**NOTES FOR OUTER HEBRIDES RIFG MEETING FRIDAY19 MARCH 2021**

**MATTERS ARISING FROM MEETING 28 FEBRUARY 2020**

Due to other commitments Marine Scotland were unable to make any progress in sourcing a limited spurdog quota in similar terms to that allocated to English vessels that participated in an avoidance scheme. Unclear whether this matter could be progressed further since we have left the EU.

All local trawlers and increased visiting vessels have fished in the North Minch and with good radio they have managed to cooperate better with static gear vessels with less conflict occurring despite increased trawling activity.

Shiant East Bank SAC has been announced with boundaries having been amended to reflect additional information provided by local skippers to continue fishing on tows originally inside the boundaries.

Response sent to HSE to consider retaining dive teams at existing levels and with existing qualifications, however, further consultation issued which requests same levels of crewing and other additional requirements with closing date for response by end of April 2021.

Nephrops Working Group established by Marine Scotland which will consider issues raised with regards to supply and accreditation.

Marine Scotland officials held meetings in both Stornoway and Benbecula, to consider management measures for the Sound of Barra and a number of areas that had been identified through surveys of Priority Marine Features outwith MPAs. Skippers provided tows of where they had been fishing within the areas identified as PMFs and there was a general consensus from officials that boundaries could be amended to reflect continuation of scallop tows.

Good progress is being made on the socio-economic study of potential benefits from a Bluefin Tuna fishery for the Western Isles with a Steering Group having met with the consultants that have been awarded the contract for Harris Development Ltd. A small BFT allocation has been awarded to the UK, with the FLAG funded tagging programme for a catch and release being pursued in 2021, with a number of vessels being issued with a derogation for taking commercial anglers to sea for catch and release trips.

# **CHAIRMAN’S REPORT**

Donald Nicholson will provide a verbal report at the meeting.

 1.

# **OUTER HEBRIDES POT LIMITATION PILOT**

Covid prevented the proposed meetings in Uist and Barra to discuss the pilot project, resulting in a virtual meeting being held with fishermen from both locations and some form Harris that had missed the Harris meeting all attending.

The 2 Year Pilot was launched on 1 November 2020 and all eligible vessels with a previous track record during the reference period have been allocated a permit by Marine Scotland. Problems with the appointed local contractor delayed the installation of the final trackers aboard the 40 vessels. Another contractor was appointed and now all vessels have had trackers fitted and working well, with poor communications with some of the Barra vessels, however, that has been resolved.

Virtual meetings have been held with some of the skippers and St Andrew’s University has provided a link to the demonstrate the early stages of the project on

<https://youtu.be/CgHxNGvu8kI>

St Andrew’s will be providing regular updates throughout the summer, with trackers having geographical coverage throughout the pilot area, fitted to different sized vessels from the largest down to dingle handed vessels.

Marine Scotland will provide a verbal progress update on the project and relay any problems that have been flagged up in the initial stages of the project.

**MARINE SCOTLAND UPDATE**

Marine Scotland will provide an update on matters that they have been involved with Covid and Brexit having caused major problems for all sectors of the industry.

**FUTURE FISHERIES MANAGEMENT STRATEGY**

Marine Scotland announced their Future Fisheries Management Strategy for 2020 – 2030 in December with an action plan highlighting matters that will be pursued in coming years some being as follows:

**New Entrants**

There has been a gradual down-sizing of the fleet over a number of years following previous decommissioning schemes, coupled recently with older skippers detaching licences from vessels with licences transferred to modernise and upgrade the pelagic sector. Increased costs of licences for over 10 metre vessels has resulted in skippers investing in smaller static gear vessels as licenses are cheaper. Strength of the local fleet being vessels operate in a mix of fisheries, nephrop trawling and scallop dredging for larger vessels, whilst a mix of static vessels fishes for velvet crab, brown crab and lobster, nephrops are targeted by a large number of 8 -16 metre vessels.

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The Fisheries Investment Scheme (FIS) a partnership between, RBS, CNES and WIFA has succeeded previous loan and loan guarantee schemes. FIS supported eight fishermen, in 2020, to invest in both static gear and mobile gear vessels, creating or safeguarded employment of 18.5FTE, with £1.65m combined investment in the fishing vessels, licence, and gear. Increasing cost of fishing licences is preventing young, first-time owner/skippers from investing in larger fishing vessels.

The number of local trawlers has reduced in previous years, despite significant nephrop quota, around 8,000 tonnes, not being caught. Increased investment by younger skippers in that sector would provide vital supplies to the local processing plants, all of which have invested significant levels of modernisation in their premises to improve quality of product for an increasing global market.

