



Ein cyf/Our ref: OAQ(5)0160
Paul Davies AM
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
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Dear Paul

At Plenary session on 28 June, I agreed to provide you with an update on the sea bass fishery.

Following scientific advice from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) in July 2016, which confirmed the continuing perilous state of the Northern European Bass stock, the EU Commission brought forward a range of management measures as part of its proposal for a Regulation to fix the fishing opportunities for EU Member States in 2017. This regulation was partly the subject of the December (2016) Council of Ministers which I attended in the company of my counterparts from the other UK Fisheries Administrations.

The Commission proposals, in terms, were heavily biased against netting methods and tended to favour hook and line methods. Initially there was no catch allowance for netting at all.

Whilst I recognise the scientific advice about the state of the Bass stock, I felt it necessary to balance that evidence against the predominance of small scale, inshore fishers in Wales who rely heavily on the bass component of their catches for their commercial viability. These are very small vessels by comparison with bass vessels used elsewhere in the UK and the wider EU and as such their impact on bass stocks is minimal and therefore sustainable. The nature of the bass fishery in Wales means a significant portion of the catch is taken by nets, regulation of which means they are highly selective.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

Against this background, I felt it to be important that the interests of our fishers in the coastal communities be protected and I therefore pursued a relaxation of the Commission proposals which resulted in a 250kg catch allowance per month for those using fixed nets. It is likely that such a limit will impact the catches of small vessels in the mainly summer months, but they already fish within such limits most of the year due to the constraints of weather and tide on their already vulnerable operations. The outcome of the negotiations was welcomed by the representatives of the Welsh fishing industry.

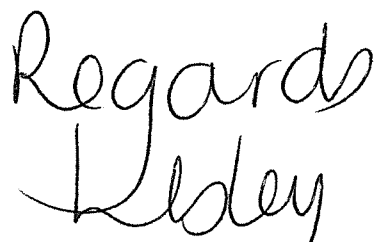
Had I not negotiated a modest catch allowance for net fishers then clearly the catches for that method this year would have been zero with a consequent significant impact on their financial viability.

Total Bass landings in Wales were 62 tonnes in 2016, down from 93 tonnes in 2014. This reduction is mainly due to an increase in the EU minimum landing size, a measure which Welsh Government has supported to arrest the decline in the spawning population. Nevertheless, this represents a considerable reduction in income to fishers whilst contributing to the conservation of the stock.

In applying the agreed Commission management measures for this year, my officials have issued approximately 200 authorisations for the use of fixed nets to catch Bass based on track-record evidence of vessel activities. Looking at that catching method alone, bass landings for 2017 have amounted to 8.9 tonnes to the time of writing which is a reduction of 2.5 tonnes on the same period in 2016. It should be borne in mind that there is a lag in declarations working their way through the marketing chain, from where the figures are derived and so there may be a subsequent slight increase in the figure for this year. My officials are currently working on an improved system of fisheries statistics collection which will improve our understanding of industry activity.

As I set out above, there are numerous factors which influence the success or otherwise of our small scale fishers and so the reduction in catches cannot be attributed completely to the regulation of fixed nets.

I am awaiting the publication of the ICES scientific advice on Bass (and our other important commercial fish stocks) for 2018 and the Commission proposals that will be informed by it. Science and evidence must be at the heart of our fisheries management actions. Nevertheless, I am determined that blanket regulation issued from Brussels should not disproportionately impact artisanal fishers already operating sustainably wherever they may be and particularly here in Wales.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Regards" on the top line and "Lesley" on the bottom line. The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Lesley Griffiths AC/AM

Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros yr Amgylchedd a Materion Gwledig
Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs