

## **OUTER HEBRIDES REGIONAL INSHORE FISHERIES GROUP**

MEETING IN COUNTY HOTEL, STORNOWAY, ON TUESDAY 17 MAY 2022 AT 2000

Present:

Donald Nicholson, Chair OHRIFG, Duncan MacInnes, Secretariat OHRIFG, Stuart Bell, MS Policy, Chloe Aird, MS Policy, Donald Morrison, MS Compliance, Pete Middleton, CNES, Douglas Craigie, Iain Knight, Adam McClements, Jamie MacDonald, Neil J MacLeod, Norman D MacLeod. Ronnie MacNeil, Ruairidh MacRae,

Donald Nicholson, welcomed all to the meeting and introduced both Stuart Bell and Chloe Aird from the Marine Scotland, Inshore Policy Team.

### **Outer Hebrides Inshore Fisheries Pilot Year One Report**

Stuart Bell provided a summary of the First Year report of the Outer Hebrides Pilot Project with positive feedback on data collection with 40 vessels fitted with trackers providing valuable information on geographical distribution of the fleet and numbers of pots hauled. St Andrews University were analysing more detailed information from Fish 1 Forms and keen to develop the Catch App to replace the current paper Fish 1 Form. Several skippers present had incurred problems in gaining access and operating the App, although most had signed up to the App and consented to St Andrews University having access to their Fish 1 Forms. The last skippers to have had trackers fitted through Scotlock had had no feedback from St Andrews and were unable to have access to their tracks. Stuart would be in touch with Mark James to ensure that those skippers would be contacted. MS Scotland Science had incurred problems with incomplete Fish 1 Forms which did not provide accurate information on areas fished, uncertainty over number of pots hauled in a day compared to actual amounts in the water, stored lobsters not being recorded for week caught and only appearing as a group when sold, use of parlour pots set for several days distorting the catch per unit effort when compared to single chamber pots being hauled on a daily basis, this being mainly in the lobster and crab fisheries. The use of parlour pots had been recognised in the original Management Plan, as retaining increased numbers of lobsters which caused damage amongst themselves, resulting in many lobsters being crippled, hence reducing the value of the catch as there was a prohibition on landing crippled female lobsters in the Outer Hebrides. Skippers present were supportive of the pilot and stressed the importance of pot limits being extended to other areas in the inshore waters around the Outer Hebrides. Prawn catches had improved as pot numbers had decreased within the pilot area. Concern was expressed at increased unmarked gear being left for

prolonged periods and despite being reported there had been no follow up to identify or remove unmarked gear.

Stuart concluded that MS was keen to get as many skippers as possible signed up with the CatchApp and would be in contact with Mark James to ensure that the final skippers would gain access to their tracks. He was hopeful that the pilot could be extended past November 2022 to ensure that maximum benefit could be gained from tracker data within the pilot area. Many of the skippers present had given consent for their Fish 1 Forms being analysed in more detail from 2018 onwards and would sign up for the Catch App if details could be provided.

### **Cap on all fishing effort within 3 Miles of Scotland Coastline.**

Stuart updated those present on the Bute House Agreement proposal to introduce a cap on all fishing effort within 3 miles around Scotland, based on a reference period still to be agreed. Vessels could be bought and sold around Scotland, with latent licences currently with up to 10 year maximum entitlement still being available for licensing vessels. Skippers noted the need for new entrants having access to join the industry and it was agreed that the FFMS still had allowance for new entrants and grant assistance having been available for first time vessel ownership through the Marine Fund Scotland Scheme. The requirement to have continued access to vessels outwith Scotland was highlighted, in particular, amongst static gear vessels as many replacement vessels had been bought from England, Wales or Northern Ireland, due to newer vessels not being available for purchase in Scotland. A consultation paper would be issued shortly with everyone having an opportunity to feedback comments. Capping effort could also impact on uptake of the successful Fisheries Investment and Community Quota Schemes operated by Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar over the last 20 years.

A further consultation would be issued shortly regarding latent scallop entitlements which are currently frozen. None of the skippers present had seen their scallop entitlements frozen, however, they noted that personal circumstances could have prevented them from investing in the fishery and that they should be given additional time to invest if circumstances had changed as they had paid for that entitlement when they had purchased the licence and that maximum flexibility should be available to move between fisheries rather than being restricted within certain sectors.

### **Extending Tracking Devices to all vessels before end of current Term of Government**

Marine Scotland will be extending REM with cameras to all pelagic and scallop vessels in the first instance, with further extensions to larger demersal vessels, with some form of tracking to all vessels within next couple of years. A risk based approach would be adopted with smaller vessels having cheap trackers, with the Outer Hebrides pilot clearly showing the value for money with trackers costing under £100 in use, providing significant data. The trackers would provide an evidence base for all vessels to indicate intensity of activity on different grounds, highlighting seasonality and would provide a strong case for evidence on the most productive grounds by value to industry, in defence of fish farms or other new developments.

