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UK and European Sea bass conservation measures

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Summary

The European seabass is an important commercial fish species. It is also one of the most important fish species for recreational fishermen in the UK due to its “famed fighting prowess”.

Health of the sea bass population

The species is thought to be particularly vulnerable to over-fishing. The most recent assessment of bass stocks showed that stocks have continued decline year-on-year. The [international scientific body \(ICES\) recommended](#) that bass catches in 2016 should be no more than 541 tonnes in Central and South North Sea, Irish Sea, English Channel, Bristol Channel, Celtic Sea, half the UK’s 2014 catch of 1,000 tonnes.

Emergency measures to preserve bass stocks 2015/16

Negotiations on the introduction of technical measures to preserve bass fish stocks have been ongoing in the European Commission since 2012. After there was no agreement on technical conservation measures at the December 2014 meeting of Ministers, the [UK Government made a formal request to the Commission](#) to take emergency measures to protect sea bass stocks.

The Commission subsequently announced a package of technical conservation measures for 2015:

- [A pelagic trawling ban for sea bass](#) (26 Jan 2015) during its spawning season—effective until 30 April 2015;
- a [limit on recreational anglers of three fish per day per angler](#) (26 March 2015);
- a [maximum catch per month by gear type](#) limiting the targeting of the vulnerable stock, [agreed on 24 June 2015](#); and
- an increased minimum landing size (MLS) for sea bass (from 36 cm to 45cm).

Despite these emergency measures, ICES warned that bass stocks are still declining. Throughout 2015, the European Commission worked with member states on a range of measures to reduce bass fishing mortality. In December, an agreement was reached for a ban on commercial (pelagic) trawlers fishing for bass from 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2016 in the English Channel and North Sea and from 1 July 2016 to 31 December 2016 it shall be prohibited for vessels to fish quantities exceeding 1 tonne per any vessel per month of sea bass. Whilst for recreational fishermen are limited to catch and release for the first part of the year and a one bass per fisherman per day for the second half of the year. The measures are now in force in the UK.

Sea angling review 2012

In 2011, the Government launched a national survey of sea angling in England. This report assessed the number of people sea angling, catch data and the economic and social value of sea angling. This report – [Sea Angling 2012](#) – was published on 27 November 2013. The Government also launched an assessment of seabass stocks to determine whether the MLS should be increased. The [Government published the findings of this assessment](#) in December 2014.

1. European sea bass: *Dicentrarchus labrax*

The European sea bass *Dicentrarchus labrax* is a widely distributed fish species in the Northeast Atlantic and Mediterranean Sea. It is found around the UK, and populations extend from southern Norway to Northwest Africa.

According to the Marine Management Organisation's (MMOs) landings statistics, the total weight of sea bass commercially landed in the UK in 2014 was 1051 tonnes with a first sale value of £7.59 million.¹ Most sea bass produced in the EU is farmed.²

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Sea bass is an important species for sport fishermen in the UK. It has a "famed fighting prowess" that makes it, and particularly larger specimens, a "highly desirable" target for recreational fishermen.³⁴ The Bass Anglers' Sportfishing Society (BASS) claimed that recreational fishing of the species was worth £100 million in 2004.⁵ Angling groups argue that this spending makes the species more valuable as a sport quarry than as a commercial food-fish.⁶

1.1 Health of the stock

The European sea bass is thought to be particularly vulnerable to over-fishing and local population depletion due to various aspects of its biology:

- they are slow growing and do not mature until they are approximately 31-35 cm in length for males and 40-45 cm for females.⁷ It can take from 4 to 7 years to reach this size (they have been recorded up to 28 years of age). Such slow maturing species are vulnerable to over-fishing as individuals may be caught before they can spawn;
- they concentrate into specific areas at particular times of the year, making them easier to catch. For example, juvenile bass occupy defined nursery areas in estuaries whilst adults return to the same offshore spawning sites each year;
- individuals return to the same sites each year, meaning that local populations can more easily be depleted by fishing; and,

¹ MMO, "[Monthly sea fisheries statistics December 2014](#)", 27 February 2015

² [Responsible Sourcing Guide: Seabass Version 3](#), Seafish, February 2011, viewed 26 March 2013

³ [Bass Management Plan](#), Bass Anglers' Sportfishing Society, September 2004 [viewed 26 March 2013]

⁴ [Report of the Inter-Benchmark Protocol on New Species \(Turbot and Seabass\)](#), ICES Advisory Committee, 1-5 October 2012

⁵ [Bass Management Plan](#), Bass Anglers' Sportfishing Society, September 2004 [viewed 26 March 2013]

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ [Responsible Sourcing Guide: Seabass Version 3](#), Seafish, February 2011, viewed 26 March 2013

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- periods of low sea temperatures can kill large numbers of juvenile sea bass, making them particularly vulnerable in northern parts of their range.⁸

There is insufficient information on the state of the stock to fully evaluate its health, although some evidence points to a recent decline in the Northeast Atlantic.⁹ The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), a scientific body that independently reviews fish stocks, assessed all the available evidence in October 2012. This indicated that in the Northeast Atlantic:

- sea bass stock had increased from the early 1990s to mid-2000s, possibly because of climate change-related increases in sea temperature;
- numbers of adult sea bass started to decline in the mid 2000s. This coincided with increased fishing; and,
- a number of cold winters since 2008 may have killed a significant proportion of juvenile sea bass.¹⁰

ICES noted that this scenario, of increased fishing with a declining population, “would lead to an expectation of further... decline” in the Northeast Atlantic. However, ICES said it would have to undertake additional analysis to be able to give advice on population trends for sea bass.