Its likely that the age profile of both skippers and vessels has increased over the last 10 years and it would be prudent to undertake a study to determine the age profile of skippers and crew plus age of vessels in each segment of the fleet. Once such a study had been completed then it would provide the necessary evidence on which segments of the fleet required most investment to attract younger skippers and newer vessels.

Innovative measures could be considered as how younger skipper/owner could be able to invest in vessels for which there are sufficient quota opportunities.

Members are asked to consider that a study should be undertaken to determine the age profile of fishermen, skippers and vessels in the various segments of the Outer Hebrides fleet, to determine which segments of the fleet provide best opportunities for new entrants.

**Additional Quota & TACs for Scallops and Crab**

Despite the UK indicating that share of resources would be based on zonal attachment and no linkage between access to UK waters and access to export markets, that did not materialise in the final Brexit Deal. However, the UK Government did announce of 25% increase in fishing opportunities phased over a 5-year period, with a 15% increase in Year 1, with a further 2.5% in following years.

Most inshore vessels have little or no entitlement to white fish or pelagic species, therefore, allocating a percentage of additional quota based on current FQAs would be of little benefit to many fragile coastal communities.

Following support from Local Authorities, Community Quotas have been operating successfully in the Outer Hebrides, Orkney and Shetland, giving new entrants an opportunity to lease quota without incurring the initial capital cost repayments.

A fair percentage of any additional quota should be distributed amongst inshore regions to provide a unique opportunity for inshore vessels to diversify and develop selective and innovative methods to fish for white fish species to provide clear economic linkage with local communities.

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Scallops and brown crab are 2 high value shellfish species that are managed by licence entitlements, gear restrictions, seasonal and area closures and minimum landing sizes. Entry to the fishery requires a vessel and licence with either a shellfish or scallop entitlement. Creating TACs for both species along similar lines to that which has operated in pelagic and white fish would create an additional entry barrier for new entrants and would further reduce profitability in the fishery at a time when Covid has had a negative impact on prices.

A high volume of both scallops and brown crab is landed by large scallopers and vivier crabbers, which generally target more offshore grounds as gear restrictions in inshore waters reduces effort by larger scallopers restricted to 8 dredges per side. Vivier crabbers generally now target more offshore grounds, after having decimated the more inshore grounds following blanket fishing of those grounds over many years resulting in many heading to fish more offshore North Sea grounds.

Entry to the scientific pilot for Razor Fish is by a permit scheme, with daily quota of 450 kilos and a maximum 110 days per year permitted. Neither the quota or the permit has attracted a value with permits returning of MS once the vessel is sold or ceases fishing and the quota is managed and retained centrally by MS. The Isle of Man already operates a maximum daily catch of scallops for their seasonal fishery and no value is attached to that quota and is retained centrally by the Government.

Shellfish stocks are more localised than migratory white fish and pelagic species and this model in the razor fishery seems a more appropriate approach to managing shellfish stocks with no additional entry value necessary.

Quotas in both pelagic and white fish have accrued significant value which is a barrier to any new entrants being able to enter the pelagic and white fish sectors, forcing skippers to invest in the shellfish sector. Extending TACs to other shellfish species offers an opportunity to consider a new approach to managing TACs, to ensure that the value that is now attached to pelagic and white fish quotas is not extended to other shellfish species.

Members are asked to consider options to protect and sustain communities for scallop and brown crab fisheries under a TAC system.

**Prohibition on Live Bivalve Molluscs to EU**

Following Brexit a prohibition was introduced on all exports to the EU of live bivalve molluscs, including cockles, mussels, scallops and oysters, that are not ready for human consumption are banned. Only molluscs from Class A waters and been end product tested can be sold from the UK. Molluscs from Class B waters must be depurated before they can be transported.

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Locally, this will affect cockles the most with many areas having a B Classification and with virtually no depuration facilities in the Western Isles this will result in no cockle harvesting at some beaches, as some have Class B all year.

Limited numbers of oysters are grown locally but they can be sold to the UK market, whilst the main mussel farmers will have access to depurating facilities. There are limited toxin testing facilities and some of those which were supplied by the Council have been used at shared facilities.

# **Sound of Barra Habitats Regulations Assessment**

Roddy McMinn NatureScot will update members on the process they are involved in with Marine Scotland to consider how a zoned approach can possibly be reached in the Sound of Barra to permit electro razor fishing to be permitted in areas which would not disturb the distribution of seagrass, maerl and reef habitat.

A Chart showing the features and the areas fished for razors are attached for information.

A zoned approach has already been agreed in the Sound of Harris with a 100 metre buffer around the maerl and seagrass beds.

