

Seafish, Defra and MMO drop-in

(for minimum landing size 'MLS' and lobster trials)

Location: Whitby Fishing School Whitby Mission and Seafarers Centre, YO21 3PP

Date: 10 December 2024

Time: 17:00-19:00

In attendance:

- Approximately 60 industry representatives
- Lewis Tattersall, Head of Fisheries Management at Seafish (Chair)
- Annabel Stockwin, Team Leader Non Quota Species (Shellfish) at Defra
- Thomas Valderrama, Non Quota Species Team (Shellfish) at Defra
- Tim Dixon, Head of Fisheries Management at MMO
- Sarah Errington, Principal Fisheries Manager at MMO
- David McCandless, Chief at North Eastern IFCA (NEIFCA)
- Dr Ralf Bublitz, Environmental and Scientific Manager at NEIFCA
- Mike Roach, NFFO

Purpose of the drop-in:

- The purpose of this drop-in was firstly to discuss the introduction of an increased minimum landing size 'MLS' (also referred to as 'minimum conservation reference size') of lobster to 90mm, as committed in the 2023 crab and lobster fisheries management plan (FMP), and secondly inform fishers of the start of MMO's work on potential lobster management trials in the Northeastern region – a measure outlined in the crab and lobster FMP that Defra has commissioned MMO to deliver.

Introduction

- A second meeting was held in Amble on 11 December 2024 – the other lobster trial area identified in the FMP. The note of this meeting can be found [here](#)
- It is acknowledged by all organisations in attendance the importance of the lobster fishery in this region and how important this species is for this area, including the communities it supports.
- Seafish, Defra and MMO greatly appreciate the role provided by NFFO, NEIFCA, and industry representatives in helping promote the drop-in and the input that they provided in the discussions.

Summary of key points:

An overview of context and background information was provided by Seafish as follows:

- Both MCRS (MLS) increases and regionally specific management trials were proposed as initial management interventions for lobster in the English FMP, which was published in December 2023 after public consultation. MCRS increase (to 90mm) is proposed as a national-level management measure, i.e. covering all English waters, and management trials were proposed for the Northumberland Durham and Yorkshire / Humber lobster fishery units (LFU) [as defined by Cefas](#).

- Management interventions proposed under the English FMP would apply to all English waters (in the case of national level measures) and would apply to all vessels fishing in English waters regardless of their nationality. Discussion in this meeting on management trials was focused on the Yorkshire / Humber LFU.
- Cefas stock assessments for 2023 showed that in the Yorkshire / Humber LFU exploitation rates were high at around the limit reference point for males and between MSY and the limit for females, and stock size is between the minimum and maximum reference point. Additionally, anecdotal reports from industry suggests that fishing effort – i.e. number of pots on the ground – has increased significantly in the area in recent years. This suggests that stocks may be being overexploited and that management action is required as per the UK Fisheries Act 2020 which stipulates that UK fish stocks should be managed at or above MSY and that where stocks are below MSY, action should be taken to help them recover.
- The overarching aim is to ensure UK fish stocks are sustainably exploited. Given the importance of lobster fisheries in the E / NE of England, and particularly in ports like Bridlington and Whitby, it is crucially important that management is effective at protecting stocks and the fisheries that depend on them.
- The aim of this meeting is to:
 - Understand how an increase in lobster MLS could be introduced in a way that minimises the impact on the fishing industry as far as possible, for example by exploring different options around phasing of increases and considering the timing of MLS step-changes to ensure fisheries are protected, and;
 - Start discussions on management trials for the Yorkshire / Humber LFU (inshore *and* offshore) to help the MMO understand industry aspirations for future management and what can be learned from existing management, such as that in place inside 6nm through NEIFCA.

Minimum landing size (MLS) / minimum conservation reference size (MCRS)

- Many industry representatives considered that the berried ban wasn't working, as it wasn't being complied with and therefore wasn't bringing any stock benefits. There was a suggestion that the MLS increase should not take place without the removal of the berried ban.
- Defra explained that a berried review was ongoing at the time of the meeting. [This review has now been published](#) with more information to be found below. Defra noted that it is not yet possible to determine what impact the berried ban is having on the stock using current stock assessments and landings data.
- It was acknowledged that the berried ban is not favoured by industry. There is significant non-compliance, and it is challenging to enforce.
- Defra explained that the berried ban will not be removed because despite enforcement challenges, there is evidence that there is still compliance with the berried ban, and that it does, in theory, provide stock benefits, especially if enforcement and compliance is improved. With Cefas stock assessments showing that stocks are currently not fished at MSY, management measures which protect the stock, such as the berried ban, remain necessary.

