

SW RFG Meeting Notes 29.05.25

Summary

Meeting title	SW RFG Meeting
Date	29.05.25
Attended participants	28
Start time	15:00
End time	16:55
Meeting duration	1hrs 55mins

Attendees

Industry

Steve Parker
Andrew Pascoe
Nathan de Rozarieux
Harry Owen
Philip Robins
Jesse Walter
Callum Greenhalgh

SWFPO

Zuzana Dusza

PSFA

Edward Baker

NFFO

Charles Blyth

MMO

Emily Theobald
Anna Maclellan
Courtney Inch
Dan Wardle
Katie James
Jacob Bestwick
Sarah Bedingham
Ellie Falconer
Dave Rowlands
Isobel Johnston
Neil Smith
Jess Duffill Telsnig
Mark Qureshi

DEFRA

Grace Rosinski
Andy Carroll
Nicola Robinson

MCA

Dave Fenner

IFCA

Sarah Birchenough

Agenda

- 1) Emily Theobald, MMO – Welcome & Introduction
- 2) Grace Rosinski, DEFRA – EU Reset
- 3) Dave Fenner, MCA – Small Fishing Vessel Code Revision and Q&A
- 4) Sarah Bedingham, MMO – SW Crab Pilot & Crawfish Update
- 5) Ellie Falconer & Dave Rowlands, MMO – MPA Stage 4 Call for Evidence
- 6) Katie James, MMO – Quota and Q&A
- 7) AOB

Contact details

Quota Team – Katie James / Jacob Bestwick
inshorequotamanager@marinemanagement.org.uk

RFG Team – Anna MacLennan
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Fishing Safety Team Leader MCA – Dave Fenner
David.Fenner@mcga.gov.uk

Recording

The meeting was recorded and can be viewed at the following link:
<https://youtu.be/ORZ-1GbNmjg>

1. Emily Theobald, MMO – Welcome & Introduction

Emily introduced herself as the Principal Marine Officer for the Southwest region and the Chair of this meeting. Emily also introduced Neil Smith as the South Principal Marine Officer based at Brixham who briefly joined the call from one of the offshore patrol vessels.

Emily advised that we have now separated and extended the quota section to give a more in-depth presentation and to allow more time for questions. She also mentioned the bass authorisation review engagement sessions that took place around the southwest with Chris Collins who is leading the review. Thank you to those who attended these sessions and fed into the review.

Emily reminded the group on the code of conduct for this meeting in that everyone is to remain polite, no swearing and keep comments short and to the point to allow everyone the opportunity to speak.

Emily did not receive any objections to the meeting being recorded nor were there any comments or questions prior to the start of the first speaker.

2. Grace Rosinski, DEFRA – EU Reset

Grace introduced herself as head of the UK/EU fisheries team within DEFRA. This team is responsible for annual negotiations with the EU to set fishing opportunities, as well as running the specialised committee on fisheries process with the EU.

Grace provided a quick summary of what was agreed in the EU reset that was announced on 19th May 2025 in relation to fisheries.

There was time at the end for any questions about the announcement.

The big picture of the announcement included a lot of aspects of the UK relationship, but did have key elements pertinent to fisheries. One aspect is that the UK and EU will be agreeing on a Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) animal and plant health agreement. When this agreement comes into effect, it will make it cheaper and easier to export to the EU, for example, by removing the need for export health certificates, which will benefit the seafood export, with less direct effect on the catching sector.

The other big aspect of the announcement was the UK and EU announcing that they have come to a new fisheries access arrangement. The relationship with the EU is governed by the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) which includes a 5½ year adjustment period that we are currently in and runs until 30th June 2026 which continued reciprocal access to UK waters by EU vessels, including the 6nm – 12nm region. It also gave some quota transfers to the UK from the EU that have been gradually moved over to us over the last few years.

This adjustment period was due to come to an end on 30th June 2026, at which point we were left to do what we wanted with the EU, either annual negotiations or multiannual agreements if decided.

The UK and EU have agreed a new multiannual period of access which will last for 12 years and will come into effect on 1st July 2026 after the current adjustment period has ended and will continue until 30th June 2038. The conditions and levels of access are the same as in the adjustment period, so will be the same as the period we are currently in, UK vessels will have the same access to EU waters and vice versa.

We have retained the quota uplift that was secured in 2020 and there will be no changes to the current levels of quota shares between the UK and EU.

Grace also flagged that on the same day the UK government also announced the launch of the Fisheries and Coastal Growth Fund, which will involve £360m of investment over the next 12 years with the purpose of supporting the next generation of fishers and coastal communities. Defra are keen to work with industry to target this investment where it matters most.

There were some complaints in the immediate aftermath of Brexit that funding didn't necessarily go to the right places and to the fishers themselves. With this new fund, Defra will be working closely with industry to identify the places where it is most needed. In general, the funding will be targeted at new technology or equipment to modernise the fleet, training and skills, ways to revitalise coastal communities, and export of UK Seafood both to the EU and around the world.

Details of the fund are still being worked through. Although Grace is not directly responsible for the funding team, she was happy to pass on any questions to the relevant team.

