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Photo: John Butterwith

Bass Minimum Landing Size: Action Group secures undertaking from Bradshaw

Fisheries Minister Ben Bradshaw has given the Bass Action Group an undertaking that he will not lay the Statutory Instrument, giving effect to an increase in the minimum landing size, until he has had an opportunity to review the arguments and evidence presented to him at an 11th hour meeting.

A delegation from the Bass Action Group, led by Dave Pessell from Plymouth, met with the Minister and systematically went through the arguments for and against an increase to 40cms.

"This was a very constructive meeting. Although we only had 35 minutes with the Minister this was sufficient, I believe, to raise significant doubts in his mind as to whether he had made the right decision," said Dave Pessell.

"The Minister made plain that he had decided to increase the MLS because it was his belief that in the medium to long term everyone including anglers and commercial fishermen and stocks would benefit. In a series of short presentations covering the science, discards, discrimination, impact on commercial fishermen and impact on anglers we challenged the assumptions supporting that belief.

"Critical to our case is the fact that the science demonstrates

that bass is harvested within safe biological limits, that there is good recruitment, and that effort is not increasing. This is a sustainable fishery."

"Furthermore, it is simply not the case that in the medium to long term everyone would benefit. We presented evidence from the markets as to the scale of discarding that will arise directly from an increase in MLS to 40cms and it would be horrendous. Apart from the loss of income to boats, for whom bass makes the difference between survival and insolvency, the image of widespread discarding of bass across our TV screens at a time when there is an EU initiative to eliminate discards would do huge damage to the industry's image and the Government's green credentials. The French fleet, by far the biggest player in the bass fleet will continue to fish to a 36 MLS. These two factors alone will negate any theoretical conservation benefits of an increased MLS.

"At his request, we will now present our points to the Minister in writing and he promised to give them due deliberation before arriving at a final decision on whether to proceed. We take his decision to delay laying the statutory instrument as a very positive sign.

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Action for Bass

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"I am sure that the Minister wants to do the right thing for all concerned. The problem has been that to date he has not been made fully aware of the consequences of a unilateral increase in terms of the stocks, in terms of discards, in terms of impact of fishermen and especially in terms of assumed but in fact illusory conservation benefits."

Crab policy

The shellfish committee of the NFFO met recently to consider and develop a new policy to help conserve brown crab.

The main conclusion from the meeting was that there needs to a regional approach to brown crab management, given the different biology and dynamics of stocks around various parts of the coastline.

Angling fears

The NFFO and its members will have the opportunity to respond and contribute to a Defra consultation document on the future development of the UK sea angling industry.

An initial draft outlining priorities from the angling sector contained a number of proposals that are unacceptable to the commercial fishing industry. These include a proposal for a 'golden mile' where commercial fishing activity would not be allowed within a mile of the shoreline.

Check list

The Food Standards Agency has indicated that it intends to apply EU food hygiene regulations to fishing boats.

In a bid to mitigate the impact of these assessments, the NFFO and Seafish have developed a simple self-assessment check list for skippers.



Stock response meeting

A meeting of an STECF subgroup on Cod Recovery Measures held in Hamburg has concluded that stocks are responding – albeit slowly.

The STECF took the view that while there have been substantial reductions in fishing effort in some fleets, this has largely been compensated for by increases in other fleets. The estimate in overall reduction in effort on cod stocks is deemed to be between 4 and 20%.

The meeting heard that the mixture of cod recovery measures that has been introduced since 2000 means that it is not possible to say which of the particular measures (TAC reductions, gear selectivity, closed areas, decommissioning or effort control) lies behind the reduction in fishing mortality. It is not possible to weight the individual measures according to their contribution, other than to say that the emergency closure of 2001 was a failure.

In summary, the cod recovery plan has not worked as envisaged but the stock response has been proportionate to the reduction in effort seen so far.

There seemed to be a view that the cod recovery plan has concentrated too much on targets, rather than moving progressively and incrementally in the right direction. It is not possible to make stock forecasts with any degree of reliability and so biomass targets are not realistic.

