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Parliamentary Briefing

Fisheries Debate – 10 December 2013

WWF Scotland and RSPB Scotland welcome the opportunity to brief MSPs for the Parliamentary fisheries debate. 2013 heralded the conclusion of the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) and a move away from annual quota trading and short-term decision making towards a more sustainable model of fisheries management. As Cabinet Secretary Richard Lochhead MSP stated at the 2013 Scottish Fishermen's Federation annual dinner: *'We can be world-beaters on quality and sustainability, ensuring that people the world over equate 'Scottish seafood' with words like quality and sustainability.'* We hope that the Scottish Parliament debate will reflect this necessary shift in the way we manage our fisheries.

North Sea – Improving cod avoidance and further reducing discards: We welcome the fact that steady improvements have been made in the North Sea, with cod mortality decreasing and biomass slowly increasing. Scottish fleets have made substantial changes to reduce by-catch of cod and other species. This is paying off in terms of stock levels.

However, there is no room for complacency. We must continue to step up the Scottish fleets' record of avoiding cod catches. Doing so would hasten the recovery of a crucial stock that determines the fishing patterns for so many other species for which the fleets have quotas. In order to meet the landings obligation under the CFP, priority must be given to minimising, and wherever possible, eliminating by-catch of non-target species.

We urge Parliament and Ministers to continue to prioritise maximum selectivity and discard minimisation across Scottish fisheries to ensure we are ready for the discard ban.

North Sea Cod quotas: We welcome work being done by managers, scientists and the industry on finding ways to protect cod further, and we support initiatives that seek solutions that are ecologically, economically and socially beneficial. A 9% cut in next year's North Sea cod quota is on the cards not because of scientific advice, but because of the provisions under the Cod Recovery Plan. Scientific advice indicates that a rollover (plus up to a 10% increase) can be consistent with achievement of sustainable fishing levels by 2015 as long as current cod avoidance fishing behaviour is maintained.

Both RSPB and WWF Scotland could accept a rollover of last years' quota, although there is evidence that increasing the quota by up to 10% carries greater risk. Therefore, any increase in cod quota would have to be accompanied by strong assurances from the industry that current measures to avoid discards (cod avoidance and selectivity) remain in place and that total removals and discards are not increased.

Where the Scottish Government pushes for a departure from the cod recovery plan, MSPs must demand evidence that the counter proposal is in line with scientific advice and will deliver better or, at the very least, no worse, outcomes for the stocks in question.

West Coast of Scotland: While the picture in the North Sea is improving, the same cannot be said of the West of Scotland where cod biomass remains very low, yet cod continues to be caught and discarded. Greater efforts to avoid cod are vital if West of Scotland cod are to stand a chance of recovery. Priority must also be given to minimising and, where possible, eliminating cod capture in smaller mesh fisheries and selected out in larger mesh fisheries.

We urge the Parliament to place much greater emphasis on the need to build a vision for the West Coast fleets in which boats can move towards sustainable, high quality catches of a mix of species in order to secure a better, more secure future for fishing communities.

Scotland's responsibility within the new Common Fisheries Policy

We welcome the positive engagement in the CFP process of Cabinet Secretary Richard Lochhead MSP, who championed the need for a more tailored approach to our fisheries through regionalisation, and recognised the need to tackle discards, rebuild depleted stocks by 2015 and maintain them at sustainable levels. This should mean better stewardship of our resources, with fewer fish being taken out of the sea through altered fishing behaviour and improved selectivity of fishing gear. It is now over to regional bodies and Member States to ensure that the reform package is turned into reality.

Ending discards: One of the major challenges that the reformed CFP presents is the requirement for all vessels to gradually land all they catch starting in January 2015 with final fisheries committed by 2019. This landings obligation needs to be carefully managed and cannot result in a shift of discarding at sea to discarding on land. The landings obligation will require a range of practical and flexible measures to encourage fishing behaviour and gear use which avoids unwanted removals in the first instance. Scottish fleets have already made substantial changes in their fishing practice and gear to reduce the unwanted removal or discarding of cod and other species, and this needs to continue.

Governance: Thanks to the progressive approach adopted by the Scottish Government in working alongside fisheries and environmental stakeholders in the *Fisheries Management and Conservation Group*, Scottish fisheries can better respond to the challenges of the new CFP regulation.

We hope MSPs will seek reassurance that Scottish Ministers will maintain and build on this governance model at the heart of fisheries management in Scotland.

Marine planning: Scotland is also leading the way through its proposals on marine planning, including Marine Protected Areas. We believe that, if properly implemented and enforced, marine planning is a key tool with which to achieve the sustainable management of our seas for wildlife and dependent communities.

MSPs should seek reassurance that the Scottish Government will implement and enforce robust marine planning to reduce the risk of conflict between different marine sectors and reduce pressure on the marine environment.

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