

Whelk Management Group (WMG) Meeting

14 November 2022

Remote meeting via Microsoft Teams

Attendees

Aoife Martin, Seafish (Chair)
Alison Freeman, Fishmongers Company
Andrew Brown, Macduff Shellfish
Bella Voak, Cefas
Bill Brock, Brighton & Newhaven Sales
Caitlin Turner, Seafish
Charlie Abbott, Lynn Shellfish
Charlotte Colvin, Bangor University
Chloe North, Western Fish Producers' Organisation
Claire Pescod, Macduff Shellfish
Ella Brock, Seafish
Gwladys Lambert, Cefas
Helen Hunter, Defra
Udara Nagodavithana, Seafish

Michel Kaiser, Heriot-Watt University
Lewis Tattersall, Seafish
Jim Evans, WFA
Joanna Messini, Defra
Mike Cohen, NFFO
Tim Smith, AIFCA
Tony Miles, MMO
Natalie Hold, Bangor University
Sara Mynott, Mindfully Wired Communications
Rachel Thirlwall, MMO
Rebecca Treacy, Seafish
Tom Duym, Eastern Maine Skippers Program

Apologies

Hannah Fennell, Orkney Fisheries Association
Ashley Mullenger, Fairlass Shellfish

Rob Clarke, AIFCA
Fiona Birch, Mindfully Wired Communications

Updates from members

1. Heriot-Watt University gave a short update on progress to complete the final report on anecdotal data gathering from whelk fishers to improve understanding of whelk morphology and distinct populations. The report is being reviewed and the team aim to publish it soon. This work will also feed into the Heriot-Watt / WMG FISP-funded whelk data improvement project.
2. Members discussed the draft evidence statement that has been prepared for English whelk fisheries by Seafish as part of the FMP development process. Cefas, the MMO, and Seafish are collaborating to provide more robust evidence across all FMPs (biological, social, and economic data) and this will be submitted to Defra as part of the whelk FMP in January 2023 and will be shared with the WMG as soon as possible.
3. Tim Smith, Senior Policy Officer at the Association of Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities, has joined the WMG and will maintain linkages with both the AIFCA and the IFCA-led Whelk Working Group.
4. Tom Duym, a lobster fisherman from the Eastern Maine Skippers Programme, has joined the WMG as a guest (in association with Fishmongers' Company) to learn about the work and structure of the WMG. Eastern Maine fishers face many of the same challenges as UK fishers and are keen to explore opportunities to share experiences and knowledge.
5. Members noted that the global market for whelk is on an upward trend as a result of growing demand from European and South Korean markets; as prices increase there is a risk that effort could be displaced from other fisheries into whelk fisheries. There is a need to monitor catch trends as access to whelk fisheries is unrestricted.

Update on development of the whelk fisheries management plan (Lewis Tattersall, Seafish)

6. Seafish continues to work on the development of a draft FMP for whelk in English waters, as commissioned by Defra in early 2022. The FMP working groups of the WMG and Shellfish Industry

Advisory Group have now finalised and signed off on draft FMP objectives (aligned with the objectives of the Fisheries Act 2020 and priorities of the WMG / SIAG respectively) and Seafish will now begin the stakeholder engagement phase of FMP development.

7. All FMP delivery leads must undertake informal stakeholder engagement activities and evidence that stakeholders have been actively involved in the development and refinement of FMP content. Seafish will host a series of in-person and online meetings through November and December 2022 to meet with stakeholders, review draft content, and gather feedback on the proposed direction of travel for English whelk fisheries under the FMP. In-person meetings focused on the whelk FMP will be held in Weymouth, Ilfracombe, Shoreham, Fleetwood, and Wells and WMG members are encouraged to both attend meetings and to help raise awareness about these meetings amongst colleagues.
8. The FMP has a draft objective focused on improving data provision for whelk fisheries in English waters. Members discussed specific priorities for the FMP, including:
 - a. Issues around different reporting methods for different métiers of the fleet which leads to incompatibility between data assets and an increased reporting burden on fishers;
 - b. The need to understand baselines for whelk fisheries and to make the best use of what information is already available. Effort data are a notable gap (pot numbers or pot hauls) and although there is an FMP objective to improve data collection to ensure the right data are gathered, there is an opportunity to review, and possibly bolster, existing data by incorporating industry data. Many operators will hold their own data on pot hauls, pot numbers fished, spatial data, and historical landings and this could make fishery-dependent data much more useful.
9. The FMP has a draft objective focused on understanding whelk catch per unit effort. Members discussed the need to explore different options to assess or estimate fishing effort data, this could include:
 - a. VMS and iVMS may provide some insight into this and could potentially be used as a proxy for fishing effort by analysing vessel fishing behaviour (e.g. steaming speed and patterns), or;
 - b. Discussions with pot manufacturers to understand how many pots are purchased annually (members noted the difficulty inherent in this approach due both to gear losses influencing fisher behaviour, gear wear and replacement, and through fishers making their own whelk pots but agreed that deviations from 'normal' rates of replacement could suggest increases in fishing effort).
10. The FMP has a draft objective focused on understanding the environmental impact of whelk fishing activities. Members noted the need to consider the wider environmental impacts of other commercial marine activities (e.g. offshore windfarm development, pollution, and dredging activities). Impacts from pot fisheries on benthic habitats and ETP species is thought to be very minor though the need to have appropriate evidence on impacts was acknowledged.

Update on progress of the WMG science sub-group (Natalie Hold, Bangor University)

11. The WMG Science Sub-group met on 11th November 2022. The group discussed:
12. Evidence packages and Defra 'must haves' for FMPs; this is the information that is considered mandatory for inclusion in all draft FMPs. The group discussed the availability of whelk data and notable knowledge gaps that should be considered in developing the FMP, including whelk stock boundaries and population structures.

13. Cefas has developed a Harvest Standard Specification (HSS) which divides selected commercial species into different categories and provides overarching guidance on harvest strategy approaches. The aim of the HSS is to provide a common approach to harvest strategies and establish a series of minimum performance measures (e.g. a target level, a soft limit, a hard limit, and a rebuild rate), with metrics varying between species and stock. No reference points currently exist for English stocks, however preliminary reference points could be developed by adapting generic reference points (from ICES WKLIFE) for whelk using existing information on size of maturity (SoM) and size frequency distribution data. The data timeseries should be approximately 1 generation length, which is 4-5 years for whelk.
14. Work is already underway for Welsh whelk stocks, which could be used as a starting point for developing reference points for English stocks. A considerable amount of work is still required to develop reference points for English whelk fisheries, particularly recognising uncertainties around stock boundaries. There was general acknowledgement of the need to begin making progress with this work and to learn from case study examples from other jurisdictions.
15. The group discussed the likely appropriateness and feasibility of different whelk management options, informed by discussions through the WMG effort workshop and meetings held in 2022, key points from this discussion is summarised below:
 - a. The lack of understanding around whelk stock status remains the biggest barrier to effective management, although the draft FMP aims to address these data deficiencies there is a need to explore management options that can be implemented in the absence of full time series data.
 - b. Sequential depletion of whelk stocks (i.e. fishing a stock until partially depleted, leaving the stock, and then returning when it has recovered) is common in whelk fisheries and could complicate assessing stock status, however it is also indicative of possible management options (i.e. spatial or temporal closures may be appropriate in the whelk fishery context). This approach would require data on growth rates and size of maturity, determining CPUE / LPUE 'limits', determining stock recovery time, and likely socio-economic impacts.
 - c. Researchers at Bangor University have begun to look into recovery times for whelk populations / stocklets, which could inform future discussions about management options. However, it is important to note that whelk fisheries in Wales may differ from those in England and improved understanding of specific stocks is required to inform management decisions.
 - d. More data are needed to understand post-release survival of whelks and this should incorporate fisher knowledge and experience on whelk handling and riddling practices. The FISP-funded project by Heriot-Watt and the WMG will aim to improve understanding in this area to inform gear selectivity innovations. An Ifremer report suggests high survivability of whelks but does not account for predation.
 - e. The group noted the importance of considering unintended consequences of any future management action, particularly with reference to driving displacement of fishing effort.