On climate change, the subgroup took the view that it was difficult to separate out the impact of climate changes on stocks from other impacts such as fishing. However, it seemed clear that cod would continue to decline in traditional areas and be replaced by other species over a

100 year timescale.

The subgroup also discussed a whole range of possible changes to the cod recovery plans, including the scope to move the Irish Sea nephrops fishery to a single species fishery, probably through gear adaptations.

Fishermen could also have a role in reducing cod by-catch if additional ways of incentivising individual vessels to avoid cod could be developed.

Although there were enthusiasts for increased mesh size, the consensus was that this could be counterproductive at this stage in the recovery plan as a mesh size of 140 to 160mm could improve cod selectivity but would mean that the only available species to catch would be cod.

In the Irish Sea the absence of discard data posed a serious problem in understanding the fishery dynamics. The industry-supported discard data project was seen as an important step forward.

Throughout the meeting, partly reflecting the questions posed in the terms of reference, there was an implicit assumption and sometimes a concrete expression, that a 'one size fits all' approach would inhibit rather than assist cod recovery. An approach differentiated and tailored to the characteristics of specific areas and gear types would be more likely to be successfully implemented.

Although the discussions were focused on recovery measures, there was throughout, a recognition that recovery was dependent on recruitment. Even at the low average recruitment seen in recent years, recovery was possible, although probably not to previous levels.

Cod stocks can recover agrees Symposium

Cod stocks in the North Sea and North Western Waters are capable of recovery, a major symposium on cod recovery has heard.

The Symposium on Cod Recovery held near Edinburgh on 9 and 10 March brought together some of the world's leading scientists, environmentalists, senior EC officials and parliamentarians, fishermen and other stakeholders to discuss cod stock recovery in the North Sea and North Western Waters.

The aim of the symposium – which was organised by the North Sea and North Western Waters Regional Advisory Councils (RACs) – is to push forward new approaches to stock recovery by utilising the wide and varied range of knowledge available. The information gathered at the symposium will be used by the organising RACs to provide the basis for their submissions to the EC and member states as part of the mid-term review of the current Cod Recovery Programme.

The symposium heard that there has been a decline in cod stocks due to a combination of factors, including fishing pressure, predation, and poor recruitment due to unfavourable environmental conditions.

Of key significance is the broad consensus from many of the speakers at

the symposium that cod stocks have the capacity for recovery. However, there is a lack of real time scientific information on the current status of cod stocks, and it was put forward that more resources should be devoted to improving our knowledge. The further development of the already successful fisheries/science partnerships would be one constructive way of increasing this flow of information. It was also recognised by many that there needs to be a more thorough evaluation of the impact of the current recovery measures in place.

Several speakers pointed out that the 'one size fits all' strategy for cod management does not work and a regional approach needs to be adopted, given the unique aspects of fisheries in different areas. For example, there was strong support for the suggestion that the European Commission should take the lead in the setting up of a series of ad hoc regional working groups for different cod stock areas, featuring representatives from STECF (EU Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries), ICES, RACs, NGOs and other relevant stakeholders.

In addition, a strong argument was put forward that the future management for cod recovery should focus on reducing mortality rather than trying to

meet spawning stock biomass targets. This could be achieved by a variety of management tools including the use of more selective fishing gear and closed areas to protect spawning and nursery grounds.

The symposium heard in some of the presentations that there is a fishing industry requirement for greater stability and that socio-economic factors must be taken into account when developing future management plans. Rather than setting rigid and unachievable targets, it might be more fruitful to adopt an approach that ensures stock recovery is continually moving in the right direction.

Marine Bill

The formal consultation on the Marine Bill was launched on 15 March and the Federation is currently drawing up its response.

The Bill has the potential to make a huge impact on marine environmental conservation and will include issues such as marine spatial planning, new marine conservation zones, and new licensing arrangements for the aggregate and offshore power generation industries.

Marine spatial planning has the potential of being a double-edged sword. On the one hand it could prevent fishing access to some areas, but it could also help to protect access to other areas.

The Federation will also be keen to ensure that the setting up of offshore special areas of conservation beyond the 12-mile limit does not act prejudicially against the UK fleet.

