

Whelk Management Group (WMG) Meeting

4 August 2021

Remote meeting via Microsoft Teams

Attendees

Aoife Martin, Seafish (Chair)
Andy Lawler, Cefas
Bill Brock, Brighton & Newhaven Fish Sales
Charlie Abbott, Lynn Shellfish
Charlie Brock, Brighton & Newhaven Fish Sales
Charlotte Colvin, Bangor University
Chloe North, Western Fish Producer's Organisation
Ella Brock, Seafish

Emma Plotnek, Fishing into the Future
Helen Hunter, DEFRA
Holly Kaiser, Seafish
Isobel Bloor, Bangor University
Jack Emmerson, Isle of Man Government
Joanna Messini, Defra
Lewis Tattersall, Seafish
Marta Moran-Quintana, Seafish
Michel Kaiser, Heriot-Watt University
Phil McBryde, Defra

Apologies:

Beshlie Pool, South Devon and Channel Shellfishermen Association
Hannah Fennell, Orkney Fisheries Association
Helen Hunter, Defra
Les Lawrence, Shellfish Assoc. of Great Britain
Mark Tilling, Welsh Government

Whelk chapter of National Shellfish Fisheries Plan (Aoife Martin, Seafish)

1. The Whelk Management Group chapter sub-group has been established to progress work on the whelk-specific chapter of the National Shellfish Fisheries Plan (NSFP). The group will work on the development of the whelk chapter and will be disbanded once this has been completed. The role of the members is to steer development of the draft whelk chapter which will then be presented to the wider WMG for review.
2. A series of high-level draft management objectives have been established by the group for the whelk chapter. The next step for the group is to establish the requirements of each objective so that they can be effectively delivered, and their performance tracked.
3. The whelk chapter will set out an overview including overarching ambition, objectives, scope, current biological/social/economic status, duration, and means of tracking overall performance.

Science Sub-Group update (Andy Lawler, Cefas)

4. The last meeting of the science sub-group was held on the 28th June. The sub-group aims to understand and steer the scientific research that needs to be undertaken to meet the objectives of the WMG chapter of the NSFP through the development of a research plan.
5. The science sub-group has identified six key fisheries management questions related to the objectives of the WMG:
 - a. What data need to be collected to build a data rich future for UK whelk fisheries?
 - b. Is there a viable stock assessment model available for whelks?
 - c. How do we establish whelk stock boundaries?
 - d. To what extent do we have multiple localised stocks versus fewer stocks but greater variation because of environmental conditions?
 - e. How best to establish a CPUE/LPUE indicators and time series data for UK whelk fisheries?

- f. Is a minimum landing size the most appropriate means of managing our whelk fisheries?
6. Gathering appropriate data for fisheries management (as opposed to enforcement) and data consistency/compatibility is a key focus of the sub-group, however this applies to all shellfish fisheries and so will be raised to the Shellfish Industry Advisory Group (SIAG) for further exploration.
7. The MMO CatchApp is currently undergoing improvement. However the inability to distinguish between pot types or pot soak time make accurate calculation of whelk LPUE/CPUE impossible. Improvement of national data gathering mechanisms will require engagement with the appropriate regulator.

Managing fishing effort (Aoife Martin, Seafish)

