

THE CORNISH FISH PRODUCERS ORGANISATION

BREXIT BRINGS OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Producer Organisations have evolved, changed and focused functions since their inception. With a Fisheries Bill looming and the UK's exit from the EU and the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), for the first time in 40 years, Britain has the opportunity to chart its own course, and to lead in the management and harvest of its natural fisheries resources.

Paul Trebilcock, chief executive officer of the Cornish Fish Producers Organisation (CFPO), discusses the past, present and future of POs.

Fishing News: The history of POs and the CFP are intertwined. How has this worked for the CFPO?

Paul Trebilcock: Starting with a handful of fishermen, the original board members (all were fishermen) such as Messrs Lawry, Townsend, Parker and Collins, were the driving force behind the CFPO's establishment and ultimate success.

Initially formed to perform a market support role, modelled on French agricultural cooperatives, POs in the UK have evolved to successfully take on devolved quota management responsibilities from government, along with a range of other roles as regional and sectoral focus points. They hold a unique position on the coast, directly linking to their member vessels and fisheries administrators.

In fact, UK POs have developed in a variety of diverse ways to fill a range of different niches, always guided and controlled by their members –

fishermen. Some, like the CFPO, are very broadly-based in terms of membership, both in terms of the type and size of vessels.

Brexit brings with it our departure from the CFP, with all the nonsense, pain and frustration it has imposed on the UK fishermen. But perhaps one of the few positives has been the emergence of producer organisations (POs). Fishing can often be highly fragmented and often divided against itself, by vessel category and method of fishing, but ultimately fishermen have a common aspiration to catch and sell fish in a responsible way, for people to eat. To that end, POs have formed

Paul Trebilcock: Brexit represents both an opportunity and a challenge to POs and fishermen alike. The opportunity lies in the advantages that the UK as an independent coastal state should bring. It is a matter of fact that UK fishermen have not received their fair share of quotas because of the disadvantageous terms on which the UK joined the EEC, as it was then.

There are now reasonable expectations (confirmed by DEFRA Secretary of State Michael Gove and UK Fisheries Minister George Eustice) that leaving the CFP will address that issue, and bring a significant increase in fishing opportunities for UK fishermen.

As welcome as increased quotas will be, the opportunity to escape the dead hand of the CFP's twisted view of fisheries

management will be perhaps as important (think of bass, spurdog, porbeagle and skate).

POs already play a central role in managing quotas, and through this make a significant and positive contribution to wider fisheries management in the UK. I believe that there will certainly be opportunities to build from this base.

The arbitrary line through the

I can foresee a light-touch regime (of quota) for genuine low-impact vessels

the basis for effective cohesion and collective self-help for more than 40 years.

Other POs around the UK reflect different parts of the UK fleet, their markets and their membership.

Fishing News: The multi-million dollar question; what are your broad hopes, fears and aspirations for Brexit?

Wide range of members

The CFPO represents a diverse and sustainable fleet of over 160 member vessels. These range in size from 5m single-handed cove boats to larger netters and trawlers and beam trawlers of over 24m LOA. Their members collectively land over 50 different species of fish and shellfish daily, generating a first sale value of over £30m per year.



▲ **Paul Trebilcock, chief executive, CFPO.**

the definition of low-impact would be important, and their catches and impact would have to be monitored and accounted for.

I strongly believe that all fishermen should be in a PO of one sort or another – to protect their interests; to ensure that their voices are heard at national level, and to cover each other's backs.

POs are at present officially recognised under European legislation. Post-Brexit that official recognition will have to be translated into national legislation, and I am sure that DEFRA has that in hand.

Fishing News: Moving forward, what management role do you see developing for POs and their members, post-Brexit?

Paul Trebilcock: POs are a step down the road of co-management through which non-governmental bodies take on



The diverse membership of the CFPO includes inshore...



... and offshore netters...



▲ ... and smaller cove boats.

a range of responsibilities – within a framework of supervision – bringing skills, and local specialist knowledge that is not available within government.

My ambition would be to travel much further down this road, taking fishermen to the very heart of UK fisheries management. We already work very closely with fisheries scientists and fisheries administrators. Fishermen have a more immediate reason than most to obtain an accurate view of stock abundance and trends, and well-run POs with active fishermen at their heart are the obvious place for this partnership to take place. Leaving the EU provides us with an opportunity to do this better and more systematically, perhaps using the production and marketing plans that POs already produce as a basis, but making them more dynamic and useful.

Fishing News: These are exciting times, but also uncertain times. How do POs and the UK industry best chart these choppy waters?

