

Whelk Management Group (WMG) Meeting

5 April 2022

Remote meeting via Microsoft Teams

Attendees

Aoife Martin, Seafish (Chair)	Holly Kaiser, Seafish
Ashley Mullenger, Fairlass Shellfish	Hubert Gieschen, MMO
Andrew Bradick, Welsh Government	Lewis Tattersall, Seafish
Andy Lawler, Cefas	Mark Merrick, AM Seafoods
Bella Voek, Cefas	Martyn Youell, Waterdance Ltd.
Bill Brock, Brighton & Newhaven Sales	Michel Kaiser, Heriot-Watt University
Charlotte Colvin, Bangor University	Mike Cohen, NFFO
Chloe North, Western Fish Producers' Organisation	Natalie Hold, Bangor University
Ella Brock, Seafish	Phil McBryde, Defra
Emma Plotnek, Fishing Into The Future	Jim Evans, Welsh Fishermen's Association
Fiona Birch, Mindfully Wired	Charlie Abbott, Lynn Shellfish
Helen Hunter, Defra	Paul Brown, Brown & Bright
	Rebecca Treacy, Seafish

Apologies

Jack Emmerson, Isle of Man government	Mark Tilling, Welsh Government
Joanna Messini, Defra	

Welcome & apologies

1. The Chair opened the meeting and the actions from the previous meeting were reviewed. The meeting minutes were approved as an accurate record of the November 2021 meeting.

Non-quota stocks (Helen Hunter, Defra)

2. Last year's negotiations set out that the EU and UK would not apply the tonnage limits for Non-Quota Species (NQS) this year. There is continual monthly exchange of uptake data for NQS between the UK and the EU. This year it has been agreed that if each party reach 80% of their overall tonnage (based on global tonnage limits) there will be an immediate discussion in the Specialised Committee.
3. There is a commitment to develop a first set of multi-year strategies for shared NQS by the end of July. Defra recognise that the multi-year strategies will have a huge impact on industry and should not be rushed. Rather, the aim is to develop more rounded management that will positively impact the industry.
4. The data on UK effort in EU waters Jan-Jun 2021 has been published and the MMO will publish data on the second half of that year in the near future.
5. Defra will pull together a short note on the key elements discussed regarding NQS for members' reference.
6. Comments from the group:
 - a. Members highlighted the importance of involving EU states in the FMP process at some level and will be incorporated into the FMP stakeholder engagement plan.
 - b. It would be useful for a multi-year strategy framework to be shared with the group to ensure the FMP process is aligned with broader government intentions.
 - c. Setting up a separate NQS sub-group for discussions on the management of NQS is a possibility if the group thinks it would be a useful forum. This group could sit under the SIAG/FIAG and encompass both NQS shellfish and finfish.

Whelk management measures in Wales (Andrew Bradick, Welsh Government)

7. In Wales December 2021, the whelk fishing permit order came into force. March 2022 saw the start of the first whelk permit period. Each vessel can apply for one permit, running for one year and for the first year there is no permit fee. No track record is required for a vessel to apply for a permit to fish in the Welsh fishing zone and there is no limit on the number of permits that can be issued. Welsh Government took this approach to avoid generating a closed fishery.
8. Welsh Government have implemented an annual catch limit for all vessels and a flexible Monthly Catch Limit (MCL) for individual vessels. All vessels are required to fill in a monthly catch return (including zero catch returns) which will inform the MCL for the following month and requires fishers to input additional data. If permit holders persistently fail to provide the required data, the government will enforce a more precautionary approach to managing the fishery. The MCL collects data on the following: weight of retained catch (kg), number of pots lifted, soak time (days), and location of fishing (using ICES rectangles)
9. Data for the month of March 2022 provides an overview of the fishery:
 - a. There are roughly 90 permit holders.
 - b. 50% of the mandatory catch returns have been received.
 - c. None of the vessels holding permits have met the 50 tonnes MCL.
10. Welsh Government will be able to monitor and control permit numbers, propose Annual Catch Limits, and propose permit fees, on an annual basis. A Wales Whelk Advisory Group will be set up to ensure sufficient stakeholder engagement is achieved. To find out more information on the whelk measures in Wales contact: <https://gov.wales/whelk-fishery>
11. Comments from the group:
 - a. Members from the group noted that it is not effective to have multiple data collection mechanisms and work is underway to ensure the data collected from fishers is useful for management purposes. A request has been sent to the MMO to add a data collection field to the CatchApp collecting information regarding reporting different types of pots and no response has been received to date.
 - b. The Chair asked that the Welsh Government consider the way the Wales Whelk Advisory Group work in tandem with the WMG going forward.

Whelk Fisheries Management Plan (Lewis Tattersall, Seafish)

12. Defra are in the process of formally commissioning Seafish to be the delivery lead on the whelk FMP. Defra have supplied an FMP toolkit and evidence strategy which will be applied to all the shellfish FMPs.
13. The whelk FMP has been prioritised for publication in September 2023. The September 2023 deadline for publication includes time for consultation and sign off from ministers meaning that FMP drafting, stakeholder engagement, and delivery to Defra must be completed by Q1 2023. The WMG FMP working group have developed and reviewed a set of objectives and actions. The next step is to sequence these objectives and align the expected resource required for delivery of each action.
14. The draft research plan and management plan are being finalised against Defra requirements. They will be presented to the working group for review before they are presented to the overarching groups for consideration. Seafish and Defra are working on a stakeholder engagement plan to ensure industry have the opportunity to be involved in the development of the FMP from the beginning.
15. The ambition is to consult on some priority management measures alongside the FMP consultation. This would help progress some of the key objectives within the FMP and address some gaps in management that require more immediate action.