ICES advised that in 2013 there needed to be a 20% cut in the amount of sea bass caught in the Northeast Atlantic. It stated that because of the lack of evidence about the state of the stock, it “considers that a precautionary reduction of catches should be implemented, unless there is ancillary information clearly indicating that the current exploitation is appropriate for the stock”.¹¹

In June 2014, ICES examined the available evidence on sea bass stocks in the North Sea and English Channel, advising that a sea bass management plan was urgently needed to reduce the fish mortality.¹² ICES advised that the implied total landings (commercial and recreational) should be no more than 1155 tonnes in 2015.¹³

In June 2015, ICES once again warned of depleting bass stocks, and advised that total landings (commercial and recreational) in 2016 should be no more than 541 tonnes in Central and South North Sea, Irish Sea, English Channel, Bristol Channel, Celtic Sea.¹⁴ This half the UK’s catch alone of 1,000 tonnes last year.

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⁸ [ICES Advice for 2013 for European seabass in the Northeast Atlantic](http://www.ices.dk), www.ICES.dk, September 2012

⁹ [Report of the Inter-Benchmark Protocol on New Species \(Turbot and Seabass\)](#), ICES Advisory Committee, 1-5 October 2012

¹⁰ [Responsible Sourcing Guide: Seabass Version 3](#), Seafish, February 2011, viewed 26 March 2013

¹¹ [ICES Advice for 2013 for European seabass in the Northeast Atlantic](http://www.ices.dk), www.ICES.dk, September 2012

¹² [ICES Advice for 2015 Celtic Sea and West of Scotland + North Sea European sea bass in Divisions IVbc, VIIa, and VIId-h \(Irish Sea, Celtic Sea, English Channel, and southern North Sea\)](#)

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ [ICES Advice on fishing opportunities, catch, and effort Celtic Seas and Greater North Sea Ecoregions](#), 30 June 2015

1.2 Seabass fishing regulations

There is no quota for seabass set under the Common Fisheries Policy. There were unsuccessful negotiations to secure an agreement to tackle the decline in sea bass stocks at the 2014 Fisheries Council meeting. However, the UK Government did secure a commitment from the Commission to work with Member States to reduce fishing pressure at the start of the season in 2015.

Consequently, in 2015 a suite of emergency conservation measures were introduced to arrest the decline in sea bass stock.

Box 1: 2015 emergency sea bass conservation measures

- A daily 3 fish bag limit per person for recreational anglers.
- Monthly catch limits for commercial fishing vessels.
- A ban on all EU commercial fishing in areas around Ireland, excluding the Bristol Channel and other areas inside the UK's 12 mile zone.
- A minimum conservation reference size of 42cm to allow female fish to grow to spawning age.¹⁵ (see section 5 for more information)

For 2016, an agreement for additional restrictions was agreed at the 2015 fisheries council meeting for both commercial and recreational fisheries.¹⁶

Box 2: 2016 sea bass conservation measures

- A ban on commercial (pelagic) trawlers fishing for bass from 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2016 in the English Channel and North Sea, except for:
 - Demersal trawls and seines are allowed to retain bycatches of sea bass that are not more than 1% of the weight of the total catches of marine organisms on board.
 - Hooks and lines and fixed gill nets which are permitted 1,300kg per vessel in January, April, May and June (NB: this does not include drift net fisheries). The fishery is closed in February and March.
- From 1 July 2016 to 31 December 2016 it shall be prohibited for vessels to fish quantities exceeding 1 tonne per any vessel per month of sea bass in the following areas:
 - ICES divisions IVb, IVc, VIId, VIle VIIf and VIIf;
 - waters within 12 nautical miles from baseline under the sovereignty of the United Kingdom in ICES divisions VIIa and VIIg.
- For recreational fishermen from 1 January to 30 June 2016 catch and release only permitted and from 1 July to 31 December 2016 one bass per fisherman per day in the English Channel, North Sea, Irish Sea and Atlantic Ocean surrounding southern Ireland will be in place for 2016 (ICES divisions IVb, IVc, VIIa, VIId, VIle, VIIf, VIIf, VIIg, VIIh, VIIj and VIIk).¹⁷

(see section 6 for more information)

¹⁵ Defra, "[New protections for sea bass](#)", 5 August 2015

¹⁶ Defra, "[Tough decisions reap benefits for UK fishermen](#)", 16 December 2015

¹⁷ MMO, "[New commercial and recreational fishing restrictions for Bass in 2016](#)", 30 December 2015

2. Changes to the minimum landing size—Government policy

2.1 Introduction to MLS

There have been calls in recent years to increase minimum landing sizes (MLS) for sea bass from 36 cm to 45cm. The aim of this would be to ensure that more females can reach maturity and breed (most females are sexually mature at 45cm). Such a change would aim to increase the size of the sea bass population. It may also increase the proportion of larger fish in the population, which are more valuable to both commercial and sport fishermen.

