



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Proposed Fisheries Management Plan for Crab and Lobster in English Waters

Executive Summary

Date: July 2023

Version: public consultation



Executive Summary

Context

Our sea fish and shellfish stocks are an important natural resource. We aim to work with the fishing sector and wider stakeholders to ensure these stocks are harvested sustainably and supported by a healthy marine environment, so they continue to provide benefits into the future.

Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs) are a requirement of the Fisheries Act 2020 (the Act), the UK Joint Fisheries Statement and a commitment in the England Environmental Improvement Plan 2023. FMPs assess the status of stocks and must set out policies to restore stocks to, or maintain them at, sustainable levels.

This draft FMP has been prepared for the purpose of meeting the requirements set out in the Act. It has been prepared in partnership with the Sea Fish Industry Authority (Seafish) in collaboration with the Crab Management Group (CMG) that brings together industry, government, and scientists. Feedback from the CMG and from the wider sector, during stakeholder engagement events, has shown that there is a need for better management of crab and lobster fisheries in England.

What is an FMP?

An FMP is an evidence-based action plan that charts a course to sustainable fisheries for current and future generations. Once published, the FMP will last for six years. It will set out both a longer-term vision and goals for the fishery (or fisheries), together with the policies and management interventions necessary to achieve these goals in the shorter term. As well as focussing on sustainable stocks, Defra intends to use FMPs to help tackle environmental, social, and economic issues associated with our fisheries, significantly enhancing our ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management and securing the economic and cultural benefits we gain from fish and from fishing. Plans will be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure they respond to new evidence and practical experience to remain effective.

Why an FMP for crabs and lobsters?

The crab and lobster industry recognised in 2019 that action was needed to better manage the stocks. With support from Seafish and Defra, the CMG was formed in 2020 to consider specific actions. This early work and engagement allowed the decision to be taken to channel the work into an FMP. Crab and lobster have been prioritised for an FMP due to the stocks' vulnerability to over-exploitation, the economic value of these fisheries, and a lack of evidence to properly assess and

Proposed Crab and Lobster FMP for English Waters

monitor the state of the stocks. Crab and lobster fisheries contribute socially and economically to coastal communities through employment and recreational fishing interests. Improved management action is therefore needed to protect crab and lobster and secure their future and the future of the industry that depend on them. Feedback from the CMG and the wider sector has confirmed the-need for better management of crab and lobster fisheries in England.

Summary of the state of stocks

There are existing stock assessments for crab and lobster providing a reasonable understanding of their biological parameters and, at a broad level, exploitation rates. Available evidence suggests that crab and lobster stocks are experiencing high exploitation rates which exceed those required to maintain stocks at Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY). However, there are still significant gaps in our understanding of these important fisheries. Whilst work is underway to improve the quantity and quality of data, there are still significant uncertainties and assumptions in current stock assessment methodologies meaning outputs may be less certain. Accurately assessing the impact of current fishing effort on long-term stock viability is currently a challenge.

This FMP combines a long-term vision to achieve MSY with clear measures to reach and maintain this goal. This plan brings together the complete portfolio of existing management measures for crab and lobster along with all available science and evidence, and highlights where gaps exist and what is required to fill those gaps to enable the necessary protection for stocks now and in the long term. This FMP presents an opportunity to take a precautionary and adaptive approach to long-term management to create sustainable crab and lobster fisheries.

Current management

The management landscape for crab and lobster in England is highly fragmented, with a range of national and regional management measures. These measures, variously applied across differing jurisdictions, include licences to fish for shellfish, days at sea effort limits, minimum landing sizes (MLS), pot limitations, vessel length restrictions, and specific conservation regulations such as de-clawing bans or mandatory escape gaps. Most of the species included in this FMP are caught in targeted pot and trap fisheries with some, such as crawfish and spider crab, caught using nets.

The existing management regimes are largely based on administrative boundaries, such as Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (IFCA) jurisdictions or administrative boundaries between devolved administrations, and do not necessarily reflect biological boundaries between stocks. This means that fisheries exploiting the

Proposed Crab and Lobster FMP for English Waters

same biological stocks may be subject to different management restrictions depending on where fishing activity occurs.

