

Whelk Management Group (WMG) Meeting

29 April 2021

Remote meeting via Zoom

Attendees

Andrew Brown, Macduff Shellfish
 Andy Lawler, Cefas
 Aoife Martin, Seafish (Chair)
 Bill Brock, Brighton & Newhaven Fish Sales
 Charlie Abbott, Lynn Shellfish
 Charlie Brock, Brighton & Newhaven Fish Sales
 Chloe North, Western Fish Producer's Organisation
 Claire Pescod, Macduff Shellfish
 Gary Hodgson, Venture Seafoods
 Hannah Fennel, Orkney Fisheries Association

Helen Hunter, DEFRA
 Jack Emmerson, Isle of Man Government
 Jim Evans, Welsh Fishermen's Association
 Jim Portus, SWFPO
 Juliette Hatchman, SWFPO
 Katrina Ryan, Mindfully Wired
 Les Lawrence, Shellfish Assoc. of Great Britain
 Lewis Tattersall, Seafish
 Lydia Osborne, Defra
 Mark Merrick, AM Seafoods
 Mark Tilling, Welsh Government
 Marta Moran-Quintana, Seafish
 Martyn Youell, Waterdance
 Matthew Johnson, Defra

Apologies:

Ashley Mullenger, Fairlass Shellfish
 Julian Bray, Welsh Gov.
 Michael Newton-Smith, Active fisherman
 Michel Kaiser, Heriot-Watt University
 Natalie Hold, Bangor University
 Paul Brown, Brown & Bright

1. Update from members on issues relevant to the WMG

1.1 KEIFCA byelaw changes

There was a discussion on proposed changes to byelaws in the Kent & Essex IFCA jurisdiction including the possible introduction of measures making the use of rotary riddles mandatory. After the meeting additional information was provided by the KEIFCA:

- KEIFCA are not introducing a byelaw making the use of rotary riddles mandatory in whelk fisheries, however the byelaw does state that fishers should pass whelks over a riddle which can be "fixed or moving, flat or cylindrical". Any method of riddling catches is allowed as long as whelks under 53mm are not retained, and;
- KEIFCA will use a 53mm "stop/go" gauge for enforcement of the minimum landing size for whelks in their jurisdiction.

1.2 Bait provisioning

Concerns were raised about the supply of brown crab for bait in the whelk fishery. This issue has also been raised at both the Crab & Lobster Management Group (CMG) and subsequently the Shellfish Industry Advisory Group (SIAG).

It was acknowledged that this is a complex issue spanning both groups and as such a short-term cross-CMG/WMG working group will be established to explore the topic further. To initiate discussions Seafish will prepare a short discussion paper focused on defining the problem and posing questions that need to be answered.

2. Update on the National Shellfish Fisheries Plan (Aoife Martin, Seafish)

Work on both the National Shellfish Fisheries Plan (NSFP) and the whelk specific chapter of the plan, developed via the WMG, is ongoing.

The whelk chapter will be structured as follows:

- Purpose of the plan including WMG ambition;
- Scope including target species and relevant bycatch species and interactions with other fisheries (e.g. bait provisioning);
- Overview of the current status of whelk fisheries, including biological, social, and economic data;
- Objectives, both statutory (aligned with the Fisheries Act 2020) and non-statutory objectives which reflect the priorities of the WMG;
- Duration of the plan; and
- Tracking overall performance.

Next steps in this work are to:

- Establish a WMG working group focused on developing the whelk chapter Agree upon a first draft of objectives to be circulated to WMG members;
- Finalise the WMG scientific research plan, via the WMG science sub-group; and
- Finalising a first draft of the chapter by September 2021 for review by WMG members.

3. North Western Waters Advisory Council Focus Group on Whelks (Bill Brock, Brighton & Newhaven Fish Sales, and Lewis Tattersall, Seafish)

The North Western Waters Advisory Council (NWWAC) is an EU fisheries stakeholder body which provides an open forum for dialogue between fishing sector and other groups. The NWWAC's principle aim is to advise the EU Commission on matters related to fisheries management.

In 2020 the NWWAC formed a focus group for the Channel whelk stock. The focus group will run until the end of 2023 and has the following two objectives:

- Prepare an overview on current state and general management framework of the Channel whelk fishery by the end of 2021; and
- Deliver precise recommendations to the Commission on management of the fishery by the end of 2022.

In scope for the focus group is the whelk stock and fishery between the EU 12nm limit and the UK-EU median line. The focus group met in April 2021 and several WMG members attended as observers.

The focus group aims to gather data on the Channel fishery from member states in June 2021, although not a member it was suggested that the UK – possibly via the WMG – could provide data as part of this action and it was agreed that the request would be raised at the meeting of the WMG for discussion.

The WMG discussed appropriateness of submitting data on UK fishing whelk fishing activity in the Channel to the NWWAC focus group, particularly given the current sensitivities. It was noted that any future UK involvement in such groups would be determined by the Specialised Fisheries Committee and that tonnage limits for non-quota species (including whelks) that UK vessels can take from EU waters are still being negotiated as part of the trade and cooperation agreement. As such the WMG agreed that provision of detailed data was not currently appropriate.

