



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Proposed Fisheries Management Plan for Sea bass in English and Welsh Waters

Executive summary

Date: July 2023

Version: public consultation



Executive Summary

The Seabass (*Dicentrarchus labrax*, hereafter 'bass') Fisheries Management Plan (FMP) for England and Wales is one of 43 FMPs proposed around the UK set out in the Joint Fisheries Statement (JFS). The plan has been developed by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and Welsh government, in collaboration with scientists, regulators, Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies (SNCBs) and stakeholders from across the bass landscape, to deliver a roadmap for the long-term sustainable management of bass fisheries in English and Welsh waters over the next six years, in line with the objectives of the Fisheries Act 2020 (the Act).

What is an FMP?

FMPs are evidence-based action plans that chart a course towards sustainable fisheries for current and future generations. An FMP sets out a vision and goals for the target fishery (or fisheries), together with the actions and management interventions necessary to achieve these goals. Defra and Welsh government have an ambitious vision to use FMPs to tackle environmental, social and economic issues associated with fisheries, significantly enhancing our ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management.

Why an FMP for Bass?

Bass fisheries contribute culturally, socially, and economically to coastal communities through, for example, employment and recreational fishing interests. However, a combination of overfishing and poor year class strength (the number of individuals born in a year) saw a sharp decline in bass stock levels from 2010. In response, a joint UK/EU management approach was implemented in 2015, which has been amended annually. Since these measures were introduced, there has been a significant increase in spawning stock biomass - although recruitment remains low. While bass is currently fished within sustainable limits in English and Welsh waters, this FMP reviews current bass management in England and Wales, sets the direction to maintain bass stocks at sustainable levels and ensures the benefits of bass fishing can be realised by the communities that depend on them.

Current management

UK and EU vessels have access to fish bass in UK and EU waters in accordance with the access provisions for non-quota stocks (NQS), in the UK/EU Trade and Co-operation Agreement (TCA). The UK and EU have developed several management measures to protect the stock. These were introduced in 2015 (and adjusted

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annually) after urgent scientific warnings of stock decline due to multiple years of poor recruitment and high fishing pressures.

Management measures include a Minimum Conservation Reference Size (MCRS), domestic authorisations required to fish for bass, seasonal closures for both commercial and recreational fishers, and catch/bycatch limits for commercial and recreational fishers. Three gear types are authorised for landing bass – trawls/seines, fixed nets (both bycatch only) and hook and line – all other gears are prohibited from landing bass. In addition, regional byelaws in England and Wales provide inshore (<6 nautical mile) management, while a network of nursery areas in England and Wales also provide protection for juvenile bass.

Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement for the Bass FMP was facilitated by Policy Lab, a multi-disciplinary team of policy makers, designers and researchers based at the Department for Education. Policy Lab took a collaborative mixed-method approach, engaging with over 1400 bass stakeholders across England and Wales via interviews, online debates, pop-up port visits, workshops and surveys. Policy Lab's aim was to jointly develop a set of potential solutions for managing bass to inform the goals and actions of the Bass FMP. Policy Lab presented the results of their extensive exercise to Defra and the Welsh government in January 2023, and this work has informed drafting of the Bass FMP.

Key goals

To ensure effective management of bass stocks in English and Welsh waters over the next six years, this plan identifies nine goals focused on domestic management priorities. Each goal is set out with a rationale, evidence, stakeholder views, short (one-two years) and medium-long term actions, and performance indicators to monitor delivery. The nine goals outlined in this FMP are:

1. Inclusive stakeholder engagement structures to inform management of the bass fishery
2. Equitable access to the bass fishery, while prioritising stock sustainability
3. Minimise discarding of bass bycatch where survival rates are low
4. Encourage and facilitate full compliance with bass regulations
5. Maximise the benefits of bass fishing for local coastal communities
6. Sustainable harvesting of the bass stock in line with scientific advice
7. Protecting juvenile and spawning bass
8. Minimise the impact of bass fishing on the wider marine ecosystem
9. Mitigate against and adapt to the impact of climate change on bass fishing

While there are multiple complex interactions, synergies and tensions between these goals, the overarching aim of the FMP is to ensure stocks are harvested sustainably

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whilst benefiting a diverse range of environmental, commercial, recreational and social interests.

