

By: Principal Compliance and Enforcement Officer

To: Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation
Authority – 14 September 2026

Subject: Bass scientific drift net trial update

Classification **Unrestricted**

Summary:

The report updates Members on the work being undertaken to explore a potential scientific trial of inshore bass drift netting.

Recommendations –

For **NOTING** and **COMMENT** only

Background

The Bass Fisheries Management Plan (FMP) was published in 2023, setting a roadmap of how to achieve the long-term sustainable management of bass fisheries in English and Welsh waters. Following this, in December 2025, the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) published its Bass Authorisation Review Report, containing 24 recommendations aimed at supporting the long-term sustainability and management of the bass fishery. Of particular significance to fishermen within the KEIFCA district was the recommendation to explore a scientific trial of inshore bass drift netting.

Drift netting for bass has been prohibited since 2016 as part of wider bass stock recovery measures. Prior to the ban, however, it was a widely used method amongst small-scale East Coast fishermen targeting this high-value species. Many local fishermen continue to maintain that, when subject to appropriate

controls, drift netting can provide a selective and sustainable fishing method with low levels of bycatch.

Following publication of the review, KEIFCA hosted a series of industry workshops to gather stakeholder views on the recommendations and identify priorities for the local fleet. The prospect of a scientific drift net trial generated the greatest level of interest and engagement from participants. Since then, KEIFCA has worked closely with Eastern IFCA to investigate whether a scientifically robust and environmentally responsible trial could be developed. Any decision on whether such a trial proceeds will ultimately be a matter for Defra, informed by advice and stakeholder views presented through the Defra established Bass Management Group (BMG).

To support these discussions, three key documents have been developed.

Industry workshop report

Two dedicated workshops were held with commercial fishermen from Essex and Kent to discuss recommendations arising from the Bass Authorisation Review including a scientific drift net trial. Attendance and engagement from the local industry was positive, with participants providing practical views on local issues, fishing methods, gear specifications, monitoring arrangements and trial design.

The engagement demonstrated significant support for further investigation of a trial and helped identify key areas requiring further consideration, including seal predation, bycatch risks, fish quality, gear selectivity and the practical application of Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM). The workshops have therefore ensured that any future proposal is informed not only by scientific evidence, but also by local knowledge and operational experience. The outcomes were reported to Members at the May 2026 Authority meeting and have informed subsequent workstreams.

Literature review

A comprehensive literature review is currently being finalised, examining the scientific and policy evidence relating to small-scale drift net fisheries, with particular focus on the East of England bass fishery. The review considers the historical rationale behind drift net restrictions, bass stock recovery, gear selectivity, comparisons with alternative fishing methods, and potential interactions with sensitive species including seabirds, marine mammals and salmonids.

The review was commissioned at the request of the Bass Management Group to ensure that any future discussions are informed by the best available evidence. To support a transparent and inclusive process, stakeholders were invited through the BMG to submit relevant scientific literature and supporting materials for consideration. These contributions are being incorporated into what has become a substantial evidence review examining both the potential risks and opportunities associated with a well-managed inshore bass drift net trial.

Feasibility study proposal

The third document is a feasibility study proposal developed jointly by KEIFCA and Eastern IFCA. Building upon the findings of the literature review and recommendations arising from the Bass Authorisation Review, the proposal sets out how an initial small-scale study could be undertaken under carefully controlled conditions.

The proposed study would include strict controls on vessel numbers, gear specifications, fishing effort, monitoring arrangements and bycatch mitigation measures. A central element of the current proposal is the direct comparison of drift nets and authorised fixed gillnets, allowing catch rates, bycatch, seal interactions and operational performance to be assessed using a consistent scientific methodology. The proposal adopts a cautious and incremental approach, ensuring that any consideration of future expansion would be dependent upon the evidence generated during the initial study phase.

Conclusion and next steps

The project is now approaching a significant milestone. The industry workshop report has been completed and presented to the Authority, while both the literature review and feasibility study proposal are nearing completion. Subject to finalisation, all three documents will be presented to the Bass Management Group for consideration and feedback.

Collectively, these three workstreams provide the stakeholder, scientific and operational basis required to inform future decision-making. They will enable Defra and stakeholders within the Bass Management Group to review the available evidence and determine whether to progress a scientific inshore bass drift net trial.

Recommendations –

For **NOTING** and **COMMENT** only