## **Update on MPAs, HPMA and PMF which are all embedded in the Bute House Agreement**

The Marine Conservation Unit was expecting to engage in further consultations in due course on MPAs which have been designated but have no management measures in place, with further tranches of MPAs and PMF being considered as they analysed previous plotter tracks which had been provided by industry pre Covid. Around 10% of all sea areas would be designated as HPMA's which would be closed to all commercial activities.

## **Wrasse Permit Update**

Wrasse permits had been issued for 2022 based on the same criteria used in 2021, additional vessels that had secured contracts with salmon farms would have to provide such evidence to Marine Scotland and those would be considered on a case by case basis. The permit had a range of management measures which included a maximum number of pots per permit, with all salmon buyers being registered buyers.

## **Landing of Undersized Lobster – identify areas – identify buyers – possible solutions**

Concerns had been raised in many areas at the increased presence of non-licensed potting activity on the back of increased leisure access to pontoons, with many vessels appearing with vessels fishing considerable number of pots, taking ashore all the catch with no consideration of minimum landing sizes. Those operators were seen as a threat to inshore stocks, as they did not have to comply with any costs involved in MCA inspection requirements, training requirements and seemed to operate in a manner that could not be enforced. Photos of undersized lobsters presented for sale to a vivier vessel had raised numerous concerns on the increased illegal activities that seemed to prevail in many areas of the Outer Hebrides.

The questions of hotels and other tourism operators purchasing from non-licensed vessels at lower rates than offered on the commercial market seemed to be prevalent in some areas and it was considered that it would be useful to design a poster displaying all the minimum sizes for shellfish that could be retained on board and for tourism sector to be aware of before buying.

The only legislation currently in place to restrict non-commercial fishing being the numbers of different species that can be retained daily aboard a vessel, 1 lobster, 5 crab, edible, green or velvet, 10 prawns and 6 scallops.

There was no restriction on the number of pots that could be set or marking for buoys and it was agreed that this required to be addressed, as those that had visited Northumberland where a maximum 5 pots were permitted and those had to be tagged with tags issued by the Fishery Office.

It was agreed that introducing such a maximum number of pots should be added to any operator working static gear within the pilot area.

## **Lessons learned from Marine Scotland Fast Rib Presence in Loch Roag area**

Marine Scotland had deployed a fast rib to the Loch Roag area in advance of the commencement of the seasonal creel prohibition in the area from 1 May – 31 August. Reports from 2021 had indicated that some commercial fishing vessels had ignored the seasonal prohibition and had continued to fish within the prohibited area. All vessels operating in the area were made aware of the legal requirement to remove gear from the area in advance of the 1 May closure. Considerable unattended gear had been identified and attempted contact with owners had been tried. Fixed penalties could be imposed on vessels that did not remove gear unless they could provide good evidence on why gear could not be removed. Skippers present welcomed this approach and indicated that such a presence should be considered for other areas, where it was clear that breach of the rules were clearly evident.

The fast rib was a new addition to inshore compliance, with the crew highly mobile across different inshore areas around Scotland. It was seen to be more cost effective than tying up larger patrol vessel in areas close to shore.

## **Ways of improving Interaction between static and mobile gear – AIS on static vessels in possible hot spot areas**

Incidents of gear interaction was relatively low, despite increased static prawn gear activity in the North Minch, good radio communications had been developed between the mobile and static gear sector over the late autumn and winter months, although interaction had taken place recently with additional vessels coming to the area and totally ignoring where gear had been set. Good marking and good radio communications were necessary to ensure good working relations between both sectors and it was noted that it was much easier to identify the area boundary of operation of any static vessel if fitted with AIS. It was noted that a couple of other vessels operating in the North Minch were considering fitting AIS systems in the hope that that would improve identification of exactly where gear was set, although one rogue trawler could cause significant damage and break down good relations which had been developed. It was noted that increased static gear effort had appeared in the North Minch from prawn vessels operating out of Ullapool and this had increased the further likelihood of further interaction.

## **Spurdog**

Skippers voiced their concern at the over-abundance of spurdog on the inshore grounds, to the West of the Islands in the summer, swimming in shoals in shallow waters not allowing anglers access to any other species, with abundance of spurdog during the late winter and spring months in the Minches, females being prevalent in summer and males in winter.

Vessels had given up on supplying catch data over a number of years expecting to be given a small monthly allocation of land some along similar terms to some English vessels, however, they ceased providing data as no further progress was made in providing a limited monthly allocation. According to those present the species was out of balance with the marine environment and must be impacting negatively on other species in inshore water.

Stuart indicated that they had been tied up in taking forward the recommendations of the Bute House Agreement and staff had been unable to arrange additional meeting regarding spurdog. Marine Scotland had been involved in the avoidance scheme but had withdrawn from the scheme in 2020 resulting in the limited scientific quota now being used up Cefas and Defra as part of their involvement in the avoidance scheme.

Those present reported that increasing shoal numbers were having a significant negative impact on current and possible future inshore fisheries.

Chairman thanked everyone for their attendance and especially Stuart and Chloe and closed the meeting at 2215.