However, an increase in MLS would have short term implications for fishermen. In 2007 it was calculated that an increase to 40cm would cost inshore fishermen “around £1.4 million in the first year, with reduced landings for three to four years, and subsequently recovering to the levels that pertained before the increase”.¹⁸

There is some, albeit controversial, scientific evidence to suggest that the use of MLS in fisheries management can lead to reductions in the overall size of fish in a population. The removal of larger fish from a population may lead to evolutionary changes and lead to smaller fish sizes over time, although more research is needed to confirm this.¹⁹

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2.2 Labour Government proposals 2006-2007

In 2006, following a consultation exercise, the then Government announced that it would increase the MLS for bass from 36cm to 45cm. This ambition was subsequently scaled back to 40cm.²⁰

However, the Labour Government reconsidered the decision after a meeting with the National Federation of Fishermen’s Organisations (NFFO). On 25 October 2007 it announced that the minimum landing size for bass in English waters would remain at 36cm.²¹

The Minister, Jonathan Shaw, explained that the evidence provided by ICES at the time showed that the levels of sea bass fishing were sustainable, and that an increase in MLS might increase discards. In addition, the Minister was concerned about the economic impact of any changes on fishermen. He said that the evidence would be reviewed in future to see whether more protections were required.²²

¹⁸ HC Deb 23 November 2007 cc1434

¹⁹ [Ocean conservation: A big fight over little fish](#), Nature Journal (Vol 493, Issue 7434), 30 January 2013

²⁰ Defra Press Release, Bass landing size increase to improve fish stocks, 10 August 2006

²¹ Defra Press release, *No change to Seabass landing size*, 25 October 2007

²² HC Deb 23 November 2007 cc1434

2.3 Coalition Government

In answer to a [written parliamentary question on 8 October 2013](#), Lord De Mauley, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, set out the coalition Government's policy towards preserving sea bass stocks:

"Government is pushing for effective EU-wide conservation measures that will ensure the stock recovers and becomes sustainable. Government is also considering the need for domestic management of bass in context of these discussions.

"Any proposals for bass conservation measures will take account of the relevant science and the socio-economic impact of any such proposals, for the benefit of all marine users. Defra officials will aim to notify stakeholders of any significant developments as soon as possible."²³

In September 2012 the Fisheries Minister, Richard Benyon, said that he had "met representatives of the Angling Trust and the Bass Anglers' Sports fishing Society... to discuss the possibility of increasing the minimum landing size for bass". He explained that "as a result of these discussions, DEFRA officials are undertaking a review of the bass minimum landing size and the findings will be presented to me in due course".

The publication of this review was delayed until December 2014, when the Shadow Fisheries Minister Angela Smith MP called on the Minister to publish this review.²⁴ The Fisheries Minister George Eustice MP agreed to publish the report, [depositing the report in the House of Commons Library](#).²⁵

Box 3: Effects of improved fishery selection pattern and increased MLS on European sea bass—Summary of findings²⁶

1. The 2012 ICES benchmark assessment of bass in the North Sea, English Channel, Celtic Sea and Irish Sea (ICES subareas IV & VII, excluding south and west Ireland) shows a recent decline in spawning stock biomass (SSB) and increasing fishing mortality (F) during the 2000's. Year classes since 2008 appear very weak, leading to an expectation of a continued decline in SSB to the detriment of commercial and recreational fisheries.
2. The historical increase in minimum mesh size to 90mm for gill nets catching bass was appropriate for the 36cm MLS, and discarding observed in gillnet fisheries has been relatively low. However, the 80mm mesh otter trawls used widely for bass in subarea VII catch bass as small as 20cm resulting in many undersized bass being discarded. Overall, around 40% of the total international catch weight of bass from each year class comprises fish that have not yet spawned.
3. Biological reference points for sustainability are not yet defined for bass. Potential proxies for F giving maximum sustainable yield (F-MSY) could be obtained from yield-per-recruit analyses, which evaluate how the total SSB and fishery yield throughout the life span of a single year class of fish vary according to F. A widely adopted proxy for F-MSY is the F at which the total SSB per

²³ HC Deb 8 October 2013 CWA16

²⁴ [HC Deb 3 Dec 2014: c134-137WH](#)

²⁵ CEFAS, [Effects of improved fishery selection pattern and increased MLS on European sea bass](#), (6 Jan 2013).

