

Update on issues surrounding skate and ray fisheries in the D&S IFCA district April 2016

Background

An update to the Authority in March 2016 described the decision made at the December EU Fisheries Council to prohibit the landing of small-eyed ray which would affect fishermen in the Devon and Severn IFCA district considerably. The basis of the decision was not scientific evidence provided by ICES which recommended a reduction in fishing mortality of 36% following reduced catches in surveys, rather than an outright ban on the fishery. Instead, the decision was made because all species of skates and rays are normally combined into one quota, so this was seen as a way of maintaining the overall skate and ray quota without having a negative impact on small-eyed ray stocks. Unfortunately, the impacts on the Bristol Channel fleet, some members of which rely heavily on small-eyed ray to make their businesses viable, was overlooked.

Recent events

The North Devon Fishermen's Association worked closely with Defra to provide evidence of the economic importance of small-eyed ray to local fishermen. D&S IFCA also provided this where possible, in the form of a description of the North Devon fishery produced as part of the North Devon Ray Pilot Project and involvement in the Shark By-Watch UK 2 project. As a result, Defra applied to the commission for an in-year amendment to the Total Allowable Catch and Quotas regulation. Defra applied for a removal of the landing prohibition for small-eyed rays in VII d and VII e-k and provided a scientific rationale for this produced by Cefas. The Commission then sent this proposal to their in-house joint review scientific panel.

Current situation

The commission did not accept all of Defra's proposals but did make the following concessions: Small-eyed ray can be landed in VII f & g (not e-k as requested). This means they can be landed from boats fishing in North Devon and the Bristol Channel, but not from the South Devon coast. However, for VII f and g a TAC of 188 tonnes has been brought in, in-line with ICES advice. When distributed to member states based on relative stability this results in a catch limit for UK vessels of 49 tonnes. The regulation was released on the 31st March and the MMO reopened the fishery on the 9th April. Discussions were held as to how to administer the 49 tonnes across stakeholders (e.g. open without restriction/ allocate to Producer Organisations/ trip/ vessel limits). After consultation with industry the MMO has decided that the fishery is open to UK vessels without restriction, but that individual vessels are limited to 800kg of small-eyed ray per month.

Whilst the fishery is now open, the current monthly limit is restrictive and is likely to still affect the viability of trawlers in the Bristol Channel, particularly boats operating from Ilfracombe and Bideford. Defra plan to apply for an increase in the small-eyed ray TAC at the December council and by that time will have new survey data from the area.

Future D&S IFCA involvement

Whilst no research is planned for the Bristol Channel at the current time by D&S IFCA, officers remain closely involved in skate and ray matters and are continuing conversations relating to the development of a Bristol Channel ray management forum. Additionally, Cefas are hoping to develop a third round of the Shark By-Watch UK project, subject to EMFF funding. It is likely that the IFCA will be involved in this, carrying out the sidescan sonar survey that was planned, but could not be carried