Questions, Comments & Answers:

Comments from Andrew Pascoe: Andrew stated that there are zero opportunities because of the EU reset deal, after Brexit there was a glimmer of hope that UK fishers would get the 12-mile limit back after the 5-year adjustment period had

finished. He stated that overnight the deal has wiped that out and the government don't realise how devastating an effect that will have on an already depleted inshore sector. He suggested that if government secured exclusive access to UK vessels to the 12-mile limit, it would have given a future to look forward to, and we wouldn't have needed the £360 million funding.

Andrew stated that the deal was devastating news, but focus should now be on removing the effort from larger vessels within the 12-mile limit by introducing conservation measures as soon as possible, such as a cap of 221kW, that applies to both domestic and foreign vessels as this would not be discriminatory.

Andrew then commented that the fishing boat market is at the lowest he's ever seen it, and there are less new entrants coming into the industry to buy the boats up.

Andrew stated that the deal does not provide reciprocal access as British fishers cannot fish within the 12-mile limit in EU waters, additionally the EU vessels that fish in the UK 6-12nm limit cannot fish within their own 12-mile limit because of conservation measures they have in place to prevent larger vessels fishing in inshore waters. Therefore, they would not have an argument against restricting this effort in UK waters.

Comments from Steve Parker: Steve commented that there has always been a problem with access to funding as it can be difficult for smaller businesses to get loans from the banks to pay the remaining costs. The schemes tend to favour bigger companies that mostly employ foreign crew.

Steve commented that training funded by grants is usually health and safety, first aid and firefighting training, which is good, but there also needs to be funding for fishing skills and help for people to learn how to fish.

Steve commented that since the 70's there hasn't been this kind of training, or support in developing new fisheries. Hopefully, Defra will look at ways to make the fleet more resilient and help the small-scale fishing fleet into the future with adopting different methods, rather than how funding has been used in the past.

Comments from Ed Baker: Ed commented that he is hesitant to say the 12-year agreement is an opportunity, but we have a lot of power with the Trade and Cooperation Agreement to introduce genuine conservation measures in our own waters, and he hopes government are looking at introducing a 221kW cap that Ed has discussed with PSFA members with genuine support across the fleet.

Ed commented that the £360m must be used strategically to help the fleet adapt. He suggested decommissioning as a possibility to create a new, more innovative fleet that sits within strict conservation measures that helps them fish sustainably within the 12-mile limit. This would reduce pressure from domestic vessels, as well as larger vessels that cross the channel to fish in UK inshore waters.

Ed stated that if Defra wants to work with industry to know how to use the £360m, they will need to know how to input into it.

Comments from Nathan de Rozarieux: Nathan stated that although he could go into the politics about the EU reset deal, this was not the time or place to discuss it.

Nathan commented that when the £100m (UK Seafood Fund) was introduced, Chris Ranford, NFFO and Nathan reached out to Defra for a strategy of how the fund would bring about change. He pleaded that before any of the £360m is spent, there needs to be a strategy to bring about changes in place, even if it takes 12 months – 2 years to draw together.

Nathan suggested that the funding should include training suggested by Steve Parker, running small-scale fishing trials and incentives for changes in behaviour. He also suggested that we need to rebalance the availability of fish available in the sea with fishing capacity. Some form of decommissioning or rebalancing needs to be done, but not at the expense of allowing foreign fleets to remain at current levels and our own fleet made smaller.

Nathan commented that the key to the strategy will need to be built around the 6 – 12nm zone to ensure there is enough space for inshore fishers. The fleet must be capped at current levels to avoid automatically filling that void with more gear or different types of trawling. This would give a glimmer of hope for the next generation to look forward to.

Comment from Harry Owen: Harry commented that the £360m is being earmarked as £30m a year over 12 years, but this is not just for the fishing industry, it seems to be for coastal communities and tourism as well. Even small infrastructure projects can suck up the cash quickly.

Q: Harry Owen asked whether there is an idea of what proportion of the funding will be earmarked for the fishing industry, or whether it's first come first served and fishers get what's left.

A: Grace advised that decisions on how the money will be spent are yet to be made. Grace also clarified that funding isn't quite £30m per year, as the way the funding will be spent over the next 12 years is still being decided.

Response from Grace Rosinski: Grace thanked those who commented for their honesty and feedback and stated that Defra appreciates where they are coming from. These comments will be fed back to the appropriate teams, particularly with regards to funding.

Grace reiterated that Defra really wants to make the fund work, and particularly for those who need it most. Decisions will be made in the next couple of weeks about how engagement will take place with industry directly.

Grace stated that everything is still on the table and there is opportunity to influence where the money goes. Grace will take all the points away and feed these back to the team responsible so that it is in the forefront of their minds.

3. Dave Fenner, MCA – Small Fishing Vessel Code Revision and Q&A

Dave Fenner from the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) shared a presentation of revising the 2021 small fishing vessel code.

A copy of the presentation can be found here:



MCA
presentation.pdf

David shared his appreciation of being invited to the South West Regional Fisheries Group meeting and advised that MCA want to be more involved in the regional groups around the country going forward.

David explained that the current code was introduced in 2021 and was developed by working with the 4 main federations, Seafish and ship builders. It was also largely developed off the back of MAIB (Marine Accident Investigation Branch) recommendations around vessels that had been involved in capsize and flooding incidents. Information on these types of incidents can be shared with those who are interested. The 2021 code introduced new requirements on construction, stability, freeboard and machinery and others.