Actions and implementation

In the short-term, improvements to bass management measures to help ensure sustainability and flexibility for the fishing sector include:

- The establishment by governments of bass management groups to facilitate stakeholder participation in management decisions
- Exploring opportunities to develop more adaptive management systems which protect the stock and allow fishers to take advantage of any increases in stock abundance
- Considering whether to review the existing domestic authorisation system for an alternative approach to align fishing opportunities with other FMP goals (for example, reducing discarding, minimising environmental impact and maximising benefits to local coastal communities)
- Reviewing the most suitable timing and duration of the closed seasons
- Considering how best to monitor and reduce discarding, for example, using existing data recording tools like the CatchApp and/or managed access (within existing annual limits) in return for data
- Encouraging better monitoring, the use of gear modifications and engagement with relevant schemes to help reduce the incidence of sensitive species bycatch associated with bass fishing
- Improving communication and understanding of bass regulations, including Registered Buyers and Sellers (RBS)

In the medium-long term, there are further actions that could be considered to help meet the goals outlined above. These include:

- Reviewing appropriate size limits for the bass stock, for example, a MCRS or slot sizes
- Reviewing appropriate harvest strategies for bass in light of outcomes from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) 2023-24 benchmarking exercise
- Encouraging participation in Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) early-adopter programmes where appropriate to improve data collection on discards and sensitive species bycatch
- Supporting industry to decarbonise and adapt to the impacts of environmental change on bass distribution and abundance
- Reviewing the practice of shallow inshore and shore-based netting to determine whether additional protections are needed to prevent migratory fish bycatch

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- Investigating the possibility of implementing a percentage catch composition definition of bass bycatch for net fishers
- Reviewing the feasibility of a model whereby all bass are landed to reduce discarding, and/or the pros and cons of moving away from bycatch and towards a catch limit or quota approach
- Improving collaboration between regulators on targeted enforcement and alignment of powers to ensure consistency
- Improving sector equality so that regulations apply to all those fishing for bass

Improving the evidence base

This FMP is based on the current biological, social and economic evidence available on bass life history, stock assessment and fishing and management practices (Section 8: Fishery Management Goals and Management Strategy, Annexes 2 and 3). Bass is a relatively data-rich ICES category 1 stock with robust MSY assessments produced annually. However, filling a number of evidence gaps could still improve stock assessments - including improved data collection on discarding, recreational catch and better understanding bass stock structure and recruitment. Improving the evidence base on the cultural and social importance of bass fishing, as well as the impacts of fishing on the wider environment, will also support progress towards more sustainable bass fisheries management.

Monitoring and review of the plan

Detailed work plans will be developed to support the implementation of this plan. As laid out in the Act, the Bass FMP for English and Welsh waters will be reviewed at least every six years. This formal review will assess how the FMP has performed in terms of performance indicators and outcomes. However, it is anticipated that the FMP will also be reviewed and updated more regularly in collaboration with bass management groups.

To conclude

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

This FMP has collated existing management measures and all available science and evidence to assess the status of bass stocks around England and Wales in 2023 to help determine a sustainable level of exploitation. At the time of publication, bass is being fished within sustainable limits around England and Wales as part of established management measures. The FMP highlights where improvements in evidence and management can be considered for the long-term sustainability of the fishery in English and Welsh waters.

Acknowledgements

Defra and Welsh government would like to acknowledge the advice, evidence and support that has been provided by the Association of Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (AIFCAs), Cefas, Environment Agency (EA), Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), Marine Management Organisation (MMO), Natural England (NE), Natural Resources Wales (NRW), Seafish and our stakeholders, throughout the development of this FMP.