

Sea Bass Q and A

Latest News

What have the 28 Member States decided on 2 July?

The EU has today taken another step to protect sea bass. The 28 EU member states agreed to the Commission's proposal to increase the minimum size for northern sea bass from 36 to 42 cm.

The new rule applies to both commercial and recreational fishermen. This will further improve the protection of this valuable stock and give it more chances to reproduce young fish before it is caught. The Commission will now proceed with the adoption of the agreed measures.

The Commission had also proposed to increase the minimum size for the two southern stocks of sea bass in Iberian waters and the Bay of Biscay. Member States however pointed to the less robust data available on these stocks. The Commission will therefore ask for renewed scientific advice on the southern stocks, which will feed into new proposals on sea bass from 2016 onwards.

Today's decision will take effect on 1 September 2015. It is the latest step in a package of measures the Commission has proposed for 2015 to halt the decline of this stock and prepare the way forward for further management measures in 2016.

What has the Council of Ministers adopted on sea bass on 19 June 2015?

On 19 June 2015 the Council of Ministers, where the 28 Member States are represented, adopted monthly catch limits for sea bass covering commercial vessels for the remainder of 2015 as follows:

Gear type	Maximum catch of sea bass permitted per vessel per calendar month (in kg)
1. OTM or PTM, Mid water or pelagic trawls	1 500
2. OTB, all types of demersal trawls including Danish / Scottish seines	1 800
3. All GN, all drift net and fixed (trammel) net fisheries	1 000
4. All LL, all long lines or pole and line fisheries	1 300
5. purse seines	3 000

The Council decision also comprises an area closure around Ireland for commercial fishing, namely the Celtic Sea, Irish Sea, south of Ireland and west of Ireland (ICES areas VIIa,b,c,g,j,k outside the UK 12 mile zone), thereby extending a national measure, that Ireland has had in place for Irish vessels only, to protect sea bass since 1990 to cover all EU vessels active in the area.

With its decision the Council has slightly increased the catch limits proposed by the Commission by 300 kg for categories 2 and 4 in the above table respectively.

What effect will these monthly catch limits have on the different fleets?

According to catch data delivered by France, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands the monthly catch limits will have an average impact of decreasing sea bass landings for pelagic trawlers by approximately 60 %, for hooks and line fisheries by 6% for demersal vessels by 22%. The "big" impact on sea bass comes from pelagic and demersal trawling and seines, so any meaningful recovery proposal unavoidably has to contain significant reductions here. The decision takes into account that the artisanal hooks and line fisheries as well as the gill net fisheries depend on sea bass to a greater extend and do not have other alternatives to catch. This decision is the third part of the package for 2015 to rebuild this stock so as to deliver an increased and stable income for all sectors involved in this important fishery.

When will this decision take effect?

The decision will be published in the Official Journal in the coming days and will take effect on the day following its publication and will be valid until 31 December 2015.

How has sea bass been managed in the EU in the past?

For years France, the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Netherlands and Belgium managed sea bass nationally. The national management measures varied from setting voluntary minimum landing sizes in France, over closed areas to protect nurseries in the UK, ban on recreational fishing for bass from 15th May to 15th June in Ireland, a maximum bag limit for recreational anglers in Ireland and the Netherlands to a full prohibition for commercial fishing in Ireland.

But scientists warned that these measures are not enough for a sustainable management. All countries agreed that a common approach is needed.

How does this common approach look like?

The common approach for 2015 is a package of three measures so that all those who fish sea bass make a balanced contribution to saving this stock:

- 1st Commission emergency measures prohibiting pelagic trawling on spawning sea bass to alleviate the immediate threat to the stock from fishing during the reproduction season;¹
- 2nd Council regulation setting a bag limit of 3 fish per recreational angler per day²;
- 3rd Council adopted on 19 June 2015 monthly catch limits for commercial fisheries and Member States agreed on an increase of the minimum size for sea bass to 42 cm on 2 July 2015.

Sea bass landings are increasing from year to year, what will the Commission do to tackle this?

Following up on the measures taken so far in 2015 the Commission will make further proposals in October 2015, which will concern the fishing year 2016. These proposals will be based on the latest scientific advice on the state of sea bass which the Commission received on 30 June 2015. Furthermore the Commission asked to receive catch data from the Member States concerned in order to have an informed view of the real situation on the ground. Should these catch data confirm an increase in catches, then the Commission will not hesitate to act accordingly with a view to proposing management measures that avoid a collapse of sea bass and that allow in the short term a better management of sea bass.

Why are recreational anglers covered by the package of measures given that the commercial sector catches the lion share of sea bass?

According to scientific assessment recreational anglers catch 25% of sea bass³ and therefore also have an impact on the stock. Scientists identified that we can reduce mortality with a daily bag limit and a greater minimum landing size⁴. On this basis the Council of Ministers, where all Member States are represented, adopted a three fish bag limit.

The commercial fishing industry catches 75% of sea bass and, while the pelagic industry has been prohibited to fish for sea bass from end January to 30 April 2015, the Council has adopted monthly catch limits for commercial fleets as can be seen in the table on page 1.

What happens in the long term?

¹ [Commission Implementing Regulation \(EU\) 2015/111 of 26 January 2015 establishing measures to alleviate a serious threat to the conservation of the sea bass \(*Dicentrarchus labrax*\) stock in the Celtic Sea, Channel, Irish Sea and southern North Sea](#)

² [Council Regulation \(EU\) 2015/523 of 25th March 2015 amending Regulations \(EU\) No 43/2014 and \(EU\) 2015/104 as regards certain fishing opportunities](#)

³ STECF 2014. Request for Services - Sea bass. Commitment No. SI2.680348. Paper for STECF July 2014 Sea bass fisheries in Europe and their management. Mike Armstrong (contract lead) and Mickael Drogou, Independent scientific experts, UK and France (background documents on: <https://stecf.jrc.ec.europa.eu/plen1402>).