David stated that since the code was introduced, there have been concerns raised including such things as: trouble identifying what applies to their vessel, difficulty to understand what the requirements are and expectations of surveyors, stability requirements difficult to comply with for some vessels if they were built some time ago, and that some of the requirements have led to a decrease in safety of the vessel. Industry had also asked if there were any other options for demonstrating compliance meeting the code, such as using sea states rather than distance from shore.

David advised that the new revision of the code has been shared with the 4 main federations for comment, and MCA will be meeting with them to discuss feedback at a later date.

David listed a number of intentions of the new code revisions including simplifying chapters so it's easier to find what applies to a person's vessel, removal of duplication in construction standard, referring to vessels as pre or post 2007, simplifying of stability chapters to split requirements by fishing method, establishing MGN503 as the single source of stability tests information, and moving guidance on LSA and firefighting into annexes to reduce clutter.

David stated that MCA will be taking operating history and equivalence into account when assessing the freeboard, including such things as buoyancy of the vessel and how quickly water clears off the deck, what angle of heel the deck immersion happens and increased combings. Hopefully this will avoid options being used that are seen to be decreasing the vessels safety.

David advised that the new code will be setting radio equipment requirements for each sea area which was meant to be included in the previous code. Fit for purpose conditions are also to be accepted at subsequent inspections unless there have been any modifications or there is particular deterioration in conditions.

David also stated that MCA have been developing 8 guidance documents that will indicate what the requirements are for 8 different categories of vessels:

- <7m open vessel built before 16/07/2007
- <7m open vessel built on or after 16/07/2007
- <7m decked vessel built before 16/07/2007
- <7m decked vessel built on or after 16/07/2007
- 7m – less than 15m open vessel built before 16/07/2007
- 7m – less than 15m open vessel built on or after 16/07/2007
- 7m – less than 15m decked vessel built before 16/07/2007
- 7m – less than 15m decked vessel built on or after 16/07/2007

David highlighted the front sheet of these documents and is happy to share copies to receive feedback from industry on whether they work or any suggested improvements.

David also stated that the code has been future proofed to include new sections on switching to alternative fuels, to avoid the need to go through hoops of MCA assessments or filling out forms to show that you are equivalent to the regulations.

David provided an overview of plans for the review, advising that discussions with industry will commence from July 2025 along with the 4 main federations. The UK Boat Builders Association are also involved in the process. MCA would like to get more input from people who will be directly affected by the code, so David asked the group how they felt MCA would be able to get that input into the process before it comes out as a consultation.

Questions, Comments & Answers:

Comments from Steve Parker: Steve commented that from his experience with the survey last year, as you go through the checklist, there is no consistency with surveyors, some surveyors want hydraulic shutoffs and others want something else.

Steve suggested that checklists should be available for what you need to have on the vessel, such as hydraulic or fuel shutoffs, as the code is overly complicated.

Steve also commented that surveyors are not fishermen and do not understand how a fishing boat works, they know how the boat works from a safety perspective, but not how the fishing operations work. Work could be done where surveyors visit vessels or go out to sea on one to understand how the operations work and what the dangers are.

Response from David Fenner: David advised that MCA are currently relooking at the training given to surveyors on understanding fishing vessels. David agreed that a lot of surveyors are not or have not been fishermen. Many of the ex-fishers have now retired or moved on.

David commented that surveyor consistency is an issue raised frequently and is something that senior management are trying to address. He advised that where things aren't consistent, it is important to point these out to MCA so that training can be addressed. He also mentioned that surveyors should be undertaking prior preparation by understanding what has already been checked in a previous inspection.

Q: Steve Parker asked whether there was any intention to introduce skipper tickets or any qualifications to take vessels out to sea.

A: Although it is not his work area, David Fenner advised that this is only going to be for new entrants for vessels down to 7 metres. Existing skippers will not need these tickets.

Q: Steve expanded on his question asking whether this was going to be introduced soon.

A: David advised that he believes this will be consulted on in the summertime but could not give a precise date as it is a different team working on this. It is likely this would not come into force until around spring 2026. But this would be subject to discussions with the federations.

Q: Ed Baker asked what the timeline would be on looking for ways to engage with the MCA ahead of consulting on the revised code. Ed highlighted that he has been working with a group of organisations who are trying to bring together and support small-scale fisheries, and one of their priorities is to communicate with the MCA, but they were unsure who to go to. Ed asked if he could have contact details for David to arrange offline.

A: David shared his email address for anyone wishing to contact him: David.fenner@mcga.gov.uk and advised that consultation would be March or April 2026. This would fit in with the face-to-face event Ed mentioned taking place in Autumn.

Comment from Charles Blyth: Charles elaborated further on the intentions for the skipper's tickets for vessels above 7 metres as he is part of the working group, advising that all skippers will eventually need to have a skipper's ticket, but current qualifications which are voluntary currently, would be honoured and transferred into a certificate of service. Charles also advised that other updates may include refresher training for vessels over 24 metres. This is still in debate and there are other legislative difficulties with Seafish that may also delay this. Charles advised that the NFFO are part of that working group alongside other federations to ensure it is sensible and as beneficial as possible.

Q: Steve Parker asked Charles whether the training for skipper's tickets will be through Seafish. Steve also commented that he has no problem with people needing to have training before taking boats out to sea but wanted to know how this is planned to be done.

