

E-catch reporting nightmare

NUTFA leader **Jerry Percy** highlights the many problems that under-10m fishermen are facing as a result of recently introduced electronic catch reporting

Tired of Monopoly, can't stand Mousetrap? Then get the latest game of chance for Christmas – yes, it's 'Catch Reporting, Not a Cluedo', a game for all the family.

With a free phone for those without a smartphone and exciting penalties for the losers, up to and including free trips to your local magistrates' court, this new game, introduced by the MMO, is bound to get everyone going this Christmas.

The rules are simple. Just bring your small boat into harbour – extra points if it is an open boat or you are landing to a beach – then pick a 'phone call lottery card' from the pack.

These cards include challenges like 'guess the five-digit code for your sea area', the 'convert your stones and pounds to kilos and grams' test, and if you are really lucky and pick the computer crash card, then you get the 'standing in the rain waiting for the operator to switch it off and back on again' bonus.

But beware, if players land on the 'exceed the 10% margin of error' after a throw of the dice, then it's a slippery snake right back to the beginning, and that dreaded 'go to jail, go directly to jail, do not pass 'Go', and please pay the fine within seven days or we will send round the bailiffs' spot.

The lucky winner gets the 'I wasted an hour of my life' badge, and a chance to help the MMO to spend yet more time and money on a pointless enforcement exercise by playing again tomorrow, and the day after and the day after and forever.

'CatchApp' – the ideal game for folk with time on their hands. The serious point, of course, is that this new and extensive system of catch reporting requirements for under-10m vessels (the majority of our fishing fleet), before the fish leaves the boat, is necessary – according to the MMO – to build up a much clearer picture of how much fish we are taking from our seas, of both quota and non-quota species.

Putting aside the MMO blurb, the big question asked by many under-10s has been 'Why?'. The majority of this sector who fish for quota, and indeed non-quota, species tend to land to recognised markets, often only a matter of yards (or metres) from their landing spot, where their catch is sorted, graded and weighed within a few hours, and the information, including precise weights and species, is then forwarded to

the MMO. It is an equal requirement, under the Registration of Buyers and Sellers legislation, for all first-sale buyers to do this, so just why the MMO feels the need to add a significant additional burden onto inshore fishermen is debatable. It's certainly not for any recognised data purposes, on which quota adjustments can be based, as

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that requires precise information that is already provided to the MMO.

Many fishermen take the view that the new requirements are designed to do little more than trap them into making mistakes that could be costly in terms of both fines and administrative penalties.

'Inundated' with calls NUTFA and the Coastal PO have been inundated with calls and emails from concerned fishermen, and their comments below speak for themselves.

One fisherman told the MMO: "Your requirement is that fishermen, whilst at sea, must estimate (I suggest 'guess' would be a more accurate description) the weight of every fish species aboard the vessel to a tolerance of plus or minus 10%, and anything outside this risks prosecution. I have frankly never heard anything like it!

"Secondly, demersal trawlers can catch anything up to 20 different species per haul. Data input for that is an onerous and lengthy task – when does a hardworking crewman get any downtime to refresh themselves?

"Thirdly, are you honestly suggesting that people with cold wet hands, in often artificial light, on a constantly moving confined space, for many in the hostile open-air marine environment, will be able to input data to a touchscreen mobile telephone with any degree of accuracy?

"This would be a difficult task for young men and women with good IT skills and reasonable eyesight. It will be impossible for those who are older and require glasses, etc.

"You must be aware through using your own mobile telephone that typing accuracy is difficult to achieve [even when] sat in a warm comfortable office.

"Your app only allows for a minimum of 1kg to be inputted

per species – what if we catch a single 0.5kg red mullet? We are already 50% inaccurate.

"Please do not try to convince me or anyone else that this live catch data will be acted upon for quota amendments overnight. Your offices are closed after 5pm. Absolutely no one is buying that."

Another fisherman reported: "I have been told by _____ of your [MMO] contact centre this morning that the difficulty I am having is caused by declaring too many species, and that in order to resolve this, I need to cut the catch in half as to species number, and record twice for each boat.