⁴ Request for Services - Sea bass. Commitment No.686192, Paper for STECF ; not yet published.

The Commission will include sea bass as one of several stocks to be managed sustainably under a multi annual management plan for North Western Waters. This proposal will be adopted in 2016 and will be based on the latest scientific advice.

Is the Commission considering the potential economic impact of a further decline of seabass?

Halting the decline of sea bass and rebuilding this valuable stock is the number one guiding principle of the Commission. Many 1000s of jobs in the UK, France, Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe depend on commercial sea bass fishing and there are many small scale fishermen involved for whom sea bass is often their main source of income⁵. Recreational fishing (everything from angling equipment to boat rentals) plays an immensely important role as well. There are more than 1.3 million recreational anglers in France and another 800.000 in the UK generating a lot of added value; direct estimates of the contribution from sea bass only recreational fishing are difficult to quantify as in general most recreational sea fishing is on a mixed species basis. However estimates from discrete surveys⁶ suggest that the downstream value added is considerable. The impact of this stock collapsing would be catastrophic for the livelihoods of so many fishermen and coastal communities. It is therefore vital to rebuild sea bass for the benefit of both commercial fishermen and recreational anglers and the Commission will not shy away from taking any measure that is necessary to achieve this goal.

⁵ Section 3.5 STECF 2014. Request for Services - Sea bass. Commitment No. SI2.680348. Paper for STECF July2014 Sea bass fisheries in Europe and their management. Mike Armstrong (contract lead) and Mickael Drogou, Independent scientific experts, UK and France (background documents on: <https://stecf.jrc.ec.europa.eu/plen1402>).

⁶ Armstrong, M. A. Brown, J. Hargreaves, K. Hyder, S. Pilgrim-Morrison, M. Munday, S. Proctor, A. Roberts, K. Williamson "Sea Angling 2012 – a survey of recreational sea angling activity and economic value in England" Defra,2013 <http://www.marinemanagement.org.uk/seaangling/finalreport.htm>

And

Blue Marine Foundation: Defining the Economic and Environmental Values of sea bass- Link to publication [here](#)

Background

1. The sea bass fishery

- Sea bass is a high value fish in the North-East Atlantic and in the highest abundance from the southern North Sea, Irish Sea and west of Ireland down to the Iberian coast.
- Sea bass in this area has been declining rapidly since 2012 and will according to ICES approach its historically lowest level in 2016. The number of young fish adding to the stock (so-called recruitment) has been declining since the mid-2000s and has been very poor since 2008; this has been the longest period of low recruitment on record. Fishing pressure (so-called fishing mortality) has continuously risen since the early 1990ies and reached an all-time high in 2013. ICES advises a reduction in catches by 80% to stem the rapid decline in biomass.
- Sea bass is targeted by a number of fishing techniques. Pelagic (mid-water) trawlers, contribute more than 25% to the total fishing mortality. Pelagic trawling targets sea bass during the spawning season from December through April, when bass aggregate in spawning areas and are therefore available as a target. Lines and hooks, gill-nets and other gears, catch sea bass mainly in different areas and throughout the year.
- Ireland, France, the UK, the Netherlands and Belgium have a stake in the commercial fishery for sea bass.
- Ireland prohibited in early 1990ies the commercial landing and sale of sea bass and closed its sea bass fishery. France fishes 67% of the total commercial catches and has the largest recreational fishery. France has developed an industrial fishery targeting sea bass in spawning areas, during periods when the fish congregate to reproduce. All other countries have smaller-scale fisheries using different techniques. Some countries have a ban on pelagic pair trawling within their own 12 mile zones.⁷
- Sea bass is popular among recreational anglers. France has the largest recreational fishery for sea bass with 1,3 million anglers, followed by the UK with 800.000 anglers and the Netherlands. Recreational angling contributes approximately 25% to sea bass landings.

2. Economic value

- The commercial fishing fleet that catches sea bass comprises a wide diversity of vessel size, range and gears. A large fraction of the fleet are small vessels (below 12m) and they are mainly active in the 12 mile zone.
- The extent to which fishing vessels depend on sea bass varies greatly. Small vessels that fish sea bass with “artisanal” means (lines and hooks) can depend considerably more on bass than large vessels that use trawls and often operate in mixed fisheries. In France, more than 220 small vessels using lines, with more than 270 sailors, depend to more than 50% of their revenue on sea bass. 21 pelagic (mid-water) trawlers and appr. 100 sailors depend more than 50% on sea bass, although they exercise most of the fishing pressure (25% of the total fishing mortality). Of the demersal (bottom trawlers) 2 vessels with 6 sailors, depend more than 50% on sea bass.
- Recreational fishing represents an important economic activity. In France, more than 1.3 million people undertake more than 9 million fishing trips per year, and sea bass is the main species caught. The total yearly expenditure on angling equipment, baits and boats is estimated at appr. EUR 530m. In the UK, it is estimated that in 2012, 800,000 sea anglers spent GBP 1.23bn on the sport.
- By comparison, the annual revenue generated by the first sale of sea bass for commercial fishing in France amounts to EUR 43 million (according to France).

⁷ The South-west Territorial Waters (Prohibition of Pair Trawling) Order 2004 (United Kingdom)