A: Charles advised that it is his understanding that MCA will be taking over the training facility that Seafish use, and so Seafish tickets will be converted into an MCA equivalent ticket. David Fenner confirmed that this is also his understanding.

Comment by Nathan de Rozarieux: Nathan urged the importance for fishers to be involved and suggested that Charles could lead a working group of active fishers from each of the previously mentioned 8 categories to feed into these.

Nathan echoed the comments that there is no one left in the MCA who have been commercially fishing, stating that it is difficult for regulators to regulate something where they do not understand the practical aspects.

Nathan gave an example of understanding of starboard side rails and the difficulties getting onboard a boat when it is aground or from a punt that is afloat. He advised that Nigel Blazeby had offered 3 or 4 years ago for surveyors to visit St Ives to go out on a small boat with hook and line to understand these issues. Nathan also stated that the key foundation of the review needs to be based around fisher's knowledge.

Nathan again stated that Charles could work across the industry to bring the right people into a small working group which could be funded to support the self-employed fishers.

Nathan commented that we didn't get the code right the first-time round, so this is a good opportunity to rectify some of those wrongs, provided industry agree with the new code. If people agree with it, then this will improve compliance.

Response from David Fenner: David stated that these were very good ideas, and that he is keen to get more input from those who will be affected by the code, and from those who have experienced being inspected under the current code.

David agreed that there aren't any surveyors that have previously been commercial fishers, but there are some ex-fishers working in other areas of the MCA.

David stated that it may be worth revisiting the proposal that Nathan suggested and recommended he contact Jason Pateman (jason.pateman@mcga.gov.uk) who is the one looking at the training provided to fishers.

David also agreed with Steve's remarks (relating to an inspection checklist), stating that it would be useful to provide further guidance outside of the regulations on what is expected of a fisher to comply with the code, as this would benefit both the fisher and the surveyor if they are both working from the same guidance.

Comments from Nathan de Rozarieux: Nathan urged the need for a working group of surveyors to visit 3 or 4 ports with different types of boats to look around them with the skippers face-to-face to help generate an understanding of how the vessels operate to help generate consistency and knowledge. He recommended that David Warwick from Seafish would be able to arrange this at Brixham or Newlyn.

Response from Davide Fenner: David advised that he had already passed on David Warwick's name to the survey and inspection team for consideration when arranging this kind of training.

Comment from Anna Maclellan: Anna advised that she has received a number of questions from industry via email and port visits for the MCA. She has emailed these to David directly and added the responses below:

Q: MCA views on commercial boats also being able to operate as charter vessels

A: There are different Codes of Practice for different operations, as the risks involved in those operations vary. If a commercial vessel is to operate as a charter vessel it should operate to the same rules as a Charter vessel. Not only does this address the

different risks, it also ensures a level playing field with existing charter operators. There are also questions regarding the training of the crew as Charter vessel crew and skippers require different qualifications as they are carrying passengers. Again, ensuring qualifications are the same on all vessels ensures that level playing field. There may also be issues regarding insurance if vessels which are not Coded correctly and an incident occurs.

Q: Getting vessels to pass the safety regs is now almost impossible for those vessels that have been bought from other countries as well as older vessels.

A: MCA are looking at the flag in procedures, particularly for vessels over 15m following questions raised by NFFO.

Q: Why are smaller vessels being treated the same as larger vessels?

A: The Small FV Code of Practice, although more in depth than previous versions, has a lower level of requirements than those for vessels of 15m and over. We are however now reviewing that Code, which will be done in discussion with Industry, to review its contents, including the inspection regime.

Q: How do we facilitate commercial fishermen who want to take their children (under 18) or other young people out on their vessels to see if they like fishing/learn the ropes etc.

A: This is being addressed by another team in MCA. A proposal has been put forward by the Devon Young Fishers. The Work in Fishing Committee, which includes members of NFFO, SFF, the Welsh Fishermen's Association and the Northern Ireland Fishermen's Federation all attend will be asked for their views. We may also need to seek advice from the Health and Safety Executive and the Department of Work and Pensions. MCA will also research similar land-based provisions for specific sectors (agriculture etc.)

Q: Inshore and outdoor checks – why do the MCA recheck the indoor when they do the outdoor when it's already been checked?

A: This has recently been discussed and MCA will look to clarify guidance to surveyors on the checks that are required at each survey. However, if a Surveyor does identify an issue, for example related to out of date or missing equipment during an Out of Water inspection, he is required to raise it.

Q: Is it a requirement to wear lifejackets in tenders when crossing the harbour.

A: The Merchant Shipping and Fishing Vessels Personal Protective Equipment Regulations 1999 require that appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) is provided for their workers when they are engaged in, or at risk from, a hazardous work activity on board a UK registered ship. In circumstances where there is a foreseeable risk of crew falling overboard, the recognised PPE includes PFDs. These regulations also require that seafarers and other workers wear and use the PPE that has been supplied. MSN 1871 explained that: unless measures are in place which eliminate the risk of fishermen falling overboard, all fishermen must be provided with and must wear, PFDs or safety harnesses. The measures eliminating the risk of Man Overboard must be documented in a written risk assessment.

This would include transferring from a tender to the vessel. I attach an MAIB report into the Fram of Shieldaig [Man overboard from potter Fram of Shieldaig with loss of 1 life - GOV.UK](#).