²⁶ CEFAS, [Effects of improved fishery selection pattern and increased MLS on European sea bass](#), (6 Jan 2013).

recruit is around 40% of the value in the absence of fishing ($F_{40\%SPR}$). Based on the results of the 2012 ICES benchmark assessment of bass, $F_{40\%SPR}$ could be obtained by either a reduction of up to 70% in international F at each age (keeping the fishery selectivity the same as at present), or by increasing the length at first capture (and MLS) to around 44cm in all European fleets. Provided the length at first capture is increased to the same extent in all European fleets, the yield per recruit for UK fleets would be greater than obtained by a 70% reduction in F at the current selectivity pattern. The choice of increasing the MLS or reducing F through limits on effort or landings to achieve conservation goals would depend on the ability to implement either approach without simply causing a large increase in discarding.

4. Fishing mortality on area IV&VII bass could not be reduced to $F_{40\%SPR}$ by altering the MLS and selectivity for only the UK fleets, because UK fleets account for only 15% of the total F on bass in this area. The impact on UK fishery yields by altering the selectivity only of UK fleets would depend critically on the extent to which bass in UK fishing grounds are also fished by foreign fleets. If there was a "UK bass stock" fished only by UK fleets (the assumption of the previous RIA on bass MLS), the full benefits of increasing the MLS for UK fleets would accrue to UK fisheries. However, if foreign fisheries catch bass below the UK MLS before they are caught by UK vessels, this may largely negate any future benefits to the UK fisheries. The true situation lies somewhere between these extremes, but cannot be identified without a quantitative evaluation of mixing rates of bass between seasonal UK fishing grounds for bass and those occupied by French, Dutch and other foreign fleets.
5. Increasing the MLS would result in a large initial drop in commercial fishery landings. Provided all European fleets adopt the new MLS and successfully achieve the necessary selectivity pattern, UK fishery yields would gradually increase and for MLS up to 48cm would exceed the yields obtainable at the current fishery selectivity after 3 – 4 years. If the MLS is increased only for UK fleets, the subsequent trend in UK landings would depend on the extent to which other foreign fleets continue to exploit bass below the UK MLS on UK fishing grounds. In the worst case scenario where bass below the new UK MLS in UK waters are heavily fished by foreign fleets, UK landings may not recover from the initial reduction after introduction of the new MLS. In the best case scenario where the UK is the sole exploiter of a "UK stock" in UK waters, landings may recover in a similar way to a scenario where all international fleets have the same MLS adjustment.
6. A phased introduction of a 40cm MLS followed by a 48cm MLS three years later avoids the very large initial drop in commercial landings caused by the immediate introduction of the 48mm MLS. However a large drop still occurs when the 48mm MLS is introduced.
7. None of the analyses of bass MLS include recreational fishery data, as it is not yet possible to include recreational catch data in the stock assessment. Large changes in MLS will necessitate more extensive catch&release for anglers, increasing the need for data on survival rates of bass released by recreational and commercial line fishermen.

3. Sea Angling Review 2012

In July 2011, the Government initiated a major project to collect information on recreational sea fishing (a requirement of EU law). The project, [Sea Angling 2012](#), collected recreational catch data for a range of species including sea bass, to help improve scientific understanding of the species and the economic and social value of sea angling. Data was collected from over 11,000 sea anglers in England through an Office for National Statistics (ONS) household survey, face-to-face interviews with anglers by inshore fisheries conservation authorities (IFCA), catch diaries and online surveys.²⁷

The survey results were published on 27 November 2013.²⁸ The surveys estimated there are 884,000 sea anglers in England who in 2012 spent £1.23 billion on the sport, equivalent to £831 million direct spend once imports and taxes had been excluded. Taking indirect and induced effects into account, sea angling supported £2.1 billion of total spending, a total of over 23,600 jobs, and almost £980 million of gross value added (GVA).²⁹

The review's authors also found that almost 4 million days of sea angling were recorded in 2012. Shore fishing was the most common type of sea angling, almost 3 million angler-days compared with 1 million for private or rented boats and 0.1 million on charter boats.³⁰

Welcoming the publication of the review, [Fishing Minister George Eustice said](#):

"Sea angling creates money and jobs for rural communities as well as making an important contribution to the national economy. Looking after our sea life is just as much an economic issue as it is an environmental one. It's in everybody's interest to manage fish stocks sensibly so people can continue to enjoy the sport and support local businesses."³¹

The report's findings were also embraced by angling groups. [Mark Lloyd, the Angling Trust's Chief Executive said](#):

"This report provides real evidence of the importance of sea angling to nearly a million people and many more who rely on sea anglers spending money in their seaside towns and villages. Sea angling is great fun and there are a huge range of fish to be caught, but it could be so much better if stocks were better managed. This report should be a wake-up call for politicians who have traditionally paid too much attention to the demands of the commercial sector and ignored recreational anglers, who generate far more revenue to the economy."³²

The Sea Angling Review 2012 estimated that there are: 884,000 sea anglers in England who spent £1.23 billion on the sport. The review also found that sea angling supported £2.1 billion of total spending, a total of over 23,600 jobs, and almost £980 million of gross value added (GVA)

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Defra, "[Sea Angling boosts the economy and creates jobs](#)" *Gov.uk* (27 November 2013. Accessed online: 20 October 2014.

