

NWIFCA Technical Science and Byelaw Meeting

11th of February 2025: 10:00 a.m.

Item No.

6

WHELK MINIMUM CONSERVATION REFERENCE SIZE STUDY RESULTS

Purpose: To provide the results of NWIFCA's research into the size-at-maturity of whelks in the district and recommend an appropriate MCRS for the district's whelk population.

Recommendation: To set the NWIFCA District whelk (*Buccinum undatum*) MCRS at 65 mm, with a review period 3 years from the date of implementation.

Background

The Byelaw 4 – Potting Permit Byelaw (2019) came into force on the 6th of June 2022. The main purpose of the byelaw was to bring in unified management to the entirety of the NWIFCA District, in particular with regards to whelk, as the legacy CSFC Byelaw had unintentionally precluded whelk fishing in the northern half of the District's waters which NWIFCA wanted to rectify. This preclusion was due to the byelaw requiring all pots to have escape gaps for crabs, preventing the use of whelk pots within that portion of the District.

As part of the new byelaw, NWIFCA also sought to introduce an appropriate minimum conservation reference size (MCRS) for whelks. There was significant research evidence across the UK that the national MCRS of 45 mm was not providing enough protection to juvenile stocks, and therefore, required increasing. As a result, the Flexible permit Conditions of Byelaw 4 stipulated an annual increase in the whelk MCRS from 55 mm to 65 mm to 75 mm each year from its inception.

Previous sampling was undertaken by officers in 2019, 2020 and 2023 in attempts to determine whelk SOM in the District, however, the data from these studies was insufficient to provide an MCRS recommendation, and suffered from limited confidence.

Due to the limited confidence in the previous research results, and concerns raised by industry that an increase to from 65mm to 75mm would negatively impact their activities and potentially make it uneconomical, at the TSB meeting on the 6th February 2024 the current MCRS for whelk was frozen at 65mm until the 6th June 2025. The intention was to allow more time for further evidence to demonstrate if an increase to 75mm was necessary.

This report details the outcome of the 2024 whelk size-at-maturity study in the NWIFCA District. This study aims to fill those gaps, by collecting further data in 2024 from the full extent of the district over the main breeding season and provides justification for the above management recommendation.

Please see the full report as an appendix to this agenda item.

30th January 2025