In this incident, the deckhand drowned after falling to the water when manoeuvring a small tender alongside the moored fishing vessel in Loch Torridon, Scotland.

4. Sarah Bedingham, MMO – SW Crab Pilot & Crawfish Update

Sarah attended the meeting to provide updates on the South West crab trials and on Crawfish.

A copy of the presentation can be found here:



Crab.Craw.Oct
Presentation.pdf

Sarah began by acknowledging the concerns from industry about the impacts of the latest octopus bloom and the effects this is having on shellfish stocks. Sarah shared data on octopus landings from 2023 – April 2025, stating that last week, fisheries managers and scientists met to assess the situation and impacts and they are committed to working collaboratively with stakeholders to understand the effects across the fishery. A further meeting will be held next week (week commencing 02/06/2025) with more industry representatives to discuss concerns, share updates and consider potential actions including future management for the emerging fishery.

Sarah advised that the MMO have been working to improve data around the fishery by sharing ID cards to encourage species level of recorded data. These are available at your local MMO office and more will be printed shortly.

Sarah stated that there is an evidence project looking at the viability of a targeted octopus fishery, which is currently in its final quality assurance process and will be available shortly.

Sarah also advised that she has been in contact with the MMO grants team to equip fishers with equipment required to deal with octopus, including portable electronic stunners, which will be made available through FaSS (Fisheries and Seafood Scheme) funding once this scheme reopens.

Q: Andrew Pascoe asked whether there were identification issues with Mediterranean Octopus for landings in 2023 as there seems to be a lot of landings for that year.

A: Sarah advised that Andrew is correct and that we have very poor data up until this year, so when we talk about octopus landings, the species are clumped together. Sarah commented that we do have much better resolution of data this year, but it is very difficult to compare this to previous years, so we can only really use totals at the moment.

Comment from Andrew Pascoe: Andrew commented that there were definitely more landings of octopus in 2023 than 2024 and most of that was from further West than this year.

Comment from Steve Parker: Steve stated that octopus don't only eat crab, he has been catching 20-30 a day in gillnets with their head bitten off and fish with sucker marks on them, so how are MMO going to work out what they have been eating if they don't leave behind the evidence. Steve also commented that you should be able to catch as many octopus as you can, similar to cuttlefish, as protecting the predator is a bad idea for crab, lobster and small fish.

Response from Sarah Bedingham: Sarah stated that we do not know the full impacts but are estimating it based on landings data from previous years at the moment.

Sarah then went on to provide an update on the progress of the South West crab trial under the crab and lobster fisheries management plan (FMP). One of the objectives under the crab and lobster FMP was to trial finer scale management on a regional basis. The South West crab fishery was chosen as one of the fisheries to trial and so the southwest crab trial group was set up. MMO and Defra have drafted a management options paper which has been shared with the working group. They have also had conversations with Devon & Severn, Cornwall and Isles of Scilly IFCA's to assist with amending the final options of the paper.

Sarah advised that online meetings were scheduled for the 3rd and 5th of June to discuss the paper, feedback from these discussions will be shared wider. There are also quayside engagement events scheduled to take place week commencing 23rd of June, hopefully taking place alongside engagement plans for Stage 4 Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). Seafish are in the process of booking venues for these, and details will be shared when available.

Sarah then moved onto a crawfish update, advising that the current closure for the fishery is due to come to an end on 1st June. MMO are going to be consulting on a potential seasonal closure for 2025/2026 imminently. This consultation will only be focusing on the seasonal closure, and not effort, which we know will be disappointing for some, but we are asking if there are any technical conservation measures that we can consider. Sarah stated that when the consultation is live, MMO will be conducting port visits like last year, more details will be provided on this when available.

Sarah reiterated that MMO acknowledges the concerns and impacts that octopus are having on all shellfish species and are keen to understand more about impacts of the octopus bloom on the crawfish fishery. She stated that if anyone is getting any signs of octopus predation, please let the MMO know by emailing, calling or discussing with anyone at the MMO, so that they can feed this into their intelligence systems.

Questions, Comments & Answers:

Q: Nathan de Rozarieux asked whether Sarah could share any information on the imminent crawfish consultation with the group today.

A: Sarah stated that we have to wait until the information is released to the public so that it is available to everyone at the same time.

Comment from Nathan de Rozarieux: Nathan stated he was disappointed that this information had not been cleared to be shared with the group, as these meetings take place quarterly and many people give up their time to attend meetings and engage constructively and fairly.

Comment from Andrew Pascoe: Andrew stated that there was very little octopus predation last year, but the year before, there were around 5 or 6 per week in the nets being eaten by the octopus. He commented that it would be a problem if the bloom was to come further West towards the crawfish grounds. Andrew also suggested that the octopus bloom may be the reason why there has been an increase in juvenile crawfish moving up from the South, as well as tagged juveniles from the Bay of Biscay that have been seen.

Response from Sarah Bedingham: Sarah thanked Andrew for the insights and advised that we would be in touch over the summer to record the extent of the issue as it develops.

5. Ellie Falconer, MMO – MPA Stage 4 Call for Evidence

Ellie Falconer joined the call to provide an update on Stage 4 Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) with David Rowlands, head of marine conservation at the MMO, supporting to assist with any questions.

