



# Inland Fisheries Ireland

## Bass Policy

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August 2014





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**Prepared by the Bass Policy Review Group**

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# **Bass Policy Review Group**

## **Management Recommendations**

### **1. Executive summary.**

Bass is an important and valuable marine sport angling species in Ireland. The sharp decline in bass stocks in Ireland in the mid-1970s resulted in a severe deterioration of the highly regarded bass angling resource, and the cessation of the commercial fishery in 1990 to conserve stocks. Bass have been regarded solely as an angling species since that time and are restrictively managed. Recently, because of a perceived improvement in stocks, significant attention has been focussed on the potential of re-opening the bass fishery to Irish commercial fishing vessels. Bass is the only marine species in Ireland to be managed for angling and until now no policy document has been specifically prepared for bass.

The focus of the Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI) Bass Policy Review Group is to develop a policy document that will ensure the conservation and protection of bass, and their aquatic habitat, whilst also facilitating long term sustainable social and economic value for all stakeholders. IFI appointed a policy review group, comprising internal and external experts, which met on four occasions. The group identified and agreed policy issues, with due reference to best available scientific data and application of the precautionary principle, and prepared a draft policy document.

The requirement for bass centric management policies, improved protection/conservation measures, regular ongoing ecological and stock assessment studies and effective communication of the benefits of healthy sustainable bass populations were the key policy areas identified.

### **2. Scope and objectives.**

Bass is an extremely important marine sport angling species in Ireland. The steep decline in bass stocks in Ireland in the mid-1970s, which was attributed by anglers and the Central Fisheries Board, to overexploitation in a then unregulated fishery and temperature-regulated fluctuating recruitment patterns, resulted in a severe decline of the renowned Irish bass angling resource. Ultimately the decline led to the cessation of the commercial fishery in 1990 to conserve stocks through the Bass (Conservation of Stocks) Order, 1990. Since then, bass have been regarded solely as an angling species and are restrictively managed. Bass is the only marine species in Ireland to be managed for angling. In recent years bass angling tourism indices, including increases in the numbers of specialist service providers and infrastructure, suggest that some of the potential of the sector is now being realised.

For the past three years significant attention has been focussed on the potential of re-opening the bass fishery to Irish commercial fishing vessels. This arose from the perceived improvement in bass stocks in Irish waters and commentary from the commercial fishing industry regarding the level of bass discarding by a limited number of Irish boats. Other factors were (a) limitations on the fleet due to EU quota restrictions on many other fish species and (b) the fact that UK, French and other vessels fishing in the same areas as Irish vessels were permitted to land bass. In November 2011 the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, who has responsibility for the Irish fishing



fleet, announced that he would not allow commercial fishing for bass in the Celtic Sea and was “not proposing changes at this time to current arrangements in relation to bass fishing”. Recent scientific advice from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) recommended no increase in exploitation levels across the wider fishery.

Against this background and in the absence of a national policy on bass, IFI formed the Bass Policy Review Group to undertake the development of a draft national policy.

### **3. Policy development process.**

The procedure on policy development is laid down by IFI. It is a very broad consultative process involving a wide diversity of stakeholders – IFI senior management, the board of IFI, management personnel in DCENR, the National Inland Fisheries Forum and statutory consultees. It is intended that any document produced would be subject to review after three years.

The policy group consisted of seven members Dr Willam Roche (IFI Swords) who acted as chairperson, Micheál Hennessy (IFI, Macroom), David Mc Inerney (IFI, Clonmel), Dr. Niall Ó Maoiléidigh (Marine Institute), Shane O’Reilly (IFI, Swords) and John Quinlan (angling guide and Irish Bass Group) Secretary to the Group was Sandra Doyle.

The group met on four occasions between October 2011 and February 2012.