Paul Trebilcock: After the roller-coaster ride of the past two decades, it is not surprising that fishermen and vessel operators want some stability in the regulatory regime. The one lesson that we have learnt over those years, is that prescriptive rules concocted on-high, and applied with no real understanding of the fleets or fisheries concerned, rarely deliver as anticipated – the law of unintended consequences. The alternative is to decentralise decision-making as far as it will go, within a framework of

monitoring and supervision. My view is that POs are ideally placed to take on this role.

It's not so much change that fishermen fear, but wrong-headed, badly-designed change that goes in the wrong direction. The landing obligation is a good example. By contrast, working with POs to steadily reduce discards would have built on the progress already made and, in my view, taken us much further. As it is, POs will be working hard to avoid chokes in their members' fisheries caused by the EU's blunt

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approach. Instead, we could have had something less flamboyant that actually works.

Fishing News: There are lots of discussions and views on quota management. What do you think the role is for POs in the future?

Paul Trebilcock: POs, because of their strategic position between active fishermen and vessel operators and the Marine Management Organisation, have really come into their own in the area of managing quota. PO quota management delivers a highly-flexible, extremely adaptive, form of decentralised management (with active fishermen at the very heart of it), based on decisions made much closer to the vessels concerned than government could ever achieve in a centralised system.

POs can choose to set monthly, bi-monthly or annual catch limits, depending on what suits their particular membership. Quota can be swapped through exchanges, both domestically and internationally.

Allocations can be made on a pool basis, individual basis or sub-divided according to set and agreed criteria by the PO membership – the fishermen. Hybrid arrangements are possible, where pool allocations are used for some species, and annual allocations used for others.

The whole arrangement is overseen by the PO membership, and, in many cases, an elected board. The variety of options available to POs to manage their quotas only

reflects the extreme diversity of the UK fleet. Different arrangements are needed for large-scale, shoaling, pelagic species than for the ultra-mixed demersal fisheries of the southwest, where up to 35 species can be caught together.

The whole system of bringing quota to where it is needed is based on a dense interconnection of communications between POs in the UK and abroad. PO quota managers have access to detailed knowledge about their members' quota needs, and what is available in terms of surplus quota elsewhere in the system. Matching the two is the daily work of each PO, and it works well. The quota available to vessels in PO membership across the course of the year can be many times the initial allocation at the beginning of the year, and that

is achieved through PO quota management. And that is why POs are so strongly supported by their members.

Fishing News: How does the relationship between POs, their members, and government work?

Paul Trebilcock: Overseeing thousands of individual fishing vessels as they go about their business, making a livelihood and feeding the nation, has to be a daunting task for any government. Electronic logbooks and satellite monitoring have certainly made things easier for them (in theory), but POs still play an absolutely pivotal role in the two-way exchange of information between the industry and government. Reliable catch statistics at national level rely on cross-checks by POs, and removing blockages in the flow of information from the industry to government – and also from the regulators to the vessels – is central to the operation of the system.



▲ PO membership enables fishermen to control their allocation of fish more efficiently.

Filtering out unnecessary junk information and interpreting the sometimes-dense rulings from Brussels is also an important role. Helping their members remain compliant within the plethora of rules is the daily work of POs.

Developing innovative approaches to fisheries management is another area of PO work that I am particularly proud of. For example, in the CFPO we have developed – in partnership with CEFAS scientists, NGOs, the MMO and DEFRA – a real-time management system for spurdog, which we are now piloting.

Fishing News: PO business and fishing continues in the meantime; what are the big challenges for 2018/19?

Paul Trebilcock: The landing obligation as drafted represents a big threat, not only to the integrity of our system of quota management, but to many fisheries and fishermen in a more general sense. I think that the member states that voted for the discard ban in 2013 (led by the UK) signed up to minimising wasteful discards, not tying up their respective fishing fleets. It seems that now ministers and the EU are beginning to realise how badly-designed the legislation is, and the magnitude of the threat posed by chokes in demersal mixed fisheries. I think that the industry as a whole recognises that a discard ban is a good aspiration, but in the form that it has been brought in, it is unworkable unless accompanied by other major changes.

We, and the federations, are working hard with the MMO and DEFRA to ensure that, at least in the UK, we have arrangements that deliver a progressive reduction in unwanted catch without bankrupting the fleets.

The challenge for POs and their fishermen is to find practical ways to take advantage of the opportunities ahead. Moving beyond the prescriptive rules of the CFP to regional/local responsibility, takes trust and confidence on both sides. I think it is sometimes forgotten that POs are fishermen's organisations – funded by, run for and run by their members – fishermen. ■