²⁹ Defra, "[Sea Angling 2012 – a survey of recreational sea angling activity and economic value in England](#)" (27 November 2013).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Defra, "[Sea Angling boosts the economy and creates jobs](#)" *Gov.uk* (27 November 2013. Accessed online: 20 October 2014.

³² [Sea Angling 2012 Report Released – Angling Trust](#). Accessed online: 21 October 2014.

4. Technical measures to preserve bass fish stocks: Commission negotiations 2014

Negotiations on the introduction of [technical measures](#) to preserve bass fish stocks have been ongoing in the European Commission since 2012.³³ On 17 October 2014, [George Eustice, Fisheries Minister, responded to a Parliamentary Question](#) on progress made by the European Commission towards sustainable management of bass stocks, by stating:

“As a result of discussions facilitated by the European Commission, there is now a consensus amongst interested Member States to significantly reduce targeting of bass across all sectors exploiting that stock. The Commission has also requested advice from the North Sea, North Western Waters and South West Waters Advisory Councils on the appropriate short term measures to apply in 2015, and the development of a long term management plan. We expect EU bass management proposals to be published before the end of the year.

“The UK Government will continue to push for effective EU-wide conservation measures that will ensure the stock recovers and becomes sustainable by working with the Commission and interested Member States. We will consider the need for any further domestic management of bass in the light of these European discussions.”³⁴

Through expert meetings, the Commission and Member States have been considering the introduction of a Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for sea bass.³⁵ ICES has previously identified that a TAC may not be the most suitable means to effectively control mortality for this stock; rather it has recommended implementation of 'input' controls, through technical measures aimed at protecting juvenile fish, alongside entry limitations into the offshore fishery.³⁶

4.1 Commission proposals, November 2014

The Commission has proposed EU bass management measures for 2015.³⁷ These measures are due to be debated by Ministers at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council Meeting on 15 and 16 December 2014. The Commission proposals include:

- a one fish daily bag limit for the recreational sector; and
- catch limits for the commercial sector (at levels still to be set).³⁸

³³ European Commission, [“46th Plenary Meeting Report of the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries”](#) (7-11 July, 2014).

³⁴ HC Deb 17 October 2014 | 209904

³⁵ European Commission, [“46th Plenary Meeting Report of the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries”](#) (7-11 July, 2014).

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ [HC Deb 17 Nov 2014 Written question - 213849](#)

³⁸ Defra, [“EU action on bass stock management”](#) in *Fishing Focus* (Autumn 2014), p.

[Recreational anglers](#) and conservationists have expressed their displeasure at the draft proposals as they maintain they favour the interests of commercial fisherman over recreational fisherman.³⁹

The Government's stated approach is to sustainably manage the marine environment for the benefit of all users, including both recreational and commercial fishermen. In answer to a [Parliamentary Question on 17 November 2014](#), Fisheries Minister George Eustice reaffirmed his commitment "to press for an approach which will ensure bass stocks recover and become sustainable."⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the [Government's quarterly fishing newsletter](#) reflects on the Commission proposals by stating that:

"This proposal will require further development and negotiation however. For example, we believe that to ensure proper restraints on the pair trawling spring fishery on groups of spawning bass, other known spawning areas need to be included to avoid boats moving to them and appropriate measures to limit bass catches by other boats are required."⁴¹

On 15 and 16 December 2014, the Fisheries Mr George Eustice MP represented the UK at the EU Agriculture and Fisheries Council meeting alongside representatives from the Scottish and Northern Irish devolved administrations (Richard Lochhead and Michelle O'Neill).⁴²

At this meeting EU Ministers considered and came to agreements on fishing opportunities for certain fish stocks in 2015. It also considered the Commission's proposal on technical measures for sea bass.⁴³

4.2 No agreement on sea bass

At the conclusion of the meeting on 16 December 2014, the [Government announced](#) that "despite pressing hard for measures to address declining sea bass levels" they had been unable to secure an agreement to tackle the issue. The Government did secure a commitment from the Commission to work with Member States to reduce fishing pressure at the start of the season in 2015.⁴⁴

Speaking at the conclusion of the meeting, [George Eustice expressed his regret at failing to secure agreement to arrest the decline in sea bass stocks](#), stating:

"I was disappointed no decision was reached this year to improve bass stocks but will be following up on the Commission's commitment to work with Member States in the New Year. The UK has been a lone voice on this issue and it is essential we achieve a balanced approach which reflects the contribution of

George Eustice MP:
"I was disappointed no decision was reached this year to improve bass stocks but will be following up on the Commission's commitment to work with Member States in the New Year."

³⁹ BASS ["Press Release: Sea Bass – Don't let the EU off the Hook"](#) (11 November 2014). Accessed online: 1 December 2014.

