

NWIFCA Mussel Minimum Size Limit – Request for Review

Background

1. At the quarterly meeting of the Authority in March 2022, Marine Management Organisation (MMO) Appointee Mr Stephen Manning reported that many fishermen would like to see a reduction of the mussel minimum size limit from 45mm to 40mm.
2. The CEO of the Authority subsequently wrote to Mr Manning to ask that a written proposal was submitted to the Technical Scientific and Byelaws (TSB) sub-committee meeting on this matter. Mr Manning spoke to Dr Jim Andrews, MMO Appointee and Vice-Chair of TSB on Monday 25th April about this, and Dr Andrews agreed to put together a brief proposal for the TSB meeting on behalf of the fishers who support this view.

Context

1. For many fish & shellfish species the minimum size (here, the “MLS”, or Minimum Legal Size) is set at a level to ensure that a significant number of individuals in an exploited stock reach the size at which they mature. The MLS reduces the risk of “recruitment overfishing”, whereby a fishery removes individuals before they have had a chance to breed, and the population declines because of a fishery-induced recruitment failure.
2. The current mussel MLS in the NWIFCA District is 45mm. Mussels in intertidal habitats become mature at 1 year old, when their size may be between 20-35mm (Dare, 1980).
3. It is our understanding that the Lancashire & Western Sea Fisheries Committee introduced the mussel minimum size over 100 years ago at the request of fish merchants. The original minimum size of 2 inches was subsequently reduced to 1¾" at the request of Morecambe Bay fishermen. The current mussel minimum size of 45mm is the metric equivalent of the original Imperial measurement. Critically, the current minimum size is not based on any biological or scientific information; it was a response to economic considerations.
4. Fishermen in Morecambe Bay and in particular in the northern part of the Bay have noted over the years that the 45mm mussel size can result in significant lost fishing opportunities. There are two main reasons for this:-
 - a. **Natural mortality** – on many of the mussel beds, mussels will only attain a size of 45mm after surviving for two winters. Very often a large resource of mussels that are just below the MLS in the autumn will be swept away in winter storms, and their economic (and reproductive) value lost.
 - b. **Pearls** – in the northern part of Morecambe Bay in particular, mussels rapidly develop pearls under their shells between the size of 40-45mm. The presence of pearls renders mussels unmarketable over large areas of the Bay.

Request

1. NWIFCA are asked to consider a reduction of the mussel MLS to 40mm. The reason for making this request are:-
 - a. It will increase the commercial opportunities for shell fishermen in the District;
 - b. It will not risk recruitment overfishing, since all mussels above 40mm in size will have had an opportunity to reproduce at least once; and
 - c. It should not jeopardise the food resource required by the seabird population in the Bay, all of which are understood to favour mussels smaller than 40mm shell length.
2. This request is made on behalf of fishers with an interest in Morecambe Bay mussel fisheries. We do not present this as a unanimous view, but we believe that the majority of the fishing community would support this proposal. We can provide letters of support from the fishing community to evidence the support for the request.

Declaration of Interest

1. As MMO Appointees to the Authority and authors of this report, we must declare that we have a prejudicial interest in the outcome of the Authority's deliberations on this matter.
2. At the meeting of the TSB Sub-Committee we will be able to clarify any of the points made in this document.
3. In order to preserve the integrity of the decision-making process and to ensure that our ongoing participation as MMO appointees is not compromised we will act in accordance with MMO and NWIFCA requirements for the conduct of Members at this and subsequent meetings.

STEPHEN MANNING

JIM ANDREWS

MMO Appointees to NWIFCA

April 2022

References

Dare, P.J. (1980) *Mussel cultivation in England and Wales*. Laboratory Leaflet 50. Lowestoft: MAFF Directorate of Fisheries Research, p. 18. Available at: <https://publications-api.cefas.co.uk/api/Attachments/download/70>.