Whelk management options discussion

16. Managing whelk fishing effort has been a long-running priority of the WMG, the group discussed management options and how best to align future management proposals with the ongoing development of an FMP for whelks in English waters.
17. Discussions focused on two distinct 'phases' of managing whelk fishing effort:
 - a. Controlling the expansion of fishing effort via new vessels entering the fishery (for example via a permitting scheme or entitlement, see action 6), and;
 - b. Managing the amount of fishing effort within the fishery.

18. The perceived pros and cons of permits versus entitlements was discussed and an action was taken to look at the legislative requirements and benefits of each. This included discussion of ability to limit numbers of vessels entering a fishery, the ability to 'hang' additional data collection of fishery management measures on the permit / entitlement, and likely transferability of permits / entitlements.
19. In managing effort there is a need to define specific management goals; members discussed the need to define whether aims should be to reduce effort (and if so how to determine what an appropriate amount of fishing effort / fishing mortality is for whelks) or to 'draw a line in the sand' and restrict further expansion of effort. Different approaches will achieve different results and require consideration of different management tools.
20. New information is expected to be published in coming weeks regarding management of whelk fisheries in Wales under the new permitting scheme and annual catch limits (for more information see <https://www.gov.wales/whelk-fishery>). The management regime is based on advice generated by Bangor University on likely stock status and samples of CPUE taken throughout Wales over the course of each year as indicators of likely stock abundance.
21. Transferability of permits / entitlements was discussed as a necessity to take into account vessel sales and replacements. Members expressed concerns that restrictions on transferring permits / entitlements can lead to unintended consequences, for example fishers keeping old vessels that are inefficient or unsafe due to fears about losing permits. However, it was noted that if a permit or entitlement has a monetary value it can drive consolidation of fishing opportunities.
22. Members agreed that the MMO should be involved in these discussions in the future since they would be tasked with enforcing any future restrictions or regulations.

AOB

23. Members raised that recent publication of whelk catches by UK vessels in EU waters shows very little uptake in 2022 compared to previous years. Members reported that this is a result of a) the lag in impacts as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic affecting demand (as food service businesses work through stores of raw material), and b) increased frequency of gear losses due to conflict with fishing vessels using mobile gears which has reduced whelk fishers' desire to fish in more 'risky' areas.

Actions

Number	Description	Responsible
1	Recirculate details from Prof. Kaiser for fishers to become involved in the ongoing whelk data improvement FISP project	Seafish
2	Circulate draft whelk evidence statement when available	Seafish
3	Circulate FMP engagement slide pack and summary to all WMG members. All members asked to help promote events and encourage stakeholder attendance at meetings.	Seafish (all members)
4	Hold a workshop of the WMG Science Sub-group with processors, fishers, and scientists to review what data are available, what gaps exist, and how industry data could potentially be used to supplement existing data assets. This should cover how industry data can be shared in a way that is usable for 'back-casting'.	WMG Science Sub-group

5	Define what data are required, how they could be gathered (fishery dependent and independent), and frequency of collection required to build appropriate time series for whelk fisheries.	WMG Science Sub-group
6	Draft and share a note on the legislative context around permit vs. entitlement and what this means (including information from the MMO) and the strengths and weaknesses of existing permitting and entitlement schemes (what works and what doesn't?)	Defra
7	Prepare a paper on future management proposals with a view to discussing with the WMG in early 2023.	Seafish