

BASS THE FUTURE



After the unpopular daily bag limit, new proposals could mean a monthly allowance and the end of hated gill nets

ANGLING ORGANISATIONS, WHO have been battling for a better deal for threatened bass stocks and for the introduction of sustainable forms of bass fishing, have welcomed the announcement by the European Commission that could see the removal of damaging gill nets from the bass fishery in the North Sea, English Channel and North Atlantic.

In addition, recreational anglers may be allowed to retain 10 fish a month during the 10-month open season (April-January), as opposed to the current one fish a day for only six months (July-December 2016).

If the proposals are adopted by the Council of Ministers at the forthcoming Fishing Opportunities meeting in December, commercial bass exploitation will be restricted to hook-and-line fishing only for 10 months in 2017, with a closure in February and March to protect spawning aggregations.

Overall, the Commission's proposals to remove the nets from the bass fishery will make a significant reduction in commercial bass mortality, while the recreational take is likely to remain broadly similar.

However, the introduction of the more flexible monthly bag limits for anglers will help to undo

some of the damage done to the charter boat fleet, which lost up to 20 per cent of its revenue as a result of a downturn in anglers' bookings following the introduction of the zero and one fish bag limits for 2016.

Both the Angling Trust and the Bass Anglers' Sportfishing Society (BASS) have been examining the evidence of the impacts of the 2016 measures on both bass stocks and on recreational bass fishing, in order to formulate a series of proposals to the European Commission and to UK Fisheries Minister George Eustice.

This included three separate surveys carried out among charter boat skippers, bass guides and sea anglers to determine the true socio-economic impacts of 2016 measures for recreational bass angling. The conclusions point to a significant loss of revenue for small businesses and coastal communities. Angling charter boat skippers in England have seen revenues slashed by more than one-fifth, and coastal towns are losing up to £3 million in valuable tourism revenue as anglers stay away.

The survey, carried out by the Professional Boatman's

Association (PBA), showed that an estimated £2.87 million is projected to be lost by charter boat businesses, which take anglers to sea to fish recreationally for bass and other species.

The losses amount to more than 50 per cent of the total value of commercial bass landings in the UK, with individual charter skippers reporting an average of 22 fewer bookings and losing more than £8,000 in revenues.

The Commission proposals published on October 27 state: "On the basis of social and economic impacts, limited fisheries using hooks and lines should be permitted, while providing for a closure to protect spawning aggregations."

"Additionally, due to incidental and unavoidable by-catches of bass by vessels using demersal trawls and seines, such by-catches should be limited to one per cent of the weight of the total catch of marine organisms on board.

"Catches of recreational fishermen should be restricted by a monthly limit."

Despite evidence to the contrary, the commercial sector lobbied strongly for the retention of gill-netting. They also argued unsuccessfully for their allowable bass by-catch to be raised from one per cent to five per cent, which would have

allowed netting to continue via the back door.

BASS spokesman Nigel Horsman, said: "These proposals are very good news for bass stocks, which have been declining dramatically over recent years, to a dangerously low level.

"Halting that decline and giving the stocks a chance to recover is not only good news for anglers, and all the businesses and livelihoods that depend on angling, but also is a welcome development for truly sustainable, hook and line commercial fishermen.

"It is important now that the long-term benefits that will arise from these management measures are not lost in the horse trading of the December Fishing Opportunities meeting. These measures can form the basis of a long-term management plan for bass, and would allow, for instance, a maximum landing size for bass to be introduced, in order to protect the largest, highly fecund females that are key to a healthy stock."

The Angling Trust's national campaigns coordinator Martin Salter, who has long argued for bass to become a net-free species, added: "At long last the Commission appears to have listened to the scientific advice and is learning the lessons from other countries, like the USA where valuable bass stocks are managed much more sustainably."

David Mitchell, head of marine at the Angling Trust, added: "It's good to see the European Commission, so often seen as the enemy, put forward some progressive, balanced and sensible measures to protect bass stocks. Unlike last year, it's essential that these measures are implemented by the Council of Ministers when they meet in December.

"The proposal for a monthly bag limit for recreational catches is one we believe offers a fairer deal for anglers, who were given a terrible deal last year once the Commission's proposals had been watered down by the politicians," he said. ■

TAKING UP THE FIGHT

Campaigners put their case to European Parliament



Words by **David Mitchell**
Angling Trust, head of marine

The big question on the lips of many anglers as 2017 approaches is what's going to happen with bass next year?

Recent scientific advice calls for zero catches – both commercially and recreationally – if we want the stock to get above a point below which its ability to regenerate is in danger.

The science on the bass stock tells us that things have gone from bad to worse. The reality is that this advice probably won't be followed. This means limited catches will be allowed in 2017, and the deadline to get back above critically low levels will slip back another year.

What might this mean for angling? My guess is that some form of bag limit will be maintained and tighter restrictions will be put on commercial fisheries.

It seems we might get a monthly bag limit, an idea put forward by the French National Federation for Sporting Boating and Fishing. It would offer a fairer deal for anglers and help charter skippers.

Even if there were significantly tighter commercial catch limits, it is obvious that the political clout of RSA is dwarfed by that of commercial fishing. Suffice to say, commercial fishers have collectively provided the expertise and finances to establish their sector's dominance in the process of formulating fisheries policies and management measures.

Recreational sea angling (RSA), on the other hand, has failed to mobilise to make sure its interests are effectively looked after by a well-funded professional representative body. Decades later, we are playing catch-up.

Despite there being overwhelming evidence that recreational bass angling delivers vastly more jobs and income than commercial bass fishing, recreational angling continues to exist on the scraps left behind once the commercial fishing fleet has been pacified.

However, we are changing this. Let's not forget what has been achieved over the last two years. We've seen the end of

the winter trawling for spawning bass, and an increase in the minimum legal size from 36cm to 42cm, allowing bass to spawn and reproduce. Neither of these measures would have come about had it not been for pressure applied by, among others, recreational angling organisations including the Angling Trust and the European Anglers Alliance (EAA).

Last month, the EAA, a group of national angling organisations from across Europe funded entirely by its members, and the European Fishing Tackle Trade Association (EFTTA), took an important step in representing anglers' interests at the European Parliament in Brussels, where MEPs, officials and others discussed recreational fishing and the long-term management of bass.

The EU is in the process of including bass in a long-term management plan. It's essential that bass are recognised as an important species for recreational angling too. Unless we are at the table, we could be locked into a system that treats sea anglers as second-class stakeholders. If we don't get recognition, there's no option but to accept that bass is now a species (within the EU at least) effectively owned by commercial fishing.

It was a real breakthrough to have Ian Noble, chairman of the Professional Boatman's Association (PBA), which represents more than 100 of the charter boats across the UK, in Brussels to present to MEPs and officials the impact that the bass measures have had on charter skippers' businesses.

The Angling Trust, on behalf of the EAA, produced a film, 'Seabass – Crisis – Value – Solution!', which was launched at the event in Brussels. The aim is to educate policymakers about the benefits to bass and local communities of recognising recreational angling in the management of European bass stocks.

Ultimately, RSA has two choices – no say on how stocks are managed or allocated, and a second-rate sea angling experience – or a strong voice as a legitimate stakeholder in how our fish stocks are managed, a seat at the table and, over time, a higher quality of fishing for you and your children to enjoy.



The event panel at the European Parliament in Brussels consisted of experts and MEPs