Market conditions: comments from members

16. Some members commented that since the Covid-19 pandemic the export market is slowly recovering, with a slow increase in demand, and an appetite within processors to source more product.
17. Some members expressed concern of a backlog through the supply chain with whelks being held in cold stores in the UK and Korea. Whilst the market may be improving, it was noted that it is not where it would normally be at this time of year, and some members of the industry are targeting alternative species as a result. The rising cost of fuel has caused an increase in prices due to high expenses for the industry.
18. There is the option to call on the Department of Trade to offer broader opportunities for the whelk market.

Whelk fishing effort workshop (Lewis Tattersall, Seafish)

19. The workshop was held in person in London on the 17th of March. The workshop focussed on several key topics, including:
 - a. Defining participant aspirations for whelk management
 - b. Defra presentation of the process of change and the required administration and implementation mechanisms
 - c. Discussion on the management options
 - d. Stakeholder “red lines” regarding whelk management
20. Industry was asked to consider their aspirations for whelk management, and discussions revolved around the following:
 - a. Stable stocks
 - b. Flexible management
 - c. Industry ownership and involvement
 - d. Good understanding of size of maturity (SoM)
 - e. Effective, evidence-based management measures
 - f. Biologically and economically sustainable fishery
21. Case study examples of whelk management approaches around the UK and abroad were presented. There was a discussion on the drawbacks and benefits of using permits, licences, minimum landings sizes (MLS) and pot limits. Members at the workshop strongly felt that the MLS is a management measure that works (and is considered a ‘safety net’ by some operators) and should remain in place until a better alternative is found.
22. The next steps following the workshop include the development of a workshop summary report, a review of management measures in place around the world for similar fisheries, and the development of several management scenarios for the group to consider.
23. It was highlighted that involving the EU fleet in whelk management discussions is integral and that the group should look to engage with stakeholders more widely. The practicalities of ensuring the group engages the EU will be included in the stakeholder plan Defra and Seafish are developing. There is the possibility of re-engaging with the North Western Waters Advisory Council (NWWAC) Whelk Focus Group.

Fisheries Industry Science Partnership research project (Prof. Michel Kaiser, Heriot-Watt University)

24. Seafish, Heriot-Watt University, Bangor University and industry partners have been granted £247,998 from the FISP funding to progress a two-year (to March 2024) collaborative *combined whelk data improvement project*. The project is aligned with objectives in the draft whelk FMP including:
 - a. Ascertain a suitable scale for managing whelk stocks
 - b. Assessing the impact of whelk fisheries on the wider marine environment
 - c. Gathering accurate effort data
 - d. Exploration of bait provisioning alternatives

25. The project will incorporate several research activities, including:
- Using fisher ecological knowledge - gathering, analysing, and mapping anecdotal information on whelk populations using the ecological knowledge of fishers. This follows on from a survey undertaken last year and aims to improve the information base in areas where the survey lacked responses. The information gathered to date has produced informative and suitable results which have been collated into a report and will be circulated in the near future. The report will be a useful mechanism to incentivise industry to offer their anecdotal data to help inform management decisions going forward.
 - Selective trapping - investigating pot design configurations to minimise bycatch of undersize whelks, reduce levels of post-release mortality of undersize whelks and gather accurate fishing effort data by fitting pots with Passive Integrated Transponder tags. This will allow information on catch per unit effort (CPUE) to be gathered.
 - Whelk bait alternatives - assessing the effectiveness and economic viability of using chemical attractants as alternatives to traditional whelk baits, such as brown crab and finfish.
26. If members have any questions regarding the FISP funded project, please contact Michel Kaiser m.kaiser@hw.ac.uk

Research on whelk shell growth and repair (Charlotte Colvin, Bangor University)

27. Charlotte Colvin presented PhD research on shell growth and repair in the common whelk. The research is important considering the economic importance of whelk fisheries and the risk of post-release mortality and whelk shell damage from fishing activities (e.g. mobile gears and mechanical riddling).
28. The PhD assessed the ability for shell growth and repair in juvenile and adult whelks. It assessed the effect food availability and temperature have on shell growth and repair. Whelks have continual growth throughout their life cycle and can live for up to 12 years.
29. Shell scarring on whelks can be caused by natural processes, such as burrowing, feeding or attempted predation, or can be caused by human processes, such as trawling, riddling and the process of discarding undersize whelks.
30. The research found that the shell repair and growth rates for whelks is largely unaffected by food availability, suggesting that whelks are relatively robust. Juvenile whelks were found to repair shell damage more quickly than adults. Whilst adult whelks are less tolerant to changes in temperature, shell repair and growth was still evident. Charlotte's research has been published here in [The Journal of Experimental Marine Biology and Ecology](#).

Actions

Number	Description	Responsible
8.1	Defra to compile a short note on the key elements of TCA/NQS management landscape for members' reference.	Defra
8.2	Circulate the slides on Welsh government measures.	Seafish
8.3	Consider means of collaborative working between the WMG and Wales Whelk Working Group, or the role the WMG may be able to play in helping facilitate this engagement.	Seafish & Welsh government
8.4	Circulate the slides of whelk FMP progress and the fishing effort workshop.	Seafish
8.5	Ask processors if they would engage in the whelk anecdotal data gathering process.	Seafish
8.6	Explore options around engagement with EU interests on FMP development work.	Seafish/Defra
8.7	Contact Department for International Trade on any support that may be available or of interest to whelk businesses.	Seafish
8.8	Incorporate whelk anecdotal data gathering survey (FISP project) in wider comms strategy.	Seafish/Mindfully Wired