⁴⁰ [HC Deb 17 Nov 2014 Written question - 213849](#)

⁴¹ Defra, ["EU action on bass stock management"](#) in *Fishing Focus* (Autumn 2014), p. 6

⁴² Defra Press Release: [UK secures fair fisheries deal in Europe](#), (16 December 2014).

⁴³ European Commission, ["PRESS RELEASE: 3360th Council meeting Agriculture and Fisheries Brussels"](#) (15/16 December 2014).

⁴⁴ Defra Press Release: [UK secures fair fisheries deal in Europe](#), (16 December 2014).

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both commercial fisheries as well as recreational anglers on declining bass numbers.”⁴⁵

The [Angling Trust were disappointed with the outcome](#), and reiterated their calls for domestic measures in UK waters including:

- Raising the minimum landing size for bass from 36cms to at least 45cms to allow fish to breed at least once before harvesting
- Strengthening and enforcing the UK's network of bass nursery areas and giving greater protection to estuaries.
- Moving away from indiscriminate netting towards line-caught methods that are more selective and environmentally friendly.
- Limiting the weekly catch per commercial boat.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Defra Press Release: [UK secures fair fisheries deal in Europe](#), (16 December 2014).

⁴⁶ Angling trust [“Angling Trust Slams EU Bass Shambles As Anything But A 'Fair Deal'”](#) (17 December 2014). Accessed online: 19 December 2014.

5. Emergency measures to protect bass stocks, 2015

On 19 December 2014 the UK made a formal request to the Commission to take emergency measures to protect sea bass stocks.⁴⁷ The Commission consequently announced a package of measures to protect sea bass.

5.1 Pelagic trawling ban

On 26 January 2015 the Commission announced emergency conservation measures that meant:

Vessels fishing with mid-water trawls with mesh size greater than 70mm will not be permitted to catch, retain or land bass caught with these fishing gears. The measures apply immediately and will remain in force until 30th April 2015.⁴⁸

This ban was introduced to protect the stock from being targeted when the fish is coming together in shoals during the spawning season to reproduce.⁴⁹

The European Commissioner for Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Karmenu Vella, said:

The impact of this stock collapsing would be catastrophic for the livelihoods of so many fishermen and coastal communities. This is about saving sea bass and saving jobs in the commercial and recreational fishing sector. I am proud of our quick reaction to what is an immediate danger to the stock.⁵⁰

5.2 Recreational fishing: A new bass bag limit

On 26 March 2015, the Commission adopted further measures introducing a limit on recreational anglers of three fish per day per angler.⁵¹ The Commission press release accompanying this announcement stated:

Sea bass is a very valuable fish, on which many fishermen, especially small fishing enterprises, depend. With over 1.3m recreational anglers in France and another 800 000 in the UK, many thousands of jobs also depend on recreational fishing.

Recent scientific analyses have reinforced previous concerns about the state of the stock and advised urgently to reduce fishing by 80%. We are witnessing a rapid decline of sea bass that risks leading to a collapse if no action is taken.

⁴⁷ European commission, "[European Commission acts to protect sea bass stock](#)", (26 January 2015).

⁴⁸ MMO, "[Sea bass measures come into force](#)", *Gov.uk*, 28 January 2015

⁴⁹ European commission, "[European Commission acts to protect sea bass stock](#)", (26 January 2015).

⁵⁰ European Commission, "[European Commission acts to protect sea bass stock](#)", 26 January 2015

⁵¹ European Commission, "[Council adopts measures to help sea bass to recover](#)", 26 March 2015.

The daily limit on recreational catches complements the emergency measures which the Commission adopted earlier this year, and which targeted pelagic fisheries.⁵²

5.3 Maximum catch per month by gear type

On 21 May 2015, the European Commission announced a further proposal aimed at halting the decline of sea bass in the Celtic Sea, Irish Sea, Channel and North Sea. This proposal envisaged a maximum catch per month by gear type, limiting the targeting of the vulnerable stock but allowing for incidental catches.⁵³

Following negotiations between Ministers, on 24 June 2015, the “third package” of measures to address bass stock decline came into force.⁵⁴ The agreement reached increased the proposed maximum catch: for “all types of demersal trawls inclusion Danish/Scottish seines” by 300kg to 1800kg; and “all long lines or pole and line or rod and line fisheries” by 300kg to 1300kg. For all other gear types Ministers agrees to the proposed maximum catch per vessel per calendar month.

Gear type	Maximum catch of sea bass permitted per vessel per calendar month (in kg)
OTM or PTM, Mid water or pelagic trawls	1500
OTB, all types of demersal trawls inclusion Danish/Scottish seines	1800
All GN, all drift net and fixed (trammel) net fisheries	1000
All LL, all long lines or pole and line fisheries	1300
Purse seines	3000

Source: MMO New fishing restrictions issued for bass (*Dicentrarchus labrax*) (24 June 2015)⁵⁵

⁵² European Commission, [“Council adopts measures to help sea bass to recover”](#), 26 March 2015

⁵³ European Commission, [“Sea Bass Q&A”](#) Accessed online: 26 May 2015

⁵⁴ MMO, [“New fishing restrictions issued for bass \(*Dicentrarchus labrax*\)”](#), 24 June 2015

⁵⁵ MMO, [“New fishing restrictions issued for bass \(*Dicentrarchus labrax*\)”](#), 24 June 2015

5.4 An increased minimum landing size

After several years of lobbying for an increased minimum landing size (MLS) for sea bass (from 36 cm to 45cm), the Commission introduced a regulation applying a minimum conservation reference size of 42cm for bass. So that from 1 September 2015, fishermen and anglers are prevented from catching juvenile bass under 42cm in size. This is to give female bass the chance to grow to an age where they can spawn.