Ellie explained that the MMO have been undertaking a project to introduce sustainable fisheries management in England's offshore MPAs starting with Stage 1 and Stage 2 byelaws which were introduced in 2022 and 2024 respectively. The Stage 4 of the project is looking to assess and address the impact of fishing in 5 MPAs designated for highly mobile species, including harbour porpoise and marine birds.

Three offshore MPAs designated to protect marine birds.

- Greater Wash SPA
- Liverpool Bay SPA
- Outer Thames Estuary SPA

Two offshore MPAs designated to protect harbour porpoise:

- Southern North Sea SAC
- Bristol Channel Approaches SAC

The Stage 4 call for evidence took place from 5 December 2023 – 13 February 2024, where initial evidence highlighted that incidental bycatch of harbour porpoise from gillnets may be a pressure of concern. Following the call for evidence, the Impacts Evidence document has been updated with new evidence and draft site assessments have continued to be developed.

Ellie expressed her thanks to those who provided evidence during the call for evidence and advised that a record of comments and evidence received has been

kept which will be published in a Harbour Porpoise Decision Document, to show where the evidence you have provided has been used.

For assessing bycatch, there is not a “site population” for harbour porpoise as they are a highly mobile species, and so the reference unit for the relevant conservation objective for assessing bycatch is the Management Unit within which the MPAs sit (in this case, the wider Celtic Sea and Irish Sea, and the Greater North Sea). Management Units represent the geographical distribution of the porpoise population in English Waters. Ellie stated that the best available evidence suggests that bycatch from gillnets in the two porpoise MPAs is above sustainable thresholds, and therefore management may be required to address this. Following SNCB advice, management is being considered at two spatial scales: MPA level and English waters of the Management Unit. This is because ongoing bycatch outside of the sites may continue to impact the conservation objectives of these MPAs.

Ellie stressed that at this point, no management decisions have been made for the two sites being considered. However, as bycatch is a concern we have started looking into potential management options. The MMO have been actively discussing options with experts and are planning informal engagement with the relevant fishing sectors and non-government organisations to look at the pros, cons and likely implications of these options. This will inform the development of a formal proposal for any appropriate management which will then be open for formal consultation before any regulations are put in place.

The 6 broad management options being considered are:

1. Time area closures
2. Effort limitation
3. Dynamic time-area closures
4. Mandatory ADDs (Acoustic Deterrent Devices) on all under 12 m vessels
5. Voluntary measures
6. Monitoring and control

Ellie stated that the MMO are wanting to share these broad management options at an early stage to gain views from stakeholders at each scale and how these may impact them. This will also provide the opportunity to challenge the management options and identify which options may work or not work, and why, while identifying potential solutions or alternative options that have not yet been considered.

Ellie stated that there will be an informal period of engagement, both virtually and in person to speak to industry to receive feedback and to influence the management options that will be proposed at formal consultation. Once the engagement is complete, all information received will be reviewed and further updates will be issued on the next steps as soon as possible.

As mentioned earlier in the call, engagement in the South West is due to take place week commencing 23rd of June, further details will be shared as soon as possible.

A literature review of management options will be published on gov.uk in the next few weeks, and online engagement with fisheries representatives will hopefully take place week commencing 16th June.

A presentation to provide a more visual representation of the information can be found here:



MCT Stage 4
presentation.pdf

Questions, Comments & Answers:

Q: Ed Baker asked for a copy of the maps and slides to be shared with the group. He then stated that for a while PSFA have been trying to set up a pinger pool for allowing fishers to have access to pingers to prevent cetacean bycatch. Ed advised that they had been repeatedly told by MMO and CEFAS there is not enough evidence to show it would be effective, and that there could be negative effects on animals.

Ed asked whether Ellie could share any evidence that suggests the pingers are safe from the proposals to use ADDs for under 12m vessels, as how this ties in with the Clean Catch UK trials and the work PSFA are doing now would be useful to understand.

A: Ellie advised that MMO are working closely with CEFAS colleagues and have been involved in the Clean Catch UK project, and the MMO wildlife licensing team, which sits within the marine conservation team, have been trying to process pinger pools and the use of pingers on under 12m vessels. David Rowlands added that it is a complex picture that isn't hard evidence one way or the other. Evidence will be shared in a workshop environment, as well as in documentation. This informal engagement is a good opportunity for any additional information to be added into that evidence base, so that we can make the best decisions possible.

Comments from Andrew Pascoe: Andrew stated that the tools being proposed for porpoise protection such as effort control, time closures and more management are what has been asked for in the last 3-4 years for the crawfish fishery.

Andrew then commented that when the pinger trials were run in the late 90s – early 2000s for larger vessels, they found that porpoises would turn their sonar on and off, rather than keeping them on all the time like dolphins, which is why pingers worked in the offshore gillnet fishery.

Andrew stated that it would be more suited to have larger pingers placed on buoys every half mile in areas with a higher concentration of porpoises than placing this burden of cost on fishers. These could easily be moved to different areas or implemented at certain times of year when the populations are greater. This would make the porpoises turn on their sonar so they can see the nets, and reduce bycatch, while putting less of a burden on industry.

AOB Questions and Comments

Q: Steve Parker raised the issue of the ban on catching small eyed ray in ICES Area 7e. Steve asked for an update on whether the ban can be lifted and what progress has been made so far.

