# Consultation Paper on Proposal to Introduce a Velvet Crab Minimum Landing Size

# Purpose of this consultation

This consultation is to gather views on the proposed management practices to introduce a Velvet Crab (Necora puber) minimum landing size. The information received will assist in formulating future policy.

# Velvet Crab Fishing in Ireland

The velvet crab fishery in Ireland lacks specific management measures at present. The main ports where velvets are landed include Kilmore Quay and Helvick in the south east, Schull, Skibereen and Castletownbere in west Cork and Howth and Skerries in Dublin.

The value of the landings in 2015 was €419K and this was distributed across 221 vessels under 10m in length. The species therefore contributes some income to a significant number of small vessels. Over 80% of velvets are landed by vessels under 10m in length.

Velvet crabs are predominantly a by-catch in the lobster fishery. The status of velvet crab stock is not known. Velvet crab stocks are likely to be exposed to increased fishing pressures in areas where lobster effort is increasing and also in areas where targeted fishing for velvet crab occurs. Some stocks (Galway Bay) are exposed to additional natural mortality caused by parasites and diseases. It would be prudent to reduce fishing mortality in such stocks. Good grading and handling of crabs on board to exclude small crabs and to optimise discard survival is necessary to protect the stock against overfishing where fishing effort is increasing.

The National Inshore Fisheries Forum members proposed, at the Forum meeting on the 22nd June 2016, the imposition of a Minimum Conservation Reference Size (MCRS) following a consultation process in order to address the current unregulated practices which are leading to issues with sustainability.

Accordingly, the Minister is now considering the introduction of conservation management measures. A comprehensive explanation of the pros and cons of each proposed measure is set out in the Annex.

# What do Other Jurisdictions Do?

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|  |  | Measure | | | | | | | |
| Country | Region | Min. size | Max.  size | Closed season | Closed areas | TAC | Prohibition on berried females | Effort limits | Specific permits |
| Ireland | National | - | - | No | - | No | No | No | No |
| England | Cornwall | 65 | No | - | - | No | - | - | No |
|  | Devon and Severn | 65 | No | - | Lundy  Knoll Pins | - | Yes | - | Yes |
| Scotland | All | 65\* | No | No | *-* | No | No\* | No | Yes |
|  | Shetland | 70 | No | Yes | - | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
|  | Outer Hebridies | 70 | No | - | - | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
|  | Orkney | 70 | No | - | - | No | Yes | - | - |

\**Marine Scotland has conducted consultation on a proposal to increase the MLS to 70mm and to introduce a prohibition on landing of berried females*

Velvet crab fishing is regulated in the UK with a minimum landing figure set at 65mm in Northern Ireland[[1]](#footnote-1), England and Wales[[2]](#footnote-2) and Scotland except for areas of the Outer Hebrides, the Orkney and the Shetland Islands[[3]](#footnote-3) where the MLS is 70mm. Conservation measures also include a closed season during the summer months in Shetland. In Scotland, vessels landing velvet crab are required to have a licence with a shellfish entitlement. Vessels without this entitlement are only allowed to land limited amounts of 25 crabs per day. Reports from the Marine Institute indicate that traditionally it was a convention for fishers in Britain to return ovigerous females to the water.

The Marine Stewardship Council have certified the Shetland Shellfish Management Organisation (SSMO) Shetland inshore brown & velvet crab, lobster and scallop fishery according to the Marine Stewardship Council Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Fisheries.[[4]](#footnote-4) The velvet crab management practices certified include the regulatory 70mm minimum landing size as well as a licensing procedure along with a fishery closure period during the moulting season.

The Shetland and the Orkney fisheries for velvet crab commenced at the same time as the Irish fishery for velvet crab in the late 1980s. These fisheries were a response to the over exploitation of the species in Spain and infection by the dinoflagellate species Haematodinium in parts of France.

The Scottish Fisheries Division have recently published draft recommendations following a 12 week public consultation (Consultation on Landing Controls for the Scottish Crab and Lobster Fisheries), which concluded on the 20th May 2016. The impetus for the consultation came from industry representatives who called for conservation management measures that were introduced in the Outer Hebrides, Orkney and Shetland to be rolled out for the rest of the Scottish coast. This followed stock assessment findings, which indicated that the velvet crab and the other species subject to the consultation are being fished at levels close to or above the Fmsy proxy.[[5]](#footnote-5) The management measures proposed for the velvet crab fishery included: a) increasing the minimum landing size for velvet crab to 70 mm carapace , b) prohibiting the landing of berried (egg bearing) velvet crab, c) introducing prohibitions on sale and carriage to match any landing prohibitions that are implemented on a uniform basis across the entire Scottish coast. The outcome of the consultation was that the three proposed management measures outlined above will be introduced by Marine Scotland.

