STATUTORY MEETING

25th January 2006

AGENDA ITEM
No 7

ENC. No. 6

To receive the Clerk's report on the Defra consultation to implement management measures to boost the number and size of Bass available to the Commercial and Angling sectors

Background

Defra are currently consulting all relevant stakeholders, (recreational, commercial and managerial interests) on the proposed measures to increase the minimum landing size (MLS) for bass and the minimum mesh size to target bass. These measures are potentially the forerunners to further restrictive management measures including bag limits for recreational anglers, near shore netting restrictions, closed areas and/or seasons and further gear restrictions. These measures would only apply to UK registered vessels operating with enmeshing net in UK fishery limits. English vessels would be subject to the restrictions wherever they may be (except when in Welsh territorial sea, where vessels would be subject to Welsh MLSs) and Scottish, Northern Irish and Welsh fishing vessels when in the English part of the UK limits.

The Joint Committee is well placed and represents a key organisation in this consultation. The aim of the Joint Committee encompasses many of the issues that arise from the consultation and the Joint Committee should therefore respond primarily on the potential impact the measures may have on the bass fishery within the District

> *"to regulate, protect and develop the fisheries within the Joint Committee's District in a manner that ensures sustainable viability for the foreseeable future and compliance with the Joint Committee's environmental responsibilities"*

To best serve the interests of the fisheries within the District, it has been shown that the best theoretical fisheries management measures are not necessarily the most effective practical measures that can be applied to any fishery. General acceptance and understanding from all the various stakeholders to some changes in management are historically proven to provide greater fishery benefits than more restrictive measures that are more difficult to justify and have a much lower level of compliance and self regulation. The socio-economic importance of a fishery is not the primary concern of the Joint Committee but does form a significant measure by which to evaluate the impact of proposed management measures.

Meetings took place with representatives of the recreational sector within the Joint Committee's District and members of the commercial sector in Suffolk. Every effort has been taken to reflect the views and opinions arising from those meetings.

Defra's Proposed Management Options

Option 1, do nothing.

Option 2, increase the minimum landing size for bass in UK fisheries from 36cm to 45 cm and the mesh size for enmeshing nets from 90mm to 105mm.

Option 3 increase the MLS for bass by stages over a three year period, or a different period and increase the mesh size for enmeshing nets from 90mm to 105mm.

Option 4 increase the MLS for bass regionally, based on average landing sizes for each defined geographic area and apply corresponding increase in the mesh size for the enmeshing nets from 90mm to 105mm.

Option 5, a staged increase in the MLS for bass to 55cm and corresponding increases in the mesh size for enmeshing nets.

Option 4 incorporates the key aspect of applying regionally based measures and this is, as highlighted above, the role of the Joint Committee. It also includes the view held by CEFAS scientists that the North Sea bass stock is a discrete population.

Minimum Landing Size (MLS)

The main proposal is to increase the minimum landing size for bass from 36cms to 45cms. From a biological perspective this may represent the best theoretical fisheries management measure. CEFAS have stated that male bass mature at a length of 31 – 35 cm and females at 40 –45cms. By increasing the MLS to 45cms all fish in the stock would be allowed the opportunity to spawn at least once before capture. At present the sustainability of the fishery is not questioned, but there is a strong belief that this may be due to environmental conditions being currently conducive to bass increases rather than a reflection of management measures.

Additional benefits of this measure would be that it should provide the recreational and commercial sector with more, larger fish to exploit. A key aim of the recreational sector is to provide for a better chance of capturing larger fish and thus significantly enhance the pleasure from angling. It is argued that this in turn would result in more business opportunities arising from the increased interest in the bass fishery by recreational anglers. Nationally, it is believed that the larger fish would benefit the commercial fishermen due to the significantly higher price the command (£/kg) and this would offset the loss of income arising from the reduced catch levels.

The commercial sector in Suffolk believe that an increase from 36cm to 45cm would remove too great a proportion of the fish currently caught and would result in loss of trade to the local outlets, pubs and restaurants. The market demand locally for larger fish is not strong enough to offset the reduction in the catches. To demonstrate this point the commercial fishermen present at the meeting in Suffolk proposed a maximum size level of 55cm.