- Effectiveness of v-notching was discussed and suggested by industry as potential mitigation / reason for removal of the berried ban. Options for v-notching were discussed.
- There was general agreement that the MLS should be phased in over 5-6 years – 1 millimetre (mm) at a time, with a year in between incremental increases to allow for stock changes and to mitigate economic impact on fishermen.
- Those in attendance were asked by Defra what would be the best time for the increase to come into effect.
- The majority of those in the room supported an MLS phased increase that should start in January 2026, as this allows access to the Christmas markets at the lower size.
- Industry explained fears for their future with increasing management measures and there needs to be consideration of the cumulative impacts. There were also questions around how policy makers and managers can assess the effectiveness of one measure if further measures are continuously implemented.
- Industry described how effort is the key issue in the fishery and not the MLS. There are significant amounts of small lobsters on the ground and the stock assessment the FMP is based on is based on data from 2021. As such there is a lag, and it does not match what fishers are seeing in the real time.
- Fishers would welcome an investigation into opportunities for diversification (for example, funding for gears, marketing and access to species). Fishers in the northeast have a very limited fishery and there are not the other species to be able to swap to. There was an acknowledgement from industry that if they do want to explore access to available quota then they can contact MMO directly to discuss.
- Defra may explore maximum landing size in the future, but this measure was not a priority for the fishery at present. Some fishers dismissed this as being needed – for example if you are bringing in MLS then you do not want this as well.
- Defra took an action to contact their trade team to respond on the request for industry support for example with minimum pricing of lobsters and Canadian lobster (labelling/trade/import bans).

Lobster management trials

- The crab and lobster FMP set out plans to develop finer scale management pilots (trials) for lobster in the Northeast. Defra have commissioned MMO to deliver these trials. 3 fishery unit areas have been identified as suitable for these trials – Western English Channel ‘Southwest’ crab and then ‘Northumberland and Durham’ and ‘Yorkshire Humber’ for Lobster.
- Seafish and MMO have set up regional groups to support delivery of 3 trial areas. One meeting has been held so far and attendance from fishers was very low. These groups need fisher’s expertise to develop options of measures that they would like to trial. An outcome of this online meeting was to split into two different groups for the two Northeast trial areas given the differences in the fishery.
- This work is at the very beginning and MMO will be starting to have discussions / meetings to consider options; and the measures that will be trialled are not yet decided, nothing is off the table yet.
- It is outlined in the FMP measures could include pot limits, days at sea, catch limits but it could be there are different options industry would like to trial.
- There was general agreement that regular face-to-face meetings and port visits (at all the ports) is needed for successful engagement. Some fishers in this region have lost faith

that their views are being listened to and heard. Government needs to be flexible with data and times (for example, weather and tide considerations) of meetings and have more incentives for engagement to reduce the pressure on all to attend meetings.

- It was noted that the engagement strategies that work in the southwest are not the same as what is needed in the northeast. This is also a different fishery and the area lacks the structure of representative organisations, associations and PO's that exist in other parts of the country and can simplify engagement. Hybrid approaches are also needed.
- The previous grant scheme for the replacement of pots was raised, and the consequence of this increasing number of pots on the ground. It was the industry view that decommissioning of pots is something that should be explored.
- Regarding effort reduction options - some in attendance noted that there are not many new people coming into the industry so they do not think that effort is going to increase any further. However, many still acknowledged that current levels of effort in the fishery are too high.
- Email addresses were collected at the end of the drop in. These will be added to mailing list for Seafish, Defra and MMO in further communication with the fleet.

Review of Lobsters and Crawfish Order 2000 and 2017 Amendment (berried lobster ban)

- Defra has [published the review of The Lobsters and Crawfish \(Prohibition of Fishing and Landing\) \(England\) Order 2000, including the 2017 Amendment \(the berried lobster ban\)](#), which recommends retaining the legislation.
- Available evidence does not support repealing or replacing the regulations. With lobster and crawfish stocks still under pressure, it is crucial to maintain and enhance the protective measures in the 2000 Order.
- Enforcement challenges and low compliance in some areas of the country have been acknowledged by Defra, and we are working closely with IFCA and MMO to improve enforcement by addressing issues with identifying scrubbed animals. Nevertheless, non-compliance comes with a risk of financial penalties, and prosecutions have been successfully carried out in the past, signalling the measure is enforceable. The review also recommends that stricter penalties be considered for non-compliance.
- The review recommends extending the definition of a v-notched lobster or crawfish to include a notch in all 5 uropods. This change harmonises with certain IFCA regulations and provides additional protection to v-notched animals. This will be implemented through new legislation.
- The review recommends, with further consideration needed, to extend the Order to include prohibiting 'buying, selling, and possession' of berried and v-notched lobsters and crawfish.
- Defra will continue to monitor the Order, which will be up for review again in 5 years.
- The Crab and Lobster Fisheries Management Plan commits to considering how new measures and future management regimes, such as the berried lobster ban, can strengthen existing legislation. These commitments will provide further data to support the next Post Implementation Review.

Useful information:

- Crab and Lobster FMP - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/crab-and-lobster-fisheries-management-plan-fmp-for-english-waters/crab-and-lobster-fisheries-management-plan>
- 'Proposed initial management interventions' section of the FMP. 'Proposal 1' is for the harmonisation of MCRS (MLS) and 'Proposal 3' is for the trial of finer scale management for brown crab and lobster in selected fishery units:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/crab-and-lobster-fisheries-management-plan-fmp-for-english-waters/crab-and-lobster-fisheries-management-plan#proposed-initial-management-interventions>
- Mike Roach (NFFO) has a Whatsapp group to help with the dissemination of information for fisheries management in this region (including MLS and trials). Mike is happy to add people to this group. Membership of NFFO is not required.