FSP Tenders

A number of projects for the successful fishing industry/science partnership have been agreed for the coming year and tenders for these will be shortly advertised in the fishing press.



Delegates at the Cod Symposium

Discard proposals

The European Commission is proposing to introduce a management system for reducing unwanted catches and discards.

Discarding has been addressed in the EU before, mainly through technical measures.

Now the Commission believes that a management system based on outcomes, defined in terms of maximum acceptable by-catch, together with an obligation to land all fish caught, will provide a strong incentive for fishermen to devise the technical solutions that are most appropriate to their own activities. Such a system would also be far simpler for all parties to implement and enforce. Flanking measures would include encouragement to improve the selectivity of fishing gear, area closures and obligations to switch fishing grounds when there are aggregations of young fish, for example.

The exact structure of such a management system, and its impact on related measures, such as total allowable catches and quotas, will need to be worked out in some detail, as will the arrangements to be put in place for landing what would previously have been discarded.

Barrie Deas, NFFO chief executive, said the Commission could make an immediate step towards reducing discards by ensuring that the North Sea TAC for cod is not cut. In the mixed North Sea fishery a reduction in cod catches would inevitably result in an increase in discards.

"There is a need to reduce discards – it is wasteful and bad for the industry's image," he said.

"But the argument for a ban is primarily window dressing. There is no simple solution for resolving the discard issue. But there is certainly scope in collaborative initiatives such as the Irish Sea Discards Project, which provide incentives for fishermen to provide accurate information on the discard levels in their catches."

Concern at WWF action

The NFFO has expressed its disappointment at the move by WWF to take the European Council to court for failing to have followed ICES science and its own rules on cod recovery.

In an open letter to Robert Napier, WWF chief executive, the NFFO pointed out that the reason why the Council of Ministers had been unable to follow the cod recovery plan in recent years was because it is fundamentally flawed.

There was widespread agreement at the recent Cod Symposium (see story page 3) that the top down, target approach never seems to deliver. Impressive science was presented to demonstrate that cod has been the subject of a regime shift closely related to changes in the availability of plankton in the food chain.

"The question the WWF should ask itself is – is it wise to force Ministers to follow a discredited plan?" the letter stated.

It is also not possible to follow ICES advice to the letter as this would result in the closure of all North Sea demersal fisheries. Rather than a knee-jerk reaction, a much better course of action would be to achieve incremental increases in cod biomass.

The letter goes on to say: "The practical effect in the North Sea of WWF's court action, should it be successful, would be the reduction in the TAC set for 2007 in December. This would force the fleets, few of which target cod, into discarding cod at higher levels than will be the case with the 14% reduction agreed by ministers and Norway."

The NFFO also feels that the WWF course of action is a throwback to an earlier period of gesture politics. "The NFFO and WWF have in recent years collaborated closely inside and outside the RACs. This requires a certain degree of trust and mutual respect," said the letter.

"We don't think for example, that the ground breaking Invest in Fish Project



would have happened if WWF had let it be known that collaboration with the fishing industry was a façade behind which WWF carried a big legal stick. "To date, WWF along with Birdlife International have played a constructive and full part in the formulation of RAC policy. Although it has not been possible to achieve agreement on every point, the degree of consensus has been remarkable. It has been, in some respects, a reality check for fishermen to work with what had previously been considered their erstwhile adversaries. Likewise, the exposure of the green NGOs to the complexities of some of the policy issues has brought a new maturity and understanding. We think that WWF will have to choose, and quickly, between a collaborative approach and an adversarial approach, including legal confrontation. It will simply not be possible to have the kind of dialogue that we need to have within the RACs if the fishing members believe that the real game is being played elsewhere – for example in the European Court of Justice.

"From the above you will gather that we consider WWF's decision to go to Court misguided and regressive, driven by motives that are hard to discern, and if pursued, likely to be highly damaging to relations between fishermen and the WWF both inside and outside the RAC. WWF has built up pretty reasonable relations with the fishing industry over recent years through a collaborative approach based on engagement. That is now jeopardised. It's time to Choose or Lose."



Further information

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