Growth rates of young bass in the North Sea are believed to be as much as 6 to 8cm a year. Based on these figures it is likely that bass at 36cm would reach 45cm within 12 to 18 months. Larger fish, 45cm and greater, are believed to grow much more slowly at around 2 cm a year. A staged increase in the MLS would allow a proportion of the 36cm to 45 cm bass to grow on whilst allowing the commercial fishery to remain viable. It is likely that further increases in MLS will be more appropriate and acceptable as the population dynamics shift to a larger mean. This process is highlighted in Option 4.

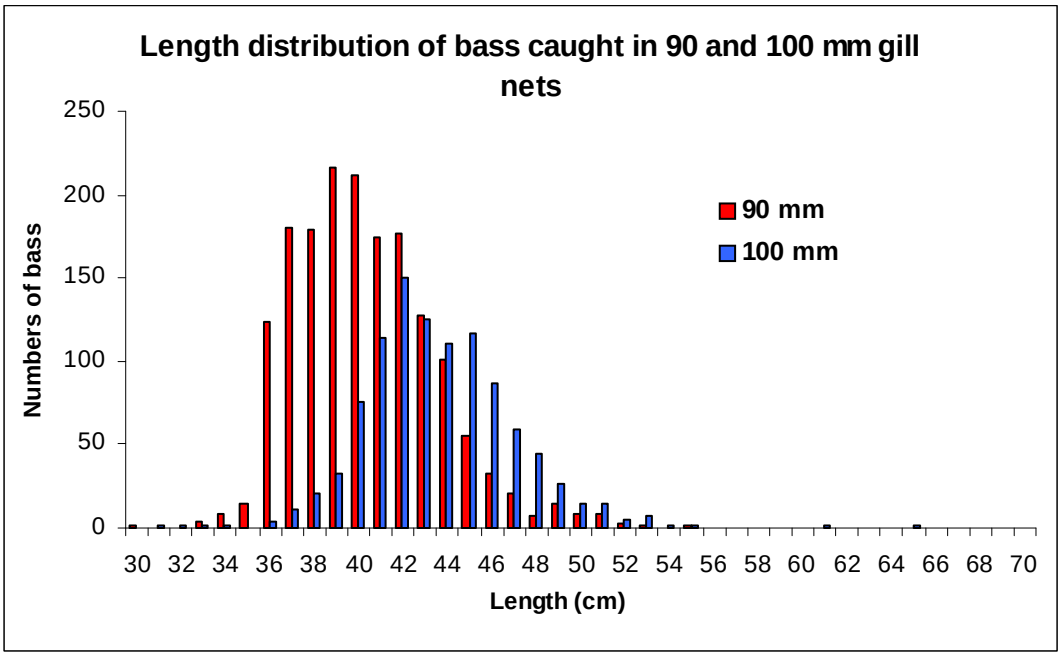
By having a maximum size limit of 55cm, the age of the fish at which sexual maturity is attained is not artificially lowered as is the case in most commercially over exploited fisheries. The larger fish that do survive through the fishery to reach that size would then be protected and would be available to the catch and release recreational fishery. More importantly this measure would provide increased numbers of larger more fecund females to the fishery.

Increasing the mesh size from 90mm to 105mm.

Extensive trials have been conducted to determine the required increase in mesh size to reflect the increase in MLS to 45cm and to limit the level of discards. From these trials it has been shown that mesh sizes between 105mm and 110 mm ensures that most fish retained are at or above 45cm.

Currently, within the Joint Committee's district, the commercial sector can legally exploit the bass, mullet and sole fisheries using 90mm mesh nets (not trawl). The sole fishery is the most significant inshore fishery in Suffolk, but reflecting the national increase in bass abundance, a greater level of bass between 36cm and 45cm has been retained by these nets as bycatch in recent years.