8. There are few management measures in place to control whelk fishing effort. Access to UK whelk fisheries is via a generic fishing license which means any vessel with a shellfish entitlement can fish for whelks. Members of the group provided their thoughts on the current management of whelks:
 - a. There are inherent challenges in managing an open access fishery. Implementation of measures to limit fishing effort would need to consider both new entrants to the fishery and 'effort creep' by existing operators.
 - b. Examples of effort management from the Isle of Man were provided. The Isle of Man uses a permitting scheme with an attached pot limitation to cap the total number of vessels and number of pots being fished. However, these measures were based on accurate logbook data of pot hauls.
 - c. The lack of robust scientific data in UK whelk fisheries may cause reticence amongst fishers regarding pot or catch limits as the necessary evidence does not currently exist; however, fishers may be more accepting of a permitting scheme which sustains the current fishery rather than reverting to a historical reference period.
 - d. Catch limits are more easily enforced than pot limits. Any measures should be linked to the economics of vessel size.
 - e. Conditions can be attached to permits allowing flexible fishery management when evidence is available to support interventions.
 - f. Any consideration of management changes must take into account management of non-quota stocks via the Trade and Cooperation Agreement as well as EU management of EU stocks. Management intervention risks displacement of effort between fisheries or jurisdictions.
 - g. Careful consideration must be given to any setting of criteria or historical reference periods when introduction measures to manage fishing effort.
9. Seafish will gather more information on the possible existence of targeted whelk trawl fisheries (and the significance of whelk bycatch in trawl fisheries) and update the WMG at the next meeting.
10. The whelk effort discussion paper will be circulated with the WMG, wider shellfish groups, the IFCAs and the Regional Fisheries Groups (RFGs). This will ascertain if there is an appetite for a call for evidence on effort management in whelk fisheries.

Market issues impacting whelks

11. The group discussed the current stagnation of the whelk export market to South Korea. Covid-19 led to a drop in demand for whelks in South Korea leading to a backlog of frozen product in both the UK and Korea.
12. It will take time to resolve this issue as frozen stocks are used. It is expected that this could take between one year and 18 months. This could translate to a reduction in fishing effort for whelks, however sales have not stopped at the current time.

Implications of the TCA on fishing opportunities non-quota stocks (Phil McBryde)

13. The UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement sets provisions for reciprocal access for UK vessels to non-quota stocks (NQS) in EU waters, and vice versa. Negotiations between the UK and EU culminated in agreement of tonnage limits for NQS (based on the 2012-16 reference period) however there is no intention to enforce NQS tonnage limits in 2021, instead Defra will monitor catches in 2021 only. This decision was made due to difficulties in implementing tonnage limits halfway through 2021.
14. Monitoring UK catches in EU waters to date suggests catches are broadly in line with expectations based on the 2012-16 reference period, however whelks and king scallops are exceeding/close to exceeding the tonnage limit.
15. Defra is exchanging data with the EU on uptake and are creating a mechanism for data sharing going forward. Defra currently only has information regarding UK effort in EU waters.
16. Industry is urged not to share any data or policy ideas with any EU fisheries stakeholder bodies. However, it is also acknowledged that maintaining communication and cooperation with groups such as the NWWAC Whelk Focus Group is mutually beneficial.

The use of soft brown crab as bait in whelk fisheries (Lewis Tattersall, Seafish)

17. The issue of landing of soft brown crabs ('white crab') for whelk bait was raised in the Crab & Lobster Management Group (CMG) with members stating that the practice puts additional pressure on crab stocks and that landing soft crab at a low price devalues the industry.
18. WMG members in attendance were not aware of a problem regarding the use of soft brown crab for whelk bait and in their experience, have not been offered or asked for soft brown crab. Soft brown crab is considered a poor whelk bait; operators instead use processing waste or crab that have died in transit as whelk bait.
19. It is possible that this is a localised issue that only happens routinely in certain areas of the UK. The topic will be added to the agenda of the next CMG meeting for further discussion.
20. Crab bait is the biggest expense in the whelk fishery so the WMG would still welcome exploration of alternatives.

Actions

Action no.	Action	Responsibility
6.1	Discussion on data gathering mechanisms and principles to be raised to the SIAG as an overarching shellfish issue	Seafish
6.2	Carry out desk-based research into a) the existence of targeted whelk trawl fisheries, and b) the significance of whelk bycatch in trawl fisheries in the UK	Seafish
6.3	Bait provisioning issues to be added to the agenda of the next CMG meeting for further discussion <i>and</i> add item on exploration of	Seafish (with input from WMG members)

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	alternative whelk baits to the agenda of the next WMG meeting	
6.4	Circulate the whelk effort management discussion paper to relevant stakeholders including IFCA's, RFGs, and invite comments from all WMG members	Seafish (with input from WMG members)
6.5	Draft a letter from the WMG to the NWWAC Whelk Focus Group regarding any future collaboration, to be approved by Defra	Seafish/Defra