



## Angling Trust Parliamentary Briefing on Sea Bass Stocks

September 2014

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### Parliamentary support needed for bass stocks

**Bass stocks are in deep trouble. This briefing seeks to provide arguments and information for Parliamentarians prepared to raise the issue at Westminster, and with ministers, to make the case for meaningful conservation measures to avoid a stock collapse.**

#### The Situation

Sea bass in Europe are at risk of total collapse in coming years unless urgent action is taken to conserve and rebuild the remaining spawning stock. The latest scientific advice issued by ICES in June 2014 recommends an 80 per cent cut in catches of sea bass across the EU for 2015. This follows advice for a 36 per cent cut in 2013 which was not acted upon. The decline is the result of intensive overfishing, increasing fishing effort and successive years of recruitment failure. Unless action is taken to protect the remaining stock we fear a moratorium on bass fishing in Europe will be the only recommendation available to protect and restore this important fishery.

The UK, through the Scheveningen Group of Member states, lead the way in 2013 with a series of recommended technical conservation measures put to the Commission that would achieve the recommendations made by ICES. These measures were rejected by France who favour a Total Allowable Catch (TAC) which would be based on a track record of landings and therefore give the French fleet approximately 75 per cent of the TAC and quota.

The EU Commission has said it would prefer technical measures and is currently considering the options for managing bass and implementing the 80 per cent cut in catches. The Science, Technical & Economic Committee for Fisheries met last month and the report from the meeting outlines possible technical conservation measures for the management of sea bass. The Commission is currently considering these and recommendations from the Advisory Councils will be put forward following a meeting in Dublin on September 18<sup>th</sup>.

It is hoped that measures to manage bass at an EU level will be agreed by December and implemented in 2015.

However, the EU's track record of implementing measures may see this timescale shift and the ICES 80 per cent cut in catches fail to be implemented in 2015.

## **UK Position**

The UK has been consistently unwilling to take unilateral action to protect bass in UK waters due to a desire not to exceed, or fall short of, the requirements set by the EU and due to the requirements of the Government's Better Regulation Framework. In addition, it is now claimed that we cannot prove that UK bass stocks are discreet from those of other member states (despite previous Cefas science stating the opposite) and the government insists that, as a shared stock, bass needs to be managed only at an EU level. This is in marked contrast to the successful precautionary approach adopted in Ireland.

## **Reasons To Take action**

However, there is action that could be taken at UK level if the Minister wants to act in the national interest and prevent the total collapse of the UK bass fishery. The Angling Trust believes the following action should be taken by the UK in the absence of agreement on measures to conserve bass at EU level.

- Publish the findings of the review, commissioned by Richard Benyon in 2012, into the evidence supporting an increase in the minimum landing size for bass.
- Implement an emergency increase in MLS to 45cm in order to protect the year classes upon which a stock recovery will have to be built.
- Strengthen and enforce the UK's network of bass nursery areas.
- Take steps to incentivise the line-caught fishery to improve selectivity and reduce unwanted fishing mortality.
- Re-profile the current exploitation pattern away from fishing methods that have biggest negative impacts on stocks towards methods that are most environmentally friendly, selective, and generate the best return from the fishery.
- Follow ICES's recommendation that a common methodological approach be developed to estimate the value of both the recreational and commercial bass fisheries (something we have already written to the Secretary of State about asking for her support).
- Support the UK-wide voluntary *Give Fish A Chance* code of conduct for recreational angling.
- Ensure that bass management policy is evidence-based and follows scientific advice.

## **Examples Of Unilateral Action From Other EU Countries.**

The Irish Government banned the commercial fishing for and landing of bass in 1990 after stocks collapsed due to overfishing. Bass has been managed by the Irish Government as a recreational angling only species ever since. Despite the ongoing EU negotiations about potential bass management measures Inland Fish-

eries Ireland (IFI) has recently launched a [new national policy](#) on the management and conservation of bass in Ireland. Bass management recommendations from the new IFI policy include:

**Increased Minimum Landing Size (MLS)** from 40 to 50 cm total length (approx. 1 kg) to protect the youngest spawning cohorts from exploitation thus contributing to increases in population size. This would bring the MLS above the first spawning size of bass in NW Europe which is 42 to 45 cm. The increased size limit is an attractive marketing prospect which also supports sustainability and further promotes the already widely practised catch-and-release aspect of the fishery.

**Reduced Daily Bag Limit** from 2 to 1 fish in any 24 hour period to reduce exploitation. Thereafter catch and release would operate. Voluntary catch and release is widely practised in the bass fishery. Development of best practise guidelines are required to minimise any mortality due to poor handling and a review of ongoing improvements in angling hook technology is recommended.

**Review Bass Closed Season** – currently 15 May – 15 June and identified as the bass spawning period in Ireland. Scientific literature indicates that the spawning period commences earlier. The revised policy recommendation is that mandatory catch and release would apply over the full extent of the potential spawning period rather than the current closed season window. The peak of spawning is over the April-May period and the review group recommend this revised window.

**No-kill zones** – identify where local stocks are vulnerable or limited and investigate where a no-kill policy could be operated.

IFI should take cognisance of bass angling management controls in other EU countries to review and compare the impact of any revised policy actions in Ireland.

## **Netherlands**

In Holland bag limits have been introduced for recreational angling

## **France**

There is a higher minimum landing size in place for the French recreational bass fishery and a system to aid enforcement against the sale of unlicensed catches.

## **A potential PQs:**

*1) In light of the urgent need to conserve sea bass stocks will the Minister publish the findings of the review into the evidence, commissioned in 2012, supporting an increase in the UK's bass minimum landing size?*

*2) If the evidence states that the UK will benefit from taking unilateral action will the Minister do his best to act in the national interest and prevent central government policy from preventing the introduction of UK measures that will avert the collapse of a stock of huge importance to both the UK recreational and commercial fishing sectors?*

*3) The UK cannot wait for the EU to fail, yet again, to take strong and decisive action to protect bass stocks. There are measures that can and should be taken to protect bass in EU waters as well as evidence to suggest, despite sharing the stock with other member states, the UK would be the net beneficiary of such action. Will the Minister therefore act in the national interest to consider UK-wide technical conservation measures to protect and restore the UK bass fishery?*

## **Useful links**

- The latest ICES advice on bass can be found [HERE](#)
- The Science, Technical and Economic Committee on Fisheries (STECF) was recently asked to consider management measures for bass. The final report from the meeting can be found [HERE](#)
- The Angling Trust's recently wrote to George Eustice and issued [THIS](#) press release.
- Martin Salter's recent blog post on bass can be found [HERE](#)
- Details of the Angling *Trust's Let Our Bass Breed* campaign can be found [HERE](#)

## Facts about bass

### Biology

- Female bass do not become sexually mature in UK waters until at least 42cm in length (source: Sea Bass: Biology, exploitation and conservation, by Pickett and Pawson. This is the definitive text on the subject produced by the leading Cefas bass experts).
- At that size and age (6 to 7 years), bass grow at about 6 cm per year.
- The current minimum landing size of 36cm was set in 1989, despite the maximum yield to the UK bass fishery occurring at an MLS of 50cm (MAFF lab leaflet 59, Pickett and Pawson).
- It takes 2 to 3 years for the bass to grow from 36cm to 48cm.

### Breeding

Very young bass live in inshore bass "nursery areas", where they are protected and can be studied. Latest sampling (by Cefas) indicates very poor breeding success over recent years, consistent with the poor weather (cold winters) we have experienced. The result is a paucity of young bass to join the adult bass population and fishery over the next few years.

### More information from:

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