

Recommendations for Setting Fishing Opportunities for 2021 for the Welsh Government

November 2020

The Marine Conservation Society (MCS), ClientEarth and Oceana – welcome the opportunity to brief Members of the Senedd (MSs) ahead of upcoming negotiations with the European Union (EU) to set and agree fishing opportunities for shared fish stocks in 2021. Within the UK’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ) are some of the most productive fishing grounds in the Northeast Atlantic and next year marks the first time in over 40 years that the UK will be managing its fisheries resources as an independent coastal state. This brings with it additional responsibilities and opportunities to improve the state of its fisheries resources. Welsh Ministers must be consulted on the setting of fishing opportunities for British boats and have responsibility for the setting of limits within Wales’ jurisdiction.

As we enter a new era of independent fisheries management outside the EU the Welsh Government must show leadership to end overfishing in its waters. To achieve this, it must ensure fishing opportunities and related management measures – for quota and non-quota, shared and domestic stocks - are designed to recover depleted stocks as quickly as possible and maintain all stocks above sustainable levels.

Ending overfishing for all stocks is an integral component of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14. It is a key element of delivering marine Good Environmental Status (GES) required by the UK Marine Strategy Regulations 2010, which the UK is failing to achieve.ⁱ Ending overfishing will also be particularly integral to Wales if we are to achieve sustainable management of natural resources as a requirement of the Environment (Wales) Act, and deliver on the Resilient and Globally Responsible Goals of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act.

The following outlines a summary of the key positions we urge the Welsh Government to adopt in its approach to the setting of fishing opportunities and management of fisheries for 2021. Wales should ensure that:

- **Catch limits do not exceed the Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) as scientifically assessed by the International Council for Exploration of the Sea (ICES) (or other best available, peer reviewed scientific advice where an ICES assessment is unavailable);**
- **Catch limits do not exceed the precautionary advice issued by ICES where no MSY advice is available;**
- **Robust monitoring, control and enforcement of the Landing Obligation are in place.ⁱⁱ Where compliance remains poor or uncertain, catch limits should factor this in and apply a buffer to ensure actual catches do not exceed sustainable levels;ⁱⁱⁱ**
- **ICES mixed fisheries advice is applied and lower catch limits adopted where necessary in mixed fisheries to ensure that all stocks encountered are recovered and maintained at healthy levels;**
- **Recovery plans are developed for all depleted stocks, which include avoidance and selectivity measures, timelines for recovery and requirements to use Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) with cameras to fully document catches and support compliance with management measures.**

Depleted stocks

The recovery and sustainable management of fish stocks would greatly benefit the Welsh economy, whilst also helping to address the current climateⁱⁱ and biodiversity emergencies.ⁱⁱⁱ For shared stocks, it is therefore vital the Welsh Government work closely with neighbouring UK and EU authorities to agree on a framework for future fisheries management, which prioritises sustainability and delivers

on domestic and international UK commitments, in particular, to end overfishing which was meant to be reached by 2020.

Several quota stocks of interest to Wales are advised to have either a very low or zero catch limit by ICES, including Celtic Sea cod, Irish Sea whiting, and herring stocks in the Celtic Sea and southern Irish Sea. We are extremely concerned that limited concerted effort has been made by the UK and devolved governments to apply more progressive management measures to these fisheries to try to recover them.

Catch limits need to be set in line with the scientific advice and precautionary recovery plans need to be developed as quickly as possible. These should include a range of complementary measures to improve the selectivity and avoidance of these species, and catches needs to be fully documented at sea through the roll out of Remote Electronic Monitoring with cameras (REM) on vessels over 10m in length encountering these stocks.