### **4. Terms of reference for the Bass Policy Group.**

IFI is a national authority established under the Inland Fisheries Act 2010. The authority replaces the Central Fisheries Board and seven Regional Fisheries Boards. Under Section 7.1 (b) & (c) of this act, Inland Fisheries Ireland is tasked with advising the Minister on policy and national strategies relating to inland fisheries, including sea angling. To facilitate this, IFI has formed a group using internal and external experts to support the development of a draft policy on bass. The membership of the group has been approved by the CEO and Board of IFI. The bass policy review group policy document will be considered by IFI’s management and board, the National Inland Fisheries Forum and the Department of Communications Energy and Natural Resources.

The focus of the IFI Bass Policy Review Group is to develop a policy that will ensure the conservation and protection of bass and their aquatic habitat, while also facilitating long-term sustainable social and economic value for all stakeholders. The policy will follow the best precautionary principles while being cognisant of enhancing and conserving the environment for all species.

In policy development the Bass Policy Review Group shall have regard to the following:

- Best practice internationally.
- Irish and European legislation relating to this area.
- Existing legislation in this area.
- Corporate and other governance issues of relevance.
- The role of the private sector in the development of this resource



- The Bass Policy Group should consider the development of policies for the management and development of bass angling and the conservation and protection of bass. The group is requested to confine its work to the development of policy. The implementation of policy will be considered by IFI at a later stage.

## **5. Current bass management approach.**

Management of the bass fishery in Ireland is primarily delivered through fishery regulations. Apart from the closure of the commercial fishery legislation also prohibits the taking of bass using nets and Irish fishing boats must not have bass on board or engage in transshipment of bass. The recreational angling fishery has also been heavily regulated - a bag limit of 2 bass per 24 hr day applies in addition to a minimum size limit of 40cm. The angling fishery is closed from the 15<sup>th</sup> of May to the 15<sup>th</sup> of June to protect spawning fish. It is also prohibited to sell or offer for sale any bass (other than bass which has been imported into the State).

Protection of the bass resource is currently delivered by IFI authorised officers and Sea Fisheries Protection Authority officers under the Sea Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006. Since 2011 IFI officers have been authorised to function as Sea Fisheries Protection Officers to enforce the statutory provisions in the control of fisheries for bass within Irish territorial seas and internal waters. Enforcement of bass legislation by IFI officers involves land, estuarine and sea patrols utilising a variety of boats, vehicles and surveillance equipment targeting priority locations and times. In recent years seizures of illegal nets and their catch have been made and small numbers of illegally caught bass have been confiscated by IFI staff from anglers.

## **6. Policy recommendations.**

### **6.1 Recommendations regarding management.**

*Bass will be managed sustainably to maximise its potential contribution to the Irish economy*

The recommendations in this section set out basic principles and fundamental management policy issues:

1. All stakeholders should recognise that bass is an important component of Ireland's marine biodiversity and has significant potential in socio-economic terms.
2. All stakeholders should recognise that bass is a valuable and important sport angling species which has been managed as an angling species since 1990 and should continue to be managed accordingly.
3. All stakeholders should recognise that bass must become identifiable as a species on a par with Ireland's existing priority angling species and afforded equivalent conservation and protection measures.
4. All stakeholders should recognise that the lack of data for sustainable management justifies the precautionary approach and the requirement to continue with the management *status quo* for Irish bass stocks. A commercial



fishery cannot be justified as the conservation status of bass in Ireland is largely unknown.

