

Whelk Management Group (WMG) Meeting

11th September 2023

Remote meeting via Microsoft Teams

Attendees

Aoife Martin, Seafish (Chair)	Joanna Messini, Defra
Alison Freeman, Fishmongers	Jonathan Parr, MMO
Andrew Brown, Macduff Shellfish	Mark Merrick, AM Seafoods
Bella Voak, Cefas	Mike Cohen, NFFO
Charlie Abbott, Lynn Shellfish	Moritz Eichert, Heriot-Watt University
Ella Brock, Seafish	Philip Haupt, Kent and Essex IFCA
Felix Ameye, Seafish	Rebecca Treacy, Seafish
Fi Birch, Mindfully Wired Communications	Sophie Bennett, Seafish
Harry Owen, Western Fish Producer's Organisation	Tim Smith, Association of IFCAs
Jack Walker, Mindfully Wired Communications	Udara Nagodavithana, Seafish

Apologies

Bekah Cioffi, Welsh Government	Phil McBryde, Defra
Claire Pescod, Macduff Shellfish	Sara Mynott, Mindfully Wired Communications
Jack Emmerson, Isle of Man Government	Tony Miles, MMO
Juliette Hatchman, Southwest Fish Producers Organisation	
Michel Kaiser, Heriot Watt University	

Review minutes and actions from WMG meeting, May 2023 (Aoife Martin, Seafish)

1. The minutes from the previous meeting were reviewed and approved.
2. An update was provided on the actions from the previous meeting:
 - a. Action 12.1: *Provide more clarity on the FMP consultation and approval process and the SEA.* Information has been shared more widely since the last meeting and there is greater clarity around the process.
 - b. Action 12.2: *Circulate draft whelk consultation questions to the group for their input.* Draft whelk consultation questions were circulated to the group for their feedback, which was incorporated prior to consultation.
 - c. Action 12.3: *Seafish to share FMP management policy papers with WMG when appropriate.* Draft papers on proposed initial management interventions will be circulated and discussed at a future meeting. The draft FMP includes a summary on each management intervention proposal.
 - d. Action 12.4: *Provide clarity on how the TCA and international obligations will be reflected in the FMP and as part of the TCA review.* Defra is still assessing how the FMPs will interact with the TCA and further updates will be provided to the WMG. The option to use the FMP review period to align the FMP to the TCA was highlighted as potential opportunity.
 - e. Action 12.5: *Maintain a watching brief on Kent and Essex whelk mortality issue.* Information on the Kent & Essex mortality issue was shared prior to the meeting and is included on the agenda.

- f. Action 12.6: *Share electronic copies of Defra FMP consultation materials.* Defra FMP consultation materials have been shared electronically with the group.

Open session:

3. No new issues were raised during the open session.

FMP: Consultation

4. Seafish shared an update on how the FMP consultation events and how to get involved:
 - a. Members were directed to the consultation page and taken through the materials available [here](#), and were also reminded of the consultation deadline (1st October 2023). An Eventbrite page lists all the consultation events, including the Seafish dedicated events, and provides full details on each meeting including a registration portal. Recently added events were highlighted, including Defra online events and in-person meetings facilitated by Seafish to focus on the shellfish FMPs in Shoreham, Cromer, Whitby, and Bridlington.
 - b. Mindfully Wired Communications have created posters to advertise in-person consultation events, and WMG members are encouraged to disseminate these materials to the wider industry to raise awareness.
 - c. Members discussed the initial proposed management interventions included in the draft FMP. Seafish-led events are part of the wider Defra public consultation, but will focus on the shellfish FMPs to gather feedback on the proposed management interventions.
5. Key discussion points on this item were as follows:
 - a. Members were concerned that the Whelk FMP has not had sufficient attention at the Future Fisheries Management LIVE events due to the high level of interest in other topics being discussed, including other FMPs, remote electronic monitoring, and discards reduction.
 - b. A whelk specific event in the Northwest of England would be welcomed by stakeholders in the area. Seafish agreed to explore the feasibility of holding an additional event in the area.
 - c. The Association of IFCA's is holding a 2-day workshop at the end of September to discuss the FMPs and to gather feedback from across the IFCA network.
 - d. Seasonal closures: There was discussion on the validity of the claim that there is excess fishing pressure on whelks, given the limited information available on fishing effort. While there is limited effort data, MMO data shows that there was a 34% increase in UK registered vessels landing whelks between 2010-2019, and there is also anecdotal evidence that pressure on whelk stocks has increased. There is a concern that as other species are under pressure this could see more displacement into the whelk fishery. A request was made to Seafish for all available data on trends in fishing pressure to be collated into a short summary document and circulated to members.

FMP: Post-consultation process

6. Defra provided a short update on the next steps once the consultation closes. Given the ambitious timeline for publication (before the end of 2024) this is likely to be an intense period of activity. Key stages will include:
 - a. Defra will prepare the response to consultation report.
 - b. Defra will work with Seafish (as whelk FMP delivery lead) to update the plan based on feedback received.
7. The opportunity to involve WMG members in updating the plan post consultation, and its subsequent implementation, was discussed. Given the tight timeframes there would be limited ability for direct involvement but there would be scope to share updates with the WMG during the process.