"I am told that the system will not, at the present time, allow for a fisherman with, for example, 12 or 13 species to record these all in one go. The advice I received this morning is to record six or seven species, go through the entire process, log out, and then repeat a second time for the species that were not able to be recorded on the first catch record.

"For two boats, this is therefore four catch recording records, which takes a considerable time in administration in logging in and out, and checking which species is in which catch record to ensure accuracy.

"_____ advised me this morning that this is not isolated to myself, and is a problem across the system as a whole. _____ also advised me on the phone today that it was not anticipated at the start that fishermen would be trying to catch-record so many different species, which I find very odd in the light of the pilot scheme the MMO has stated has been undertaken."

Improvement ideas ignored

A further example: a skipper who was involved in trawling the catch reporting app, and was asked for feedback following the trial, provided sensible recommendations for improvements.

I will not bother to repeat them here, but safe to say, and unfortunately quite predictably, they were, along with others, summarily ignored.

He told the MMO: "We are not trying to be obstructive – on the contrary, we have been giving you all our information for 25 years. Our major concern is that you have set an impossible task, by asking us – no, *demanding* of us – to record

every species, and the weights to a tolerance of 10%. And if we don't, we will become criminals.

"If we do try our best to record each species – and that could be as many as 20 – and we are out within 10%, then we could be fined. And become criminals. That's a fact.

"We took a box of mixed fish onto the market in Plymouth, and asked three of the *full-time* graders to assess the weights of each species. Not one of them got it right within the tolerances you expect. If three professional fish graders working on a market can't do it, then how do you expect a fisherman rolling around on a boat to guess?

"Can you honestly tell me that you, or any of your staff, can guess the weight of a handful of red mullets, a couple of reasonable-sized brill, half a dozen squid, a large turbot, two or three large pollack, etc, etc, all within the tolerances that you have decreed? And if they don't, they could possibly lose their job, get fined and become criminals.

"At the recent SWOAG [South West quota] meeting I attended, I brought up the subject of only recording over 50kg. That was flatly refused by the chair. I was told that it helps the MMO make 'immediate and up-to-date decisions on quota management'. I then asked, who is making these 'immediate and up-to-date decisions' between 4pm on a Friday and 10am on a Monday? There was no answer to that question..."

One more example: "I had a nightmare first attempt phoning

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in a small catch at the weekend – it took five calls. I moor in a position of poor phone signal, especially at half tide and lower, when the signal is blocked by buildings and quay walls.

"I lost the signal on the recording numerous times, and couldn't understand some of the questions, as they were not on previous landing paperwork. It took over half an hour to phone in – no way of going back if you needed to re-answer any points. My guessimates are over 10% out on my small landings, so it will take practice to get better at guessing weight, as I have never done it before.

"The system crashing isn't good, and I was 56 minutes 17



NUTFA leader Jerry Percy.

seconds on the phone today, to land probably less than a stone of fish and five half-pound lobsters, which is an unacceptable waste of time.

"After 50 minutes, I was on the verge of throwing the catch over the side – that's how frustrating today was. Surely there could be a simple text of the guesstimate catch weight sent in – rather than relying on someone typing the information while you wait, and the system won't let him?

"It would take me less than five minutes to leave the boat and weigh the catch on the merchant's scales, then one minute home, then log on to my account with the exact weight.

"My experience of the two landings reported has been bad, but so has my guessing the right weight – difficult to do without any experience of having to do it before!"

The above comments, culled from any number of letters and queries addressed to the MMO, illustrate the frustrations faced by many inshore fishermen on a daily basis, now laced with the very real threat of prosecution for honest errors.

In addition, the MMO has recently stated that it is moving from its 'education phase' in 2018/19 to its 'enforcement phase' in 2020. Bearing in mind that the under-10m sector is the 'low-hanging fruit' in enforcement terms – compared with, for instance, the lip service paid to monitoring and enforcement of some of the biggest trawlers in the world, currently fishing UK waters – and that this new list of requirements will undoubtedly leave many open to prosecution, it can hardly come as a surprise that so many concerns are being so clearly expressed.

Between the landing obligation/discards ban and the catch reporting procedures now in place, this is a game that no one will win.