Once an agreed position has been reached which satisfies the Habitats Regulations requirements to create a buffer between the features then the scientific project could be extended to the Sound of Barra where significant stocks of razors exist.

Members should note above and that progress is made to open up this important fishery which can be developed by divers operating within the scientific pilot.

# **Crawfish Traps**

FLAG funding has been secured to trial 60 crawfish traps in the 2021 summer fishery in areas where crawfish have been caught over previous years. The design is based on traps used in Australia and are being specially fabricated by Caithness Creels and fitted out locally with wooden surrounds to provide a better grip for crawfish rather than mesh covering.

Currently, the only management measure to protect crawfish is a minimum landing size of 95mm, which is relatively small. Market demand favours smaller animals with larger ones having less market demand and lower prices. Prices are significantly higher towards the Xmas markets when stored crawfish can reach in excess of £40/kilo. As part of the trial fishermen using the traps will be required to complete a log of position set, size, sex and weight of each caught and whether any are berried. The project should provide us with information on the size and sex distribution of crawfish caught throughout the Western Isles.

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The trial should enable the industry to put forward proposals to ensure that crawfish stock can be given additional protection, by increasing the MLS, introducing a maximum landing size to reflect market demand and introduce a ban on landing berried crawfish.

Members are asked to consider the above management measures for crawfish.

# **Scottish Scallop Sector Working Group**

Minutes of the last meeting of the SSSWG are attached with REM with cameras being proposed for all scallop vessels being voluntary until summer 2020 and legislation introduced in autumn 2021 making them statutory by the end of 2021.

Concerns had been raised by some skippers over cameras being used against vessels when they accidentally fouled poorly marked gear. In addition, skippers highlighted that they was no longer need for maintaining a costly VMS system which was an EU requirement simply transmitting position and speed every 2 hours, and was obsolete with new tracking devices and should only be a requirement if vessels where fishing in EU.

A further meeting will be held towards the end of April 2021.

# **Options for Effort Restrictions in Pot Fisheries**

The Management Plan that was approved unanimously by all Executive members and submitted to Marine Scotland had clearly demonstrated the declining catch per unit effort in the lobster and brown crab fishery in waters around the Outer Hebrides. Recent analysis undertaken by Marine Scotland Science had shown significant landings in the ICES Blocks during each of the years form 2016 – 2019. The Management Plan had proposed a limit on pot numbers within the Outer Hebrides IFG Region based on vessel size. The main concern raised being accurate enforcement of pot numbers using existing technology available and the complex nature of introducing a tagging system for each pot.

The SIFIDS Project through St Andrew’s University trialled tracking systems that had 96% accuracy which are now being used in the Outer Hebrides pot limitation pilot. The initial feedback from that area is that vessels that had several thousand pots had cut back on pot numbers to permitted levels and this has freed up ground for existing vessels which are already reporting improved quality and higher catch per unit effort in the area.

The West Coast Regional IFG met recently and considered at length management options in the pot fishery, in particular, over-exploitation in the brown crab and lobster fisheries with inshore vessels reporting having to increase pot numbers to remain viable due to vast reductions in catch per unit effort.

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They attributed those reductions in catches to high concentrations of pots by an increasing presence of vivier vessels that had been specifically designed and built to fish more offshore waters. Those larger were now impacting hugely on the diminishing returns caught by smaller inshore vessels.

After discussing all options they concluded that an appropriate system to manage fisheries was to introduce a maximum vessel size for vivier crabbers at 14 metres registered length, to operate within 12 miles. Maximum vessel size had already been used to manage fisheries on the Clyde, Inner Sound and Firth of Forth. They further considered that such a measure should be discussed at other IFG meetings so that a collective response could be submitted to Marine Scotland.

The first viver vessels that fished to the West of Scotland was in the mid- seventies with the arrival of Channel Isles viviers that targeted deeper offshore ground mostly for shellfish. This resulted in the removal of large female lobster from those grounds which resulted in serious decline in lobster stocks on inshore grounds for the next number of years, resulting in many inshore vessels ceasing to fish for lobsters. A comprehensive v-notching scheme was launched in the mid-nineties and coupled with increasing MLS to 90mm and increasing the Max LS to 155mm with a ban on landing crippled females stocks began to show a significant increase in lobster catch per unit effort. Concern has been expressed by local fishermen that viver crabbers are retaining lobsters below the 90mm MLS aboard, as they can be landed in ports in mainland ports of Scotland and Northern Ireland as having been caught outside 6 miles.

The proposal to ban vivier crabbers over 14 metre within 12 miles was discussed at the virtual meetings held with Marine Scotland in advance of commencing the pot limitation pilot and at the WIFA Annual General Meeting with unanimous support for that proposal, if pot limitation numbers in the industry approved management plan could not be approved for some time.

