce incidental catches and discards of sea bass. This will be particularly relevant in the context of the new MCRS (42 cm), but also in the context of catch limitations where these are applied to mixed fishery métiers. We would like to see funding for trials and technology development made available. Providing economic incentives for fishers adopting methods that enhance selectivity is considered an important part of making the transition to more selective practices.
- 3.9 We would like to see the measures applied in 2015 properly assessed, both in terms of the achieved catch reductions across commercial and recreational fisheries as well their knock-on social and economic impacts. Without such insights we cannot make fully informed recommendations for 2016 and beyond. The MCRS was introduced to protect juveniles, but may have increased discarding and discard mortality, this needs to be evaluated and quantified. These insights may lead to the conclusion that a raised MCRS is only sensible if complemented by supporting measures, such as (real time) closures, larger mesh sizes, and selective devices. Finally, the poor status of the stock is likely to have affected catch success and catches in 2015. This may explain part of the catch reductions achieved in 2015. To evaluate the true impact of the 2015 measures it needs to be determined what share of the realised catch reduction is actually attributable to this effect. To determine this it would for instance be

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<sup>7</sup> Data from 2010-2013. STECF (2014). 46<sup>th</sup> Plenary meeting report of the Scientific, Technical and economic Committee for Fisheries (Plen-14-02)



necessary to know how many vessels had reached their monthly catch limit through 2015.

- 3.10 This list is not exclusive and is likely to expand as we continue with our discussions.

#### **4.0 Future Approach**

- 4.1 We will continue to work towards developing a long-term management plan for sea bass. One of the main issues to discuss and agree will be if sea bass management should be developed as a single species plan or as part of a mixed species multi annual plan. An option is to develop it as a single species plan to be later embedded into a mixed species plan.
- 4.2 We aim to continue our Advisory Council work on sea bass, within a special focus group. This group aims to meet on a regular basis to collate and discuss scientific insights and stakeholder views, so that the NSAC is able within short notice to produce and deliver well considered, evidence based input into the decision-making process, proactively as well as on demand.
- 4.3 We would like to actively engage with scientists, fisheries managers and all stakeholders in a workshop to discuss and evaluate management for sea bass and develop a programme of work to co-design long term management for this important resource.
- 4.4 It is our intention to develop advice in close dialogue and collaboration with the North Western Waters Advisory Council.
- 4.5 For the continued work on sea bass management and in the context of designing a long-term management plan for sea bass, we would like to be engaged and consulted on an ongoing basis.
- 4.6 Sea bass management is a complicated issue and we recognise that solutions will only be found if we engage in a constructive dialogue with all parties involved. To allow this we would like the support of an independent expert facilitator to manage the process, and will look for funding options to support this. If the Commission are aware of any funding options can they make us aware of them?