Steve commented that this has been raised **multiple times have there have** been conversations with MMO and Cefas, but there is no reason why they have been banned. Steve stated that he has discarded over a tonne of small eyed ray already this year, and throwing back perfectly good fish does not provide any conservation whatsoever.

A: Emily Theobald stated that the sentinel fishery study took place last year to gather data and allow certain vessels to be permitted to land small eyed ray as part of that study. This was to aid in the removal of the non-retention policy. Emily also added that skates and rays are exempt under then landing obligation due to their high survivability likelihood when discarded from nets and trawls.

Anna expanded on Emily's response stating that the aim of the sentinel fishery is to remove the non-retention policy eventually and that there is scientific quota available this year to repeat the sentinel fishery, as one year's data is not going to be enough. Defra, CEFAS and MMO are currently working on those plans, Anna will share more details when available.

Comment from Steve Parker: Steve stated that this is a waste of resources, especially when fishers are not allowed to catch pollack, must return crawfish to sea this time of year and can't catch bass. There is another species being ticked off all the time and Steve cannot see a reason for small eyed ray to be banned in 7e.

Response from Emily Theobald: Emily agreed with Steve's comments and stated that allowing this fishery would support fishers in light of the issues with pollack and commented that there are issues as a result of this for those who fish between areas 7e and 7f.

6. Katie James, MMO – Quota and Q&A

Katie introduced herself as one of the inshore Quota managers, working alongside Jacob Bestwick who was also in attendance on the call.

At the last meeting, Katie did not provide a full quota update, so for this meeting she provided the standard presentation style that has been used over the last few years, with some additional slides that had been requested in terms of breakdown by gear type. The slides had been sent out ahead of the meeting to allow people to study and think of questions to raise at the meeting.

A copy of the presentation can be found here:



SW Quota
presentation May 20

Katie stated that the layout hasn't changed much since previous meetings and for those who haven't seen these before, on each slide there are 2 graphs, the left indicates yearly uptake, showing initial quota availability (blue), total available after trades (orange), and total uptake of quota (grey). The righthand graphs indicate a

monthly breakdown for the stock per year. For 2024 and 2025 data, there is an additional block to show manual adjustments that have been made using sales notes, due to issues with the catch recording data.

Katie provided an update on the catch limits and uptakes of each stock. *Please refer to the presentation for further information.*

Katie advised that Brill became quota stock as of last year for 7d and 7e.

Katie stated that last year we did see an increase in hake uptake last year due to diversification of some pollack fishers. There is still an increase in uptake since 2022/23, but not as much as last year, and uptake is still lower than what we have available in allocation.

Katie advised that plaice stocks were split last year from being a combined 7d&e stock to separate 7d and 7e stocks. *The graphs for previous years indicate data for the combined stocks, so this is worth considering when referring to the graphs in the presentation.* She is aware that this is a stock that uptake can reach the u10m allocations, and so Katie and Jacob have traded in stock to be able to support the uptake seen in previous years. There is some manoeuvrability between the two pools, and so Katie will be keeping an eye on this to see where quota needs to be moved to provide support.

Katie stated that plaice 7f-g was a stock with significant amounts of data missing for last year, and so is a stock that we are keeping an eye on due to there being a large cut for this year's allocation.

Katie advised that 20 tonnes of pollack quota has been traded in internationally and so quota available is closer to the 90-tonne mark, which is enough to support the 88.3 tonnes of uptake that was caught last year.

Katie stated that the international quota swaps happen in rounds and start from May, which we have just finalised and is where the additional 20 tonnes has come from. There are then monthly IQS (International Quota Swaps) rounds until January where cross-year swaps take place.

Katie stated that skates and rays catch limits in areas 6 and 7 (excluding area 7d) will be decreasing to 10 tonnes per month from 1st June as we are aware uptake has been on or around what we currently have in terms of allocations. If anyone is stuck with skates and rays quota, she is happy for them to get in touch so that she may support you.

Katie advised that for 7e sole quota allocation was initially 75.4 tonnes for the under 10m fleet, though IQS and cross year trades, this has now been increased to 170 tonnes which is at or around the uptake for the previous 3 years. Catch limits will be increased to 2 tonnes from 1st June, but this is another stock that quota managers will be keeping an eye on to ensure there is enough for the remainder of the year.

Katie then introduced the new slides that indicate a gear breakdown of 7e sole uptake for under and over 10m vessels. Katie caveated that as some of the data is manually adjusted with sales notes data, we are unable to break down those by gear

type as this is not recorded on a sales note. Judging from previous years, the missing data is likely to be from a combination of gill net and entangling nets. *Please refer to the presentation for further information.*

Katie stated that the decrease in terms of dredged sole is likely to be a result of introducing bycatch limits for dredgers from 2023.

For the over 10m sole 7e stock, there is not currently a proposed increase in monthly catch limits, however, this will be reviewed in June, and we are expecting requests in the next review.

Katie advised that for under 10m whiting 7b-k, data prior to 2024 included area 7d, but this is now a separate stock.

Katie reminded the group that undulate ray in areas 7d and 7e are still subject to restrictions on minimum and maximum landing sizes and the closed period runs from May to August. The data indicates a purple bar for May 2025, which was a result of incorrect catch records and has since been corrected. Catch limits were 2 tonnes per month and will be reviewed in September when the fishery reopens to see if this is still appropriate.