Pending Defra approval, the WMG will prepare a briefing note on the group's objectives and direction of travel to be supplied to the NWWAC focus group.

4. WMG science update

4.1 Update on the progress of the WMG science sub-group (Andy Lawler, Cefas)

The WMG science sub-group has met monthly since inception in January 2021 and is working on a scientific research plan, which will set out the research requirements to enable delivery of the WMG objectives. The research plan is built around answering the following fisheries management questions:

- What data need to be collected to build a data rich future for UK whelk fisheries?
- Is there a viable stock assessment model available for whelks? If not, are there suitable alternate indices of abundance that could be used?
- How do we establish whelk stock boundaries?
- To what extent do we have multiple localised stocks versus fewer stocks but greater variation as a result of environmental conditions and how does this affect the way we manage fisheries?
- How best to establish a CPUE/LPUE indicators and time series for UK whelk fisheries?
- Is a minimum landing size the most appropriate means of managing our whelk fisheries?

Discussion on the work of the science sub-group:

- There are significant barriers to establishing CPUE/LPUE indicators for whelk fisheries, including a lack of data on fishing effort (numbers of pots, soak times, animal behaviour in pots, bait type/quantity/quality and odour plumes).
- There is a need to determine the relationship between stock abundance and CPUE.
- Local knowledge should be considered in assessing CPUE/LPUE, for example bait shortages in the Isle of Man fisheries led to fishers using less bait and CPUE declining accordingly.

4.2 Anecdotal data gathering questionnaire for whelk fishers (Hannah Fennel, Heriot-Watt University)

The WMG science sub-group has created an online questionnaire to gather anecdotal information from whelk fishers on local variations in whelk populations. The questionnaire was developed by the Lyell Centre at Heriot-Watt University, Bangor University, and Cefas.

By gathering anecdotal information on whelk populations, the WMG science subgroup aims to better understand to the extent to which whelk populations vary across the UK.

The questionnaire, and details on the purpose and importance of the research, can be found here: [Local Variations in Whelk Populations Questionnaire](#).

All WMG members are asked to help promote the questionnaire and encourage all active whelk fishermen they interact with to contribute to this piece of work. The questionnaire is for active whelk fishermen and will take no longer than 15 minutes to complete on a laptop, tablet, or mobile phone.

5. Discussion and approaches to mapping and managing whelk fishing effort (Aoife Martin, Seafish)

A discussion session was held around potential approaches and challenges to managing whelk fishing effort. A discussion paper will be created in advance of the next WMG meeting to further explore this topic.

- Any discussion on managing fishing effort will be influenced by what fishers currently do as opposed to what they *could* do in the future. Fishers will inherently think about the grounds they currently fish however any future work should consider potential fisheries which are not yet exploited but are likely to be economically viable.

- Management of fishing effort should consider vessel scale to ensure that management measures are proportionate. Different sized vessels have different economic needs and a failure to address this could have unintended consequences such as displacement of effort into other fisheries.
- The WMG should look at management examples from other jurisdictions. For example, the Isle of Man limits fishery access through the total number of permits which carries a specific pot allocation and limits on effort within 3nm. The IoM permitting scheme also stipulates daily reporting of pot lifts as a means of gathering effort data.
- Fishing effort will fluctuate based on external factors such as market price of both whelks and other species, such as crabs, which fishers can also target; when the price of crab is low more fishers will target whelks.
- The UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement will have significant implications for access to non-quota species and such must be considered as part of any future discussions on managing fishing effort. If tonnage limits on non-quota species are pooled, then the take of whelks will also have a direct impact on the available tonnage limit for other non-quota species that can be taken by UK vessels from EU waters. This is a particular concern given that whelk landings have increased since the tonnage limit reference period of 2012-16.
- There is a need to explore interim measures to prevent further expansion of the whelk fishery, this could potentially be achieved through output controls (e.g. changes in MLS) or input controls (e.g. seasonal closures).
- The Covid-19 pandemic has seen a drop in demand for whelks and as such fishers have left the fishery. More data are required to assess the current state of the fishery and market.
- A review of management measures used in similar gastropod fisheries elsewhere in the world could help inform discussions around means of managing fishing effort for whelks.

Actions

Action no.	Action	Responsibility
5.1	Establish a working group to develop and deliver the whelk chapter of the National Shellfish Fisheries plan with a view to presenting the chapter for WMG review in autumn 2021.	Lewis Tattersall, Seafish
5.2	Establish a short-term working group between the WMG and CMG to further develop work on the landing of soft or poor-quality brown crab for whelk bait.	Lewis Tattersall, Seafish
5.3	Prepare a briefing note on the objectives of the WMG for the NWWAC whelk focus group (pending approval from Defra)	Lewis Tattersall, Seafish Helen Hunter, Defra
5.4	Publicise and promote the anecdotal data gathering questionnaire to active whelk fishers	All WMG members
5.5	Present the WMG research plan at the next meeting of the WMG (July 2021)	WMG science sub-group
5.6	Create a discussion paper on managing effort in advance of the next WMG meeting	Seafish
5.7	Re-circulate the Basse-Normandie review paper prepared by Seafish to show management measures used in an MSC certified whelk fishery.	Lewis Tattersall, Seafish