# Policy Proposals

## Option 1: Introduce a legal minimum landing size of 65mm

If such a measure was introduced no velvet crab under 65mm could be landed. Fishermen would be obliged to comply with this standard. The main effect of this measure would be to protect stocks from growth overfishing and ideally recruitment overfishing.

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| **Pros** | **Cons** |
| Would legally require fishermen to be compliant with minimum landing size. To contravene the legislation would be an offence and would result in a penalty. |  |
| Would guarantee smaller crabs would not be landed. There would be certainty as to the minimum landing requirement and market forces would have no impact on that figure. | Vessels targeting velvet crabs would have an increased sorting/grading period. The cost of time spent sorting could be offset by escape panels on velvet crab gear. From previous Irish studies a circular panel of 47mm diameter seems to be the best option of selecting out crabs below 65mm |
| Would prevent the landing of juvenile crabs. This allows them the opportunity to grow and reproduce before harvesting. A higher MLS increases the chances of individuals being able to reproduce before being harvested, potentially increasing a fishery’s yield and spawning stock biomass. | A strict minimum landing figure may be an over restrictive requirement as velvet crabs are difficult to accurately measure. |
| Would fix the spawning escapement per recruit at a minimum level defined as the number of spawning events that would occur prior to the crab recruiting to the fishery (the remaining egg production of a crab would then be determine by the annual fishing mortality rate or probability of being removed from the stock). |  |

## Option 2: Retain a voluntary or market driven landing size of 65mm subject to proper sampling of landing data being carried out.

If such a measure was retained proper sampling of landing data would have to be carried out to monitor the efficacy of volunteer or market driven grading practices

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| **Pros** | **Cons** |
| Fishing practices would remain unchanged | No certainty or control regarding landing size and velvet crab stock sustainability. |
|  | A market driven landing figure is subject to market pressures which may result in smaller crabs being landed. There would be no method to regulate the landing size. |
|  | May negatively affect spawning events |
|  | May lead to overfishing and an unsustainable fishery. |

## Option 3: Do neither

Your opinion may be that neither of the options presented are appropriate. In that case you may consider that no management measures are required or that different measures are needed. In the consultation submission form attached you are invited to provide reasons why you think no measures are required or if you think additional measures are needed then to identify your preference in this regard.

If no measures are introduced then the current trends in catches and catch rates which are experienced would be expected to continue. If there are further increases in fishing effort then velvet crabs stocks are likely to be exposed to increased fishing pressures. The pros and cons of doing nothing at the current time are as follows.

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| **Pros** | **Cons** |
| Fishery could potentially become depleted. | No control or certainty around stock sustainability and no measures to prevent overfishing. |

1. Statutory Rules of Northern Ireland, No. 200, Sea Fisheries, Crabs and Lobsters (Minimum Size) Order (Northern Ireland) 2000, Article 3 and Schedule 2 ; minimum landing size for velvet crab set at 65mm. Statutory Rules of Northern Ireland, No. 185, Sea Fisheries, The Unlicensed Fishing for Crabs and Lobster Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008, Article 3, prohibition of retention or landing; limits the number of crabs (including velvet crabs) that can be retained on board or landed to five crabs [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. UK Statutory Instrument, 1989 No. 919, Sea Fisheries, Conservation of Sea Fish, The Undersized Velvet Crabs Order 1989. Sets minimum size at 65mm. Welsh Statutory Instruments, 2015 No. 2076 (W. 312) Sea Fisheries, Wales Conservation Of Sea Fish, The Specified Crustaceans (Prohibition on Fishing, Landing, Sale and Carriage) (Wales) Order 2015. Prohibition of landing, selling carriage of velvet crab below 65mm. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Scottish Statutory Instruments,2015 No. 183, Sea Fisheries, Conservation of Sea Fish, The Outer Hebrides (Landing of Crabs and Lobsters) Order, 2015. Article 3, minimum landing size for velvet crab set at 70mm. Scottish Statutory Instruments,2016 No. 50, Sea Fisheries, Conservation of Sea Fish, The Orkney Islands (Landing of Crabs and Lobsters) Order, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.msc.org/track-a-fishery/fisheries-in-the-program/certified/north-east-atlantic/shetland-inshore-crab-lobster-and-scallop> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Fmsy is the fishing mortality consistent with the largest average yield that can continuously be taken from a stock under existing environmental conditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)