Key goals and proposed actions

Stakeholders noted that a 'one size fits all' approach to management is not appropriate for a fishery characterised by local stocks and fleet variation. So regional or local based management is needed together with better species and fisheries data to ensure the long-term sustainability of these fisheries. The FMP sets out Crab and lobster specific objectives that address specific requirements for the crab and lobster fisheries in English waters.

Specifically, the FMP sets out the following actions:

Improving the evidence base: Significant gaps remain in our understanding of English crab and lobster, both in terms of fishing activity and its level of impact on stocks. The crab and lobster research plan (Annex 2) details available science and evidence; it highlights where knowledge and evidence gaps exist and what is required to fill those gaps to provide the necessary protection for stocks now and in the long-term. These evidence gaps include the development of data collection programmes, defining stock boundaries, and improving stock assessments. The aim of the research plan is to build on existing research and data for crabs and lobsters so that management is driven by a comprehensive harvest strategy, reliable stock assessments and a consistent ongoing data collection and research programme.

Initial management measures: These are designed to contribute to objectives set out in the FMP in the short-term and increase protection for stocks in line with the precautionary objective. The key proposals are exploring opportunities for harmonising lobster and crawfish minimum landing sizes with existing IFCA measures in English waters, prohibiting the landing of soft brown crab for bait, and piloting finer scale management of brown crab and European lobster in certain areas based on spatial scale rather than administrative boundaries.

Longer term measures: Over time, as both the evidence base and monitoring of management effectiveness improves, the process of implementing more targeted measures will be developed through the lifetime and future iterations of this FMP. The FMP proposes an adaptive, iterative management approach in which management decisions are implemented, reviewed, and refined with new data, to deliver long-term sustainability. Future measures will focus on ensuring stocks are not targeted excessively. Seasonal closures, effort limits, and pot and catch limits are some of the interventions under consideration which will be developed in collaboration with the CMG and relevant partners.

Wider issues and environmental impacts

Proposed Crab and Lobster FMP for English Waters

All FMPs are subject to legal obligations for environmental protection arising from the Habitats Regulations, Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009, Marine Strategy Regulations 2010 and the Environment Act 2021. These requirements are in addition to the FMP contributing to the environmental objectives of the Fisheries Act 2020.

This FMP will contribute to commitments to improve our marine ecosystem set out in the England Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 and the UK Marine Strategy.

The crab and lobster FMP includes objectives that will ensure that the environmental impacts associated with crab and lobster fishing are understood. The crab and lobster pot fisheries potentially pose two environmental risks of bycatch of Endangered, Threatened and Protected (ETP) species and unwanted marine species and marine litter from abandoned, lost, and discarded fishing gear. Based on current evidence, both risks are considered low in these fisheries. Where crab and lobster pot fisheries are considered to have an adverse impact on the marine environment, the FMP sets out commitments to taking action to avoid, remedy or mitigate such impact.

Implementation and monitoring

The actions and measures contained within the crab and lobster FMP will undergo an implementation phase where appropriate mechanisms will be required to deliver them. Such mechanisms could include voluntary measures, license conditions, national and regional byelaws, and statutory instruments.

The Act requires the crab and lobster FMP to be reviewed when appropriate and at least every six years. This formal review will assess how the FMP has performed in terms of delivering against the objectives of the Act.

To conclude

The Crab and Lobster FMP has been prepared for the purpose of meeting the requirements set out in the Act. This statement and the contents of the plan meets the obligation set out in section 6 of the Act.

This FMP has collated existing management measures and available science and evidence to assess the status of crab and lobster stocks around England and determine a sustainable level of exploitation. It is currently difficult to accurately assess the impact that fishing effort is having on long-term stock viability or how to effectively limit effort. The Crab and Lobster FMP seeks to address this to ensure that Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) can be more accurately assessed, and action taken to maintain stock status at or above this level. The FMP highlights where knowledge and evidence gaps exist to establish sustainable crab and lobster fisheries. The management objectives and associated evidence and research plan guide those seeking to fill those gaps over time. The proposed management

Proposed Crab and Lobster FMP for English Waters

interventions seek to apply a precautionary approach to managing harvesting whilst evidence improves. This FMP aims to deliver a step change in moving towards the long-term sustainable management of crab and lobster fisheries in English waters.