[Commission Implementing Regulation \(EU\) 2015/1316](#) applies a minimum conservation reference size of 42cm for bass as a derogation from annex XII of the “technical conservation” regulation ([Council Regulation \(EC\) 850/98](#)).

...fishermen and anglers are prevented from catching juvenile bass under 42cm in size. This is to give female bass the chance to grow to an age where they can spawn.

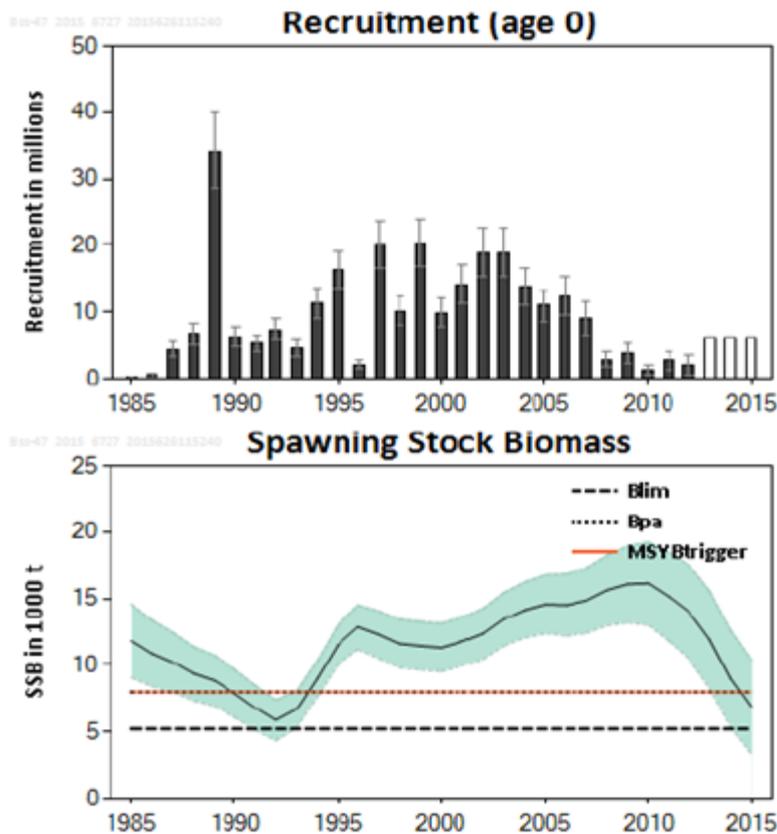
6. Seabass conservation measures 2016

6.1 Bass stocks continue to decline

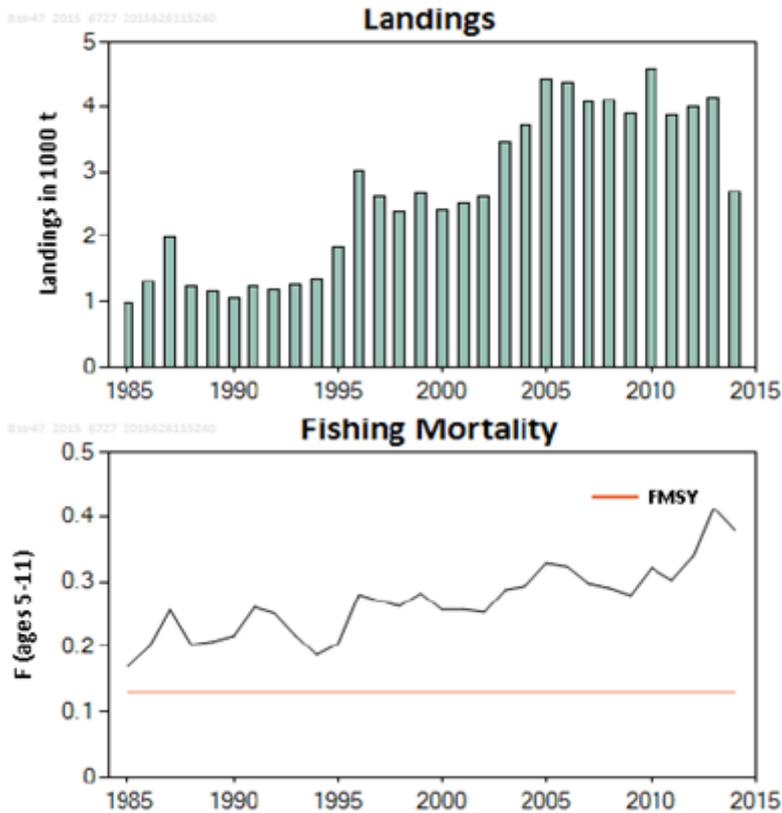
In June 2015, International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) once again warned of depleting bass stocks, and advised that total landings (commercial and recreational) in 2016 should be no more than 541 tonnes in Central and South North Sea, Irish Sea, English Channel, Bristol Channel, Celtic Sea.⁵⁶