It is in the long-term interest of coastal communities and the marine environment to recover these stocks and failing to restore these stocks not only perpetuates overfishing, but also the choke risk these stocks pose. Fisheries around the UK are often mixed which can present challenges for management and for the industry, particularly when dealing with overfished stocks. However, multiple measures can and should be implemented simultaneously to help mitigate the impact of “choke” situations whilst still fishing within MSY limits. This includes applying mixed fishery MSY advice provided by ICES to set catch limits; increasing minimum conservation reference sizes to reflect the length at maturity of the species (eg. for Whelk and other shellfish stocks); mandating the use of multiple selectivity and avoidance measures at the same time; and keeping record of which vessels are using which measures to track progress and demonstrate efforts being made.

Non-quota stocks

Welsh fisheries are predominantly focussed on shellfish and fish that are not quota managed under a Total Allowable Catch (TAC). This means that it is very difficult for catches of these species to be effectively controlled in relation to the size of their respective populations. This has led to the overexploitation of some stocks and we urge the Welsh Government to support transitions towards TAC and quota management for all commercially exploited stocks of interest to Wales.

Seabass

While the UK should be commended for leading efforts to recover the main shared seabass population, the status of the stock remains fragile and its condition just above its lower biomass limit (B_{lim}).^{iv} ICES has provided advice based on the ranges in the EU Western Waters Multiannual Plan and recommends catch limits for 2021 are set between 1680-2000 tonnes. However, in this case, applying even the lower limit of this recommendation would only result in a very small increase in the Spawning Stock Biomass (SSB) of just 0.18% the following year. We therefore recommend the Welsh Government support the call for a more ambitious bycatch-only limit in the order of 1000 tonnes with measures akin to those observed in 2018. Ongoing efforts to improve control and enforcement of management measures is needed as in 2019, ICES noted that total discards were considerably underestimated and there appears to be targeted fishing for bass in some areas, despite it currently being a prohibited or bycatch only species for all gear types except handlines. We therefore also suggest an increase in the number of at-sea inspections and close monitoring of monthly reported landings data.

Whelk

Although there is limited data available on whelk stocks, the data that does exist indicates that populations are being overexploited. Whilst we very much welcome the recent Welsh Government consultation proposing improved stock assessments and management measures for whelk fisheries in Wales, we think the measures need to go further to ensure the sustainable exploitation of these

important and valuable stocks. In particular, sustainable catch limits should be set for all discreet stocks in relation to the size of the populations as opposed to a single catch limit for Wales; existing restrictions on fishing during the spawning season should be maintained; and further work carried out to develop regional specific minimum landing sizes that reflect the length of maturity for the different stocks.

We hope MSs find these recommendations helpful and are able to use them to evaluate and question the Welsh and UK Government's policies and approach in the coming weeks and months during negotiations with the EU and the setting of fishing opportunities for 2021 and beyond. **For further detail, please [see this linked briefing](#) or contact:**

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ⁱ Defra, 2019.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/841246/marine-strategy-part1-october19.pdf [Last accessed, 08.09.2020]

ⁱⁱ Trueman C.N., Johnston G., O'Hea B., MacKenzie K.M., 2014. Trophic interactions of fish communities at midwater depths enhance long-term carbon storage and benthic production on continental slopes. Available at:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262884286_Trophic_interactions_of_fish_communities_at_midwater_depths_enhance_long-term_carbon_storage_and_benthic_production_on_continental_slopes [Last accessed, 08.09.2020]

ⁱⁱⁱ IPBES, 2019. Report of the plenary of the [United Nations] intergovernmental science-policy platform on biodiversity and ecosystem services on the work of its seventh session. Addendum: summary for policymakers of the global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the IPBES. Available at:

https://ipbes.net/system/tdf/ipbes_7_10_add.1_en_1.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=35329 [Last accessed, 26.11.19]

^{iv} ICES, 2020. Sea bass (*Dicentrarchus labrax*) in divisions 4.b–c, 7.a, and 7.d–h (central and southern North Sea, Irish Sea, English Channel, Bristol Channel, and Celtic Sea). Available at

<http://ices.dk/sites/pub/Publication%20Reports/Advice/2020/2020/bss.27.4bc7ad-h.pdf> [Last accessed 09.11.2020]