

Summary

A continuous decline in catch per unit effort has been seen in Irish crab stocks since 2015. This has been acknowledged as a serious situation for the brown crab stock and the industry and communities which depend on it. It was agreed by all at the Brown Crab Working Group that action needs to be taken to recover the stock. This means reducing the landings of brown crab until a sustainable stock level is reached.

There are three approaches that can be taken. Landings can be reduced by bringing in technical measures which mean less of the stock meets the criteria for landing e.g. increases in MLS, no berried crab, no soft crab. Another approach which can complement technical measures is to decrease landings by reducing the amount of fishing effort e.g. seasons, pot limits etc or to reducing the amount you can catch directly through bring in a Total Allowable Catch.

A series of measures were examined under three headings - the pros, the cons and additional issues are described in the attached Table but the process is summarised in the following paragraphs.

Technical Measures

Reduces amount of crab landed. Fishing mortality decreases, value increases.

Increase Minimum Landing Size – A 10mm increase results in 13-19% of currently landed catch being returned to the sea for a period until the crabs grow to that size.

Ban landing of berried females – not usually landed unless for bait or claws so small impact

Ban landing of soft crab – Soft crab results in poor product, even claws, resulting in bad reputation. Live returns will be in good condition in 4-6 weeks

Escape gaps – Can be made to work for mixed lobster and crab fishery, juveniles allowed to escape so less chance of damage or being eaten by other crab. About 30% effective for juvenile crab, better for lobster

Restrict clawing – Clawing can encourage the catching of soft and undersize crab and the use of crab as bait. Restricting clawing to discourage these practices will help the stock.

Input and Output Controls

There are two other options to allow the stock to recover i.e.

1. Reduce the amount you fish (input control) OR
2. Reduce the amount you catch (output control).

However, both of these options need Managed Access to work effectively. This means initially managing/limiting the number of vessels that can fish the stock to those that

Management Tools for Brown Crab Stock Recovery

currently target crab. The criteria used for Entry (Young Fishers) and Exit (Retirement) to/from the fishery after introduction are critical in making this effective.

Reduce the amount you fish (Input Control)

There are many ways to do this:

Limit fishing time – different ways

- days at sea,
- closed season – not useful if tie up isn't during normal fishing operations as it needs to reduce fishing mortality.

Limit catching capacity

- Pot numbers – would need effective gear marking and pot tags
- Pot type – same issues as pot numbers

The result is to reduce catch and fishing mortality.

Reduce the amount you catch (Output Control)

TAC (Total Allowable Catch) is set for stock which directly reduces catch.

It is likely allocations would be required in same way whitefish quotas are currently managed.

Measures to reduce the amount you fish or reduce the amount you catch could also be introduced on a **regional basis** to support the recovery of a particular stock

Potential Secondary Measures to Support Industry

A reduction in catch means reduction in income therefore fishers will need to be supported while the stock recovers through mechanisms such as:

Improved marketing of crab – consumer education, accessible formats for time poor consumers such as pre-packed white meat etc.

Incentivised data collection

Opening up alternative non crab fishing opportunities

Tie-up Scheme

Retirement Scheme

Enforcement of Recreational potting restrictions