The original Outer Hebrides IFG Management Plan supported a pot limitation scheme within the IFG which at that period extend to 6 miles, however, the Scottish Government is now in a position to manage vessels out to 12 miles.

Members are asked to consider whether the option proposed by the West Coast Regional IFG to prohibit vivier crabbers from operating inside 12 miles, similar to existing legislation covering EU vessels, be extended to include waters around the Outer Hebrides. Other options that could be considered whether they should be prohibited within 3 miles or 6 miles. Marine Scotland is not intending introducing any further pot limits until feedback has been received on the 2 year OH Pilot.

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# **HSE Commercial Shellfish Diving Proposals**

The proposals in the consultation paper are considered in excess of the proportionate requirements for shellfish divers and would result in the cessation of a selective method of fishing which is already tightly monitored with no incidents or accidents

Current dive team numbers of 3 has enabled shellfish divers operating in both the razor fish and scallop fisheries to operate safely in depths of less than 15 metres for razor fishery and in depths of 10 – 30 metres for the scallop fishery. Current training requirements for the inshore shellfish diving has ensured that the sector has operated safely and there has been no evidence provided by HSE that it’s necessary to gain HSE SCUBA or equivalent qualifications with additional costs involved in course and travel costs.

The current scientific pilot project using electro fishing for razor fish has been developed in partnership between industry, Marine Scotland and the Health and Safety Executive and clearly demonstrates that the conditions and pre-inspection requirements prior to the issue of a permit to fish is a model that has been safe for the divers, selective for the fishery and has no negative impact on the marine environment.

The gear design of the razor fish fishery ensures that the diver is protected from an hazards with a shield barrier and a clear communication signal which alerts the skipper immediately of any problem that may arise. The current dive team of 3 demonstrates a work regime that provides a daily recognized workable system which enables divers to alternate the number of dives per pay for each diver to guarantee a profitable income based on the current dive team of 3.

All scallop dive vessels to be fitted with an AIS system would provide an additional safety measure which would ensure that all agencies could monitor where all vessels where fishing. Additional safety measure would be that all divers carry a Personal Locator Beacon similar to the Nautilus Lifeline Marine Rescue GPS which could be linked to the vessels AIS system. This would provide further evidence to fisheries managers as to where scallop diving activity was taking place and assist scientists in having a better understanding of the scallop grounds.

Comprehensive risk assessment is undertaken on a daily basis aboard each vessel, ensuring adequate pre-dive checks are made on all equipment and further familiarization amongst the crew to cover the dive procedures for each day.

Covid-19 had resulted in unforeseen problems with shellfish markets and prices reducing the profitability of all sectors, making the dive sector unviable if they require to increase dive teams numbers and would impose further pressure on the stocks having to work longer hours as they would attempt to survive in a sector that was previously one of the most successful inshore methods.

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The fragility of the Western Isles economy has already been identified by both the Scottish and UK Government’s and the recent introduction of the Islands Act makes it a legal requirement that an Islands economic impact assessment must be undertaken to consider whether any new legislation will have a detrimental negative impact on the Islands communities.

The fragility and remoteness of the Western Isles and the additional costs in being able to transport shellfish to markets, coupled with higher fuel costs already reduces the profitability of the shellfish diving sector and the additional requirements being proposed for the shellfish diving sector will result in most dive vessels having to stop fishing due to the increased operating costs.

Clearly, HSE is trying to introduce measures that are applicable to divers operating in a deeper and harsher marine environment and have not demonstrated any statistics of fatalities or injuries which justifies the additional costly measures which will make force the closure of many dive teams operating safely and successfully in inshore waters of Scotland.

Members views are asked on how best to respond to an organisation that seems to introduce draconian measures when they have not provided any evidence to justify what is work with the current dive system that is operating safely in inshore waters.

# **Feedback on Cockle Meetings**

A meeting of the various Government Agencies have met to the discuss the Cockle Survey at Harris, Uist and Barra and virtual meetings have been arranged for Harris and Uist on Wednesday 17 March and Barra on Thursday 18 March. Future cockle fisheries will be impacted with the recent prohibition LBM from Class B waters and its expected that a good number will be attending the Barra meeting.

A verbal update from the meetings will be provided at the meeting will any updates on what types of management measures harvesters and the community wish to ensure that the fishery is developed sustainably for future years.

# **MarPAMM Update**

Charlie Main will provide an update

**FLAG UPDATE**

Pete Middleton will provide an update with the budget being fully committed and projects having to be completed by the end of 2021.

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