It is the opinion of many of the inshore fishermen that an increase in mesh size to 100mm would be acceptable. There are many individuals that already use these nets. A longshore netting trial in the North Eastern Sea Fisheries Committee's District during October, between 2002 and 2004, recorded a clear difference between the size of bass retained in 90mm mesh nets and 100mm mesh nets. The 90mm mesh retained significant numbers of 36cm and above individuals with a mean size of 39cm. The 100mm mesh retained few 36 –37 cm bass with the mean size recorded at 43 cm. An increase in mesh to 100mm would effectively increase the minimum size of bass caught in the nets to between 38cm and 40cm. A MLS of 38 cm or 40 cm would therefore be appropriate. A 38cm MLS would reduce discards to a minimum. Using larger gear 105mm to 110mm may well increase the number of larger bass caught in enmeshing nets. It is a concern in the consultation that the larger mesh proposed may also increase the number of salmonids caught. 100mm mesh would support the local commercial fishermen's proposal for a maximum landing size; any greater size mesh would weaken this measure.



(Chart source: A 3-year bass gillnetting trial (1st – 31st October 2002-2004) and complementary studies undertaken near Bridlington, East Yorkshire – Summary Report, page 9.)

The consultation suggests that only those fisheries that have a bycatch in excess of 10% bass will be affected by these measures. Mixed fisheries in the ESFJC district, including the longshore fishery, and the inshore sole and mullet fisheries would have bycatches of bass in excess of 10% and would result in significant discards.

General points for consideration.

The commercial bass fishery in the ESFJC District is relatively small. From the sustainability of the stock perspective, there are reservations as to the degree of influence that the inshore fishery has on overall mortality of the stock. On the other hand, the value derived from landings of bass does form a key aspect of the inshore fishermen's overall income.

There are strong indications from the tagging studies carried out by CEFAS that a significant amount of bass remains in the inshore fishery and the offshore migratory patterns have changed to reflect the more benign environmental conditions inshore, especially during the winter, i.e. higher shallow water temperatures.

The proposed measures do not include the trawl bass fisheries. In order to substantiate the benefits that arise from increasing the MLS of bass it seems crucial that this significant element of the bass fishery is addressed. Currently, the level of trawling in the ESFJC district continues to decline. It is conceivable that trawling activity would increase to take advantage of the restrictions to the inshore fleet and increase in bass stocks resulting from these proposals. There are many vessels within the district that currently have the ability to trawl for sprats that could diversify and take advantage of the situation created.

If restrictions were imposed on the trawl, enmeshing net and recreational fisheries there is a distinct possibility that rod and line and set line commercial fisheries could be developed much further on both a local and national level. These fisheries would be highly accessible by the inshore, under 10 metre fleet.

The proposed measures are directed mainly at the English inshore under 10m fleet. It seems crucial that these measures should include all vessels and be implemented on a European scale. Not necessarily because of the benefits to the stock but there would be far greater acceptance within the commercial sector if this were to be the case.

Summary

This is a highly complex issue compounded by the constraints imposed by the consultation. There is undoubtedly good evidence to support the proposal to increase the MLS for bass to 45cm and to increase the minimum mesh size to 105mm. It is the Officers opinion that Option 4 of the consultation provides the most appropriate mechanism by which to implement the management proposals. In order to limit the potential impact of the measures but still to provide a significant improvement to the fishery, it is proposed that the increases in MLS should be incremental, and should be fully evaluated at each stage before any further increase. Assessing further the impact of a Maximum Landing Size is also recommended. In response to the Defra consultation it is the Officer's recommendation to support Option 4 and to increase the MLS for bass to 38cm and to increase the minimum mesh size of enmeshing nets to 100mm in the first instance.

The Joint Committee is asked to receive the report and to consider and agree a response to the Defra consultation.

Matthew Mander
Clerk & Chief Fishery Officer

17th January 2006

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

1) Defra's consultation on measures to increase the number and size of bass available to commercial and recreational fishermen, dated 15th November 2005.
2) A 3-year bass gillnetting trial (1st – 31st October 2002-2004) and complementary studies undertaken near Bridlington, East Yorkshire – Summary Report, page 9.)
3) CEFAS publication, An appraisal of the UK bass fishery and its management (1995) G.D.Pickett, D R Eaton et al.
4) CEFAS Scientific Paper, Bass Management Plan – scientific advice on increased MLS and complementary mesh size for enmeshing nets.