The charts below, taken from the ICES advice, show strong year classes in 1989 caused a rapid increase in spawning-stock biomass, that fishing mortality is well above the F_{MSY} (Maximum Sustainable Yield) proxy and stock recruitment has been very poor since 2008:

Bass stock development over time



⁵⁶ [ICES Advice on fishing opportunities, catch, and effort Celtic Seas and Greater North Sea Ecoregions](#), 30 June 2015



Source: ICES

6.2 Commission proposals for 2016

On 10 November 2015, the European Commission published proposals building on the emergency measures introduced in 2015. The aim of the Commission's proposals are to bring the stock under Maximum Sustainable Yield management by 2017.⁵⁷ The measures proposed were agreed, with certain small exceptions, were agreed at the December Fisheries Council meeting.⁵⁸ Speaking at the conclusion of this meeting, Commissioner Karmenu Vella stated:

On sea bass, we are building on the measures that we have put in place in 2015 both for the commercial and the recreational fisheries. We committed to measures that will be effective enough for sea bass, in an attempt to reverse the steep decline of this stock.

We also took into account the fact that there is a lower impact by small scale fishing vessels on the sea bass, than by the large scale trawlers.⁵⁹

In the UK the MMO made an [announcement](#) on 26 January 2016 setting out the additional restrictions for 2016 which have been implemented on both commercial and recreational fishermen and rest out in Box 4 below

⁵⁷ European Commission, "[How is the EU protecting sea bass?](#)", Accessed online: 7 January 2015

⁵⁸ Defra, "[Tough decisions reap benefits for UK fishermen](#)", 16 December 2015

⁵⁹ [AGRIFISH Council Press Conference](#), 16 December 2015

Box 4: 2016 Bass Restrictions

For commercial fisheries:

- a continued closure throughout 2016 to all commercial bass fishing in ICES Areas VIIb, VIIc, VIIj, VIIk and outside the UK 12nm in areas VIIa and VIIg;
- From 1 January to 30 June 2016 a prohibition on commercial vessels fishing for bass in ICES Areas IVb, IVc, VIIa, VIId, VIle, VIIf, VIlg, VIIh except for:
 - Demersal trawls and seines which are permitted a 1% bass by-catch; and
 - Hooks and lines and fixed gill nets which are permitted 1,300kg per vessel in January, April, May and June (NB: this does not include drift net fisheries). The fishery is closed in February and March.
- from 1 July to 31 December 2016 monthly catch limits apply to all vessels in ICES Areas IVb, IVc, VIIa, VIId, VIle, VIIf, VIlg, VIIh
 - 1,300kg per vessel per month for hooks and lines and fixed gill nets (NB: this does not include drift net fisheries)
 - 1,000kg per vessel per month for all other gears

The catch limits apply to a single vessel and cannot be transferred between vessels or between one month and another.

For recreational fisheries

In ICES Areas IVb, IVc, VIIa, VIId, VIle, VIIf, VIlg, VIIh

- from 1 January to 30 June 2016 catch and release only permitted
- from 1 July to 31 December 2016 one bass per fisherman per day

In ICES areas VIIj and VIIk

- from 1 January to 31 December 2016 one bass per fisherman per day

Recreational fisheries include fishing from the shore.

The MMO has also produced a [set of maps](#) setting out the 2016 bass fishing restrictions.

7. Bass landings data, 2009-2013

The [June 2014 ICES report on Sea bass stock in nearby waters](#) provides further information on bass landings, including an estimate of the annual recreational bass catch:

- Commercial landings in the UK and France in 2013 = 4132 tonnes (21% bottom trawlers; 37% pelagic pair trawlers; 13% fixed/drift nets; 12% lines; 3% other gears. Other countries: 14% all gears).
- Discards are known to take place but cannot be fully quantified (they are likely to be in the order of 5% in weight).
- Recreational catch is known to be substantial but cannot be fully quantified (surveys indicate total annual removals by France, UK (England), Netherlands and Belgium of the order of 1500 tonnes in recent years).⁶⁰

Landings into the UK (all vessels) and elsewhere (UK vessels only) can be quantified using official statistics (see below):

Bass Landings into UK by UK and Foreign Vessels					
	<i>Quantity (Tonnes)</i>				
	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Bass	682	704	787	835	796

Source: UK Sea Fisheries Annual Statistics Report 2013

⁶⁰ ICES, "[ICES advice June 2014 – ECOREGION STOCK: Celtic Sea and West of Scotland + North Sea](#)" (June 2014).

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