Katie advised that for small eyed ray in 7f and 7g, there is a UK allocation of 57 tonnes which is unallocated at UK level and so is mainly managed between the MMO and Welsh Government as the main fishery is in these waters. Katie and Jacob are looking into the feasibility of trading internationally, however, the additional 9 tonnes received this year is more than has been traded in for previous years.

If there are any stocks that weren't included in the slides that anyone would like to see, you can send an email to the RFG mailbox or directly to Katie or Jacob using the email addresses in the 'contact details' section.

Questions, Comments & Answers:

Q: Steve Parker asked how MMO are defining bycatch only for pollack.

A: Katie advised that there is not an official definition of bycatch and is not something she is able to answer but will take the question away and ask Defra.

Comment from Andrew Pascoe: Andrew stated that, as much as the increase in bycatch allowance is welcomed, that going forward we need to keep a close eye on it to avoid going down to 10kg allowance a month from October onwards or so.

Response from Katie James: Katie agreed with Andrew and advised that she is looking at both catch recording and sales note data on a weekly basis to see what uptake has increased to and will be monitoring the impacts of increasing the catch limit over the summer months. Katie stated that there is potential that the catch limit will go down later in the year but would avoid it going anywhere near 10kg and would reduce sooner than later if action was needed to be taken. There are still avenues to trade in quota internationally and so those avenues are being investigated to enable a consistent catch limit going forward.

Comment from Ed Baker: Ed commented that some of the PO's (producer organisations) look as though they have tapped out their pollack allocations or are close to it, are these looking internationally for quota? Ed stated he does not want the under 10m vessels to be bailing out the rest of the country.

Response from Katie James: Katie stated that this is a question that has already been raised at a Defra level, but they have the same avenues as fisheries managers to explore obtaining quota. Katie has been proactive with cross year trading at the end of last year and in trading internationally, and so it could be a case of success for the PO trades later in the year.

Comment from Steve Parker: Steve commented that he was concerned the graph for 7e sole allocations was indicating that we would not have enough quota for the remainder of the year, or catch limits would be reduced later in the year, as he was not aware of the additional quota that had been traded in.

Response from Katie James: Katie stated that catch limits had started off at a lower catch limit than in previous year. Katie is quite confident that she will be able to trade in further quota to sustain a 2-tonne quota for the remainder of the year.

Comment from Steve Parker: Steve stated that, from the gear breakdown graphs, there has been a massive increase in sole landed from dredgers this year, is this a result of an increase in dredgers fishing in the area, or are they ignoring the 200kg/month bycatch limit?

Response from Katie James: Katie stated that this is a good question, coastal teams would enforce this, and Katie will raise with the compliance team to see if there has been any increase in abuse of this system, but did not have the data to hand on whether there has been an increase in individual vessels.

Comment from Steve Parker: Steve commented that 200kg per month seems like a large amount to allow as bycatch for dredgers.

Comments from Ed Baker: Ed echoed Steve's comments and suggested that 200kg per month may be too much. He also stated that he would be keen to know how the non-sector is doing with sole uptake in dredgers and asked whether there is scope to try and limit that activity as well, as it was an action that was mentioned in the sole management measures.

Response from Katie James: Katie stated that she would take these questions away and look at the data before providing an update.

Comment from Steve Parker: Steve commented to say that the quota section was much better than previous meetings.

7. AOB

Comments from Andrew Pascoe: Andrew commented that it is disgusting that we are ignoring ICES advice regarding recreational pollack fishing. He stated that it is basically a free for all and the stock is in major trouble. Andrew commented that

recreational fishers are not sticking to their gentleman's agreement of 5 per day, and even if they are, charter vessels that are taking out 10 people out a day are having a massive effect on the stock. Andrew stated that something needs to be done about this otherwise the stock is not going to improve.

Response from Emily Theobald: Emily stated that she understands Andrew's point of view and that this has been mentioned continuously since the pollack zero TAC (total allowable catch) situation first began. She advised that MMO recognise this as a problem, although was unable to give any guarantees of what this looks like in terms of management moving forward.

Response from Andy Carroll: Andy commented to say that Minister Daniel Zeichner has been clear that Defra will introduce regulations if voluntary measures are not working. We are looking to evaluate Angling Trust's measures and expect to have initial results later this year. Emily added to Andy's comment to say that when the Minister visited the South West a couple of weeks ago, pollack was very high up on the agenda in terms of what was being raised to him and so hopefully more information will be available soon.

Comment from Andrew Pascoe: Andrew stated that it feels as though commercial fishers are feeling the brunt of the regulations and they rely on pollack to make a living, while seeing other sectors taking advantage of the stock while fishers are helping the stock. He added that it is strange to continue to allow this to happen, especially with the zero TAC advice.

Response from Katie James: Katie stated that this is not being ignored, and we are echoing these statements in the relevant pollack meetings.

Emily Theobald rounded off the meeting by thanking those who attended and presented. The next RFG meeting will be held in approximately 3 months' time.

The meeting was concluded at 16:55.

Thank you for attending this Regional Fisheries Group meeting. If you would like comment on these or previous minutes, be added to this group's contact list or contribute in any other way please contact the MMO Regional Fisheries Mailbox: regionalfisheriesgroups@marinemanagement.org.uk or find out more at the Regional Fisheries Groups webpage: Regional Fisheries Groups - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)