FMP: implementation

8. A dedicated FMP delivery team has been established in Defra which will lead on the implementation, including the early management measures and any further interventions. This was welcomed but there are still concerns that the resources required to fully implement the FMPs may not be available, particularly as more FMPs are progressed. Defra acknowledged this challenge.

Research update:

Whelk pot selectivity within the Whelk sustainability project (Moritz Eichert, Heriot-Watt University)

9. Moritz presented the latest findings from the FISP project on factors affecting the size selectivity of whelk pots and the riddling process:
 - a. Experiments have been conducted comparing standard pots (with escape gaps as required by the relevant IFCA byelaw) alongside modified scientific pots with ten times the active escape area. Whilst increasing the available escape area did not improve the selectivity for whelks exceeding the minimum landing size, soak time played an important role. If pots are hauled within 24 hours, as most commercial pots are, there is always some retention of undersize whelks and is likely due to the bait still actively fishing until the pots are hauled. If pots are left for 45 hours there is almost no retention (1%) of undersize whelks.
 - b. Implications of the findings were described, such as how effective gear selectivity reduces the need to sort using a riddle, which is a potentially harmful process to discarded undersize whelks. Whilst increasing soak time does have the benefit of effective selectivity, this time frame may not be achievable for industry without increasing the number of pots fished. Any changes to standard fishing practices could have associated economic impacts.
 - c. The research team are also investigating the use of chemical attractants as bait alternatives, compared to natural baits commonly used in whelk fisheries. The use of binding agents such as sodium alginate may enable bait to last longer and this will be trialed, first in lab-based experiments and then in the field. Heriot-Watt University has offered to send these binding agents to any members who wish to trial their own alternative baits.
10. Key discussion points on this item were as follows:
 - a. Industry expressed agreement with the finding that increasing escape opportunities will not improve selectivity with the current industry soak times (~ 24 hours). The group welcomed the research and update from the team since there is concern that riddling to select for certain sizes may lead to higher rates of post-discard mortalities.
 - b. It was brought to the group's attention that Mindfully Wired Communications have written an article in Fishing News about the scientific research being conducted at Heriot-Watt University and Bangor University, which will be circulated in due course.

Update on Kent and Essex whelk mortality issue (Philip Haupt, Kent & Essex IFCA)

11. Kent & Essex IFCA gave a presentation on the occurrence of moribund whelks at the end of the summer 2022, and the implications of this on the fishery. Investigations have been undertaken to identify the cause:
 - a. There was a strong correlation between the event and the number of days where water temperatures exceeded 20°C. The affected area is notably shallow and so is especially vulnerable to temperature change. The event took place during the prolonged heatwave of 2022.
 - b. Water quality and dredging activity were considered as possible causes of the event. Following discussions with the Environment Agency, it is deemed unlikely that sewage discharge could have caused such a long-term issue over such a large area. KEIFCA is meeting with the London

Gateway Project to discuss commercial dredging operations that may have been undertaken in the vicinity, and with Southern Water to discuss water quality issues further.

- c. In response to the event, KEIFCA are conducting a mark recapture monitoring programme for whelks both at and around the affected site, and some distance away from it. Samples have shown that catchability decreases with warmer temperatures such as those experienced in the early summer, yet during the cooler late summer period catches improved. Stock abundance at the affected site and surrounding area have not yet fully recovered to levels seen before the event; full recovery is expected to take a few years given whelk growth and reproductive rates.
- d. Temperature loggers were deployed on pots by KEIFCA, from which the recordings provided the desired reassurance that this area is well mixed and so readily available sea surface temperature data can act as a proxy for the benthic temperatures in future monitoring efforts. This is an important consideration in assessing the impact of temperature-related impacts on stock health.

12. Key discussion points on this item were as follows:

- a. The group were curious to hear of any evidence alluding to whether this was caused by water contamination. A Cefas toxicology report will be released soon, however in the meantime it was disclosed that no obvious contaminants were detected in whelk samples.
- b. Members enquired about any indications of the health of the affected whelks. The whelks brought to the IFCA by fishers were loose in their shell, with evident necrosis. There was no facility to investigate stomach contents. Samples of dredged cockles from the same area were also found in poor health, hence contaminated bait was discounted as a cause.
- c. The wider topic of the threat of climate change to UK shellfish was raised, with this being one of a few shellfish mortality events observed in the last few years. It was collectively agreed that this group should consider how to improve our response to these events and better our understanding of the adaptability of this species to climate change.

AOB

13. No AOB items raised.

Actions

Number	Description	Responsible
13.1	Distribute a briefing note describing the FMP process including approval and implementation and circulate this along with the SEA documents.	Seafish, Defra
13.2	Distribute draft management proposal papers with the agreement of Defra (carried over from previous meeting).	Seafish / Defra
13.3	Defra to provide an update at the next meeting on how the TCA and international obligations piece will be reflected in the FMP.	Defra,
13.4	Collate a summary of the evidence base for trends in whelk fishing pressure and share with the group.	Seafish
13.5	Explore feasibility of holding an additional consultation session for Northwest England.	Seafish
13.6	Defra implementation team invited to attend a WMG meeting in the future.	Seafish / Defra
13.7	Fishing News article on the whelk research projects to be shared with WMG members.	Mindfully Wired Communications