5. All stakeholders should recognise that management policies must aim to manage towards developing a sustainable stock i.e. the stock should meet a required biological reference point (e.g. a conservation limit) and any surplus above this is available for the fishery.
6. This group acknowledges the value the socio economic study of recreational angling has placed on angling in Ireland. As a follow on from such an exercise, the group feel that, IFI should focus on the Bass angling product to determine the levels of engagement and investment (public and private) required to fully develop its potential and to provide a baseline to measure progress in socio-economic policy performance.
7. All stakeholders must be informed by IFI that a key medium term policy aim is to increase the abundance of all bass and specifically bass > 3kg (circa 15 years old) to the levels of abundance observed in the 1960s. Enhanced management has the potential to consistently produce bass of this size giving Ireland significant competitive advantage in Europe.
8. Protection of existing bass angling revenue must be a strong policy focus. This can be achieved through better protection, higher Minimum Landing Size (MLS) and reduced daily bag limits. Operating on a precautionary basis, (which applies where stock data are limited), amendments to existing bass angling regulations are recommended to effect greater levels of conservation on stocks:
  - **Increased Minimum Landing Size (MLS)** from 40 to 50 cm total length (approx. 1 kg) to protect the youngest spawning cohorts from exploitation thus contributing to increases in population size. This would bring the MLS above the first spawning size of bass in NW Europe which is 42 to 45 cm. The increased size limit is an attractive marketing prospect which also supports sustainability and further promotes the already widely practised catch-and-release aspect of the fishery.
  - **Reduced Daily Bag Limit** from 2 to 1 fish in any 24 hour period to reduce exploitation. Thereafter catch and release would operate. Voluntary catch and release is widely practised in the bass fishery. Development of best practise guidelines are required to minimise any mortality due to poor handling and a review of ongoing improvements in angling hook technology is recommended.
  - **Review Bass Closed Season** – currently 15 May – 15 June and identified as the bass spawning period in Ireland. Scientific literature indicates that the spawning period commences earlier. The revised policy recommendation is that mandatory catch and release would apply over the full extent of the potential spawning period rather than the current closed season window. The peak of spawning is over the April-May period and the review group recommend this revised window.



- **No-kill zones** – identify where local stocks are vulnerable or limited and investigate where a no-kill policy could be operated.
9. IFI should take cognisance of bass angling management controls in other EU countries to review and compare the impact of any revised policy actions in Ireland.

## **6.2 Recommendations regarding protection/conservation.**

*Bass and its habitat will be protected and conserved, under the existing and any revised legislative framework, in a manner that maximises sustainable economic, environmental and social benefits to all stakeholders:*

1. IFI and the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) must jointly develop clear national operational guidelines, based on national policy, reflecting the responsibilities and legislative requirements of both bodies, to deliver effective, efficient and consistent protection of the bass resource. New or revised legislation should be introduced where required.
2. IFI must investigate the feasibility of taking prosecutions on a scaled/graded basis using “on-the-spot fines” or the existing District Court route for lesser offences thus removing /limiting DPP involvement. Major cases would be prosecuted under SFPA legislation through the DPP as envisaged in legislation originally.
3. IFI should develop a bass specific protection strategy which allows for strategic assessment and focusses on high risk periods for illegal fishing based on reliable intelligence. Identification and investigation of transportation, storage and point of sale of illegally caught bass should be core elements of this strategy.
4. Bass protection activity must be visible in the community to demonstrate delivery of function and protection of a shared bass resource.
5. IFI should make adequate resources available to sustain a bass protection service to include staff and equipment, legal resources and support for forensic investigations. At a high level stakeholders should be encouraged to engage fully with the protection service through existing routes and contacts, and any new angler networks, to advise on suspected illegal activity and assist in targeting available enforcement resources. On a broader scale the IFI 24-hr hotline should be widely advertised as a means of reporting illegal activity in relation to bass (and other marine fish) as well as freshwater fish.
6. IFI should assess the extent and impact of all bass exploitation methods (poaching, angling, beach-lines, spear-gun fishing etc).
7. IFI should identify priority bass inshore nursery areas, where juvenile bass aggregate for approximately 5 years prior to their spawning migration and may be vulnerable, as by catch, to commercial fishing activity and angling, and make recommendations for their closure to all fishing activity to protect undersized bass and contribute to conservation of the spawning stock.





8. Traditional or new fisheries (e.g. inshore herring/mullet fisheries), which may generate large bass by-catch in priority habitat, should be mapped and any potential impact assessed.
9. Biosecurity – anglers must be made adhere to guidelines on control of invasive species (plants, animals etc) which may be imported from other jurisdictions or locations so as to limit any potentially negative impact on bass or its habitat.

### **6.3 Recommendations regarding stock assessment.**

*Sustainable bass management will be underpinned by a regular bass stock assessment programme.*

Scientists require survey data to provide stock assessment information, evaluate stock status, assess resource sustainability and provide consolidated scientific advice. Fishery managers require scientific advice to conserve, protect and manage fisheries rationally.

1. Regular stock assessments should be undertaken to provide the necessary scientific data to manage the bass resource. These assessments should allow evaluation of pre-adult (juveniles) and adult stock status and will provide the basis to monitor change and develop long-term stock assessment procedures for management and reporting.
2. IFI should determine the scale, scope, funding required, and cost the delivery of, this regular stock assessment programme.
3. In the medium term the ecology and biology of Irish bass should be investigated to provide an understanding of current stock dynamics and to contribute to the development of predictive tools for stock assessment. Parallel outputs should include refining the issues of stock definition and stock size and would include genetics and tagging studies.
4. Anglers, as primary stakeholders in the Irish bass fishery, should be encouraged to report their catches for scientific management. Experience has shown that anglers' responsibility and interest in management is increased if they are contributing to the overall management function. Initially reporting can be achieved by introducing a voluntary catch report, similar to the UK based 'BASS' scheme, which would encourage anglers to engage in angling fishery data collection and further increase the generally high level of awareness of an obligation to report and conserve.
5. Identification and designation of priority bass nursery areas must be undertaken by IFI. These data are essential to ensure that this habitat can be protected from potentially harmful land-based or inshore development works, poor water quality or similar threats.

### **6.4 Recommendations regarding education/promotion/communication.**

*The economic, environmental and social benefits of sustainable bass stocks will be effectively communicated.*



Recreational bass angling revenue has been shown to be worth multiples of the first-hand sale value of commercially caught bass.

1. The profile of bass in the public arena should be increased by IFI. Stakeholders and the wider public should be regularly informed by IFI through all available media of the economic, health and social benefits of the existing bass recreational angling fishery and the potential which could be derived from an abundant bass stock supporting a well-managed fishery. The potential contribution of such activity to local heritage and a sense of public well-being should also be emphasised.
2. Education (e.g. 'Something Fishy' in schools) and enforcement programs should focus on encouraging positive changes in public attitudes towards developing a stronger conservation ethos by including bass in their programme content.
3. IFI should encourage/support the development of local bass information networks which would provide information on bass distribution, catches, etc. through liaison (two-way) with local protection officers. Stakeholders should be routinely involved in surveying to support stock assessments. Non-destructive sampling of adult bass is often best achieved by angling. Angler network groups should be set up to monitor and report catches and to support survey programmes. Involvement of stakeholders confers a level of stewardship for the resource and will encourage responsibility in terms of contributing to data collection for management.
4. The angling tourism sector, particularly IFI and Failte Ireland, should continue to work together, to identify needs/areas for growth and improve information and infrastructure for domestic and tourist anglers.
5. A guide to the current understanding of the status and biology of bass in Ireland should be produced. The aim of this guide would be to present the current state of knowledge about bass in Irish waters in an accessible format.

## **6.5 Biosecurity.**


All anglers should strictly adhere to biosecurity protocols, both pre- and post- all angling sessions, in order to ensure that no invasive species and harmful fish pathogens are introduced or spread within the country.

1. Best biosecurity practice guidelines for anglers, and other key stakeholder groups, have been produced by IFI (see [www.fisheriesireland.ie](http://www.fisheriesireland.ie)) and these should be circulated widely among key stakeholder groups.
2. Because of the seriousness of the risk associated with invasive species and fish pathogens, it is recommended that strict adherence to these guidelines should be made a condition of membership of all angling clubs and Federations.
3. It is further recommended that information boards and facilities to disinfect angling tackle and protective clothing should be provided at all major air and sea ports in Ireland. It should also be mandatory for anglers travelling from abroad to show proof that their angling equipment has been disinfected prior



to entering the country. Failing this, the tackle must be disinfected at the point of entry into the country.

4. International collaboration in respect of biosecurity matters must be encouraged.



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