

SW Regional Fisheries Groups (RFGs) collaborative science questions, actions and MMO/Defra/Cefas responses

One question was posed by the SW group during the April RFG meeting, these are detailed here along with the answers and suggested next steps.

- 1. Can CEFAS carry out a survey of Small-Eye-Ray in VIIe similar to that which was run in VIId for Undulate Ray? There are 5t available in the SoS determination and the MMO can manage the issue of dispensation letters if CEFAS can provide the detailed landings/survey sheets similar to those used for VIId. If you deem this appropriate?***

CEFAS Response

Consideration of this stock as part of the skate complex in Division 7.e (or 7.d–e) through a dedicated research project. ICES currently provide advice for thornback ray in 7.e (rjc.27.7e) and blonde ray in 7.e (rjh.27.7e), as well as small-eyed ray (rje.27.7de); all of which are Category 5 assessments (i.e. there is no stock-size indicator) and so at potential risk of regular precautionary reductions in the advised landings through ICES. There are still remaining biological questions (e.g. stock units, length-at-maturity) regarding these and other Channel skate stocks, which would include undulate ray (rju.27.7de) and common blue skate (rjb.27.67a-ce-k).

Given this, a dedicated research project on skates and rays in the English Channel could usefully be considered, potentially involving collaboration with both Jersey and Guernsey. Such a project would require dedicated funding and could usefully address:

- Derivation of potential stock-size indicators for stocks (e.g. thornback ray, blonde ray and small-eyed ray) in the western Channel (e.g. from the south-west beam trawl survey).
- Biological data collection (e.g. length-at-maturity), for key data-limited stocks, for which more robust maturity estimates are required for some of the species. This parameter is needed for some assessment models, for deriving length-based indicators and can inform on biologically-meaningful management measures (e.g. size limits).
- Mark-recapture studies to better examine stock units (noting that the potential relationship between thornback ray in 7.e and 7.d requires further consideration, and as to whether Channel skate stocks (and other species) also extend into 7.h).
- Collection of better length data from skate catches across different fleets to support data-limited approaches such as length-based indicators.

Suggested next steps:

The SoS provisional determination published earlier this year detailed a scientific allocation for small eye quota in 7e. However, this is no longer in force as detailed in the written record and the soon to be published revised SoS determination. Defra will continue to discuss this with the EU in the context of the Specialised Committee.

If quota is secured in the future, it is suggested that this is managed via MMO scientific dispensations enabling data on the catch to be gathered.

MMO and Cefas to work on the principles of such a survey, so this can be put in place should quota become available.

In the first instance, if relevant fishers can highlight those areas where they are having high encounter rates of small-eyed ray (fishing grounds; gears; times of year), then we can collate this information and identify potential options for improved monitoring of this stock in the future. Please send responses to CEFAS Jim Ellis jim.ellis@cefass.co.uk