

Consultation response report

Options for extending the sea trout beach net fishery in Yorkshire and North East England

Executive Summary

Between June and August 2019, the Environment Agency undertook extensive field trials of modified designs of nets in the Yorkshire and North East beach net fishery to determine whether these modified nets could be used to catch sea trout preferentially to salmon.

The results of the trials show that the modified nets proved successful in intercepting sea trout whilst only entangling a small number of salmon, and that the impact on salmon stocks from the modified nets was low. The impact of an extended sea trout net fishery on sea trout stocks was found to be less certain, since large numbers of sea trout were caught during the trial period.

Following the 2019 net trials, a number of options were developed for potentially extending the beach net fishing season for sea trout. Each option would have some degree of impact on the livelihoods of beach net licensees and on the stocks of salmon and sea trout exposed to the net fishery.

The Environment Agency undertook a public consultation for a period of five weeks between Monday 20th January and Friday 21 February 2020. The consultation sought views from interested parties on the possible options to extend the beach netting season for sea trout in Yorkshire and the North East.

A total of 527 online responses were received. Of these, 463 (87.9%) were from individuals and 45 (8.5%) were from organisations. The remaining 19 (3.6%) responses were recorded as 'other' or no response to this question was made. A further 9 written responses were received by post, and 26 by direct email, bringing the total number of responses to the consultation to 562.

The results of the consultation are unequivocal, with a 93% majority opposed to any extension of the current sea trout netting season, and 7% in favour.

A total of 296 responses clearly identified a preferred management option, including management options not included in the consultation, which were put forwards by consultees.

The most supported option for the future management of the beach net fishery was complete closure of the beach net fishery, followed by further reducing the netting season length. Both these management options were suggested by consultees. Maintaining the current season length was the third most supported option.

In regulating the fishery, we seek to achieve the best balance between providing vulnerable stocks with much needed added protection, while minimising the economic and social impacts of regulating the beach net fishery for sea trout, allowing a sea trout fishery as far as is sustainable and consistent with providing adequate protection for fish stocks, in line with precautionary principles. The benefits of extending the sea trout net fishery must therefore be carefully balanced against any increased risks to stocks of salmon and sea trout provided by increased netting opportunities.

We recognise that factors other than exploitation in net fisheries impact upon salmon and sea trout stocks, and that marine survival is one of the most important of these factors. We are working with partners to address all factors affecting salmon and sea trout stocks under

the Salmon Five Point Approach, including water quality, fish habitat and access improvements, as well as working to better control levels of exploitation.

We have assessed management options against the latest available evidence describing the performance of contributing stocks of salmon and sea trout, the impact of the net fishery upon those stocks, the results of the modified net trials, the wider regulatory and policy framework and the socio-economic impacts for those participating in the fishery. We have also carefully considered the responses made to this consultation.

Having reviewed the evidence and all consultation responses, and considering all other factors, we find it is not appropriate or precautionary to recommend an extension to the sea trout netting season at this time.

The best balance between providing contributing fish stocks with necessary protection and allowing a fishery as far as that is sustainable is achieved by allowing those netsmen currently operating in the fishery to continue to do so, over the current netting season and continuing to reduce the size of the net fishery over time as current licensees retire.

Whilst an immediate closure of the beach net fishery, or a reduction in the length of the netting season would provide increased protection for sea trout and salmon stocks, our view is that following the increased protections introduced by the 2018 national byelaws, a further reduction in fishing effort is not required at this time.

The option to require beach nets to adopt the modified designs tested during the trials for the existing net fishing season would reduce netting efficiency for sea trout at times when few salmon are likely to be netted. This would be likely to reduce net catches of sea trout, generating a further economic dis-benefit for licensees. Given the low numbers of salmon likely to be intercepted during the current sea trout netting season, this option would create an unnecessary burden for licensees for a marginal benefit. Therefore, this option is not supported.

We will continue to monitor and review the performance of salmon and sea trout stocks contributing to the beach net fishery in the North East and Yorkshire, and the impact of the net fishery upon those stocks.

Should sea trout populations improve to the extent that there is an identified harvestable surplus available, the potential to extend the net fishing season should be re-assessed, as the trial results indicate that modified nets can selectively exploit sea trout.

Having carefully reviewed and considered all relevant evidence, the following recommendations are made:

1. The current sea trout netting season dates in each district in the Yorkshire and North East net fishery should be maintained, as defined by the 2018 national salmon and sea trout protection byelaws.
2. The management of the beach net fishery should be formally reviewed, including the potential to extend or restore the netting season for sea trout, as part of developing a new Net Limitation Order, on or before December 2022.

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