



Parliamentary Briefing

Fisheries Debate – 12 December 2013

RSPB, WWF and MCS welcome the opportunity to brief MPs for the Parliamentary fisheries debate. 2013 heralded the conclusion of the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) and a shift away from the annual quota trading and short-term decision making, that has blighted our fisheries, towards a more sustainable model of fisheries management. As former Fisheries Minister Richard Benyon MP stated in June on the conclusion of negotiations: *'This agreement hails a significant breakthrough that will make fishing more sustainable, will end the centralised one-size-fits-all approach to decision making and will make discards a thing of the past. This broken policy is finally on the right path.'* We hope that the House of Commons debate will recognise and reflect this vital shift in the way we manage our fisheries.

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

However, with the latest ICES data showing that the North Sea stock is only slightly above what is considered a safe level for the species, there is no room for complacency. We must continue to build on the progress already made to avoid unwanted cod catches and so reduce discarding. Doing so will hasten the recovery of this crucial stock that determines the fishing patterns for so many other species for which our fleet has quotas. In order to meet the landing obligation (otherwise known as the 'discard ban') under the new CFP, priority must be given to minimising, and wherever possible, eliminating by-catch of non-target fish.

We urge the Government to continue to prioritise maximum gear selectivity and other measures for the minimisation of discards across UK fisheries to ensure we are ready for the discard ban.

North Sea Cod quota: 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 EU 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 fishing behaviour on cod avoidance is maintained.

The RSPB, WWF and MCS do not oppose such a rollover of last year's quota but there is evidence that increasing the quota by up to 10% carries greater risk. As such, either a rollover or any increase needs 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 do not increase.

Where the Government pushes for a departure from the cod recovery plan, MPs 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.

The UK's responsibility within the new Common Fisheries Policy

We welcome that the Government led in the EU for ambitious CFP reform, in particular championing the need for a more tailored, less top-down approach to managing our fisheries through regionalisation. We also welcome the Government's recognition of 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 'unwanted' fish being taken out of the sea. It is now up to regional bodies and Member States to ensure that the reform package is turned into reality, starting on 1st January 2014.

In this new regionalised model of the CFP, MPs should urge the Government to take a positive lead in the 'Scheveningen Group' of North Sea Member States and in other regional sea basin groupings affecting UK waters.

Ending discards: One of the major challenges presented by the new CFP is the requirement for all vessels to land all they catch (and this to be counted against quota). The landing obligation will be phased, starting in January 2015 with pelagic fish (such as mackerel and herring), in January 2016 for whitefish (which generate more discards than pelagic fisheries) and applying to all EU fish stocks subject to quotas by 2019. This landing obligation needs to be carefully managed and cannot be allowed to result in a shift from discarding at sea to discarding on land.

The landing obligation will require a range of practical and flexible measures to encourage fishing behaviour and gear use which avoid unwanted removals in the first instance. UK fleets need to build on the substantial changes in their fishing practice and gear already made to reduce discards. In the Defra-funded 'Project 50%', Devon beam-trawlers agreed to work with Cefas to trial new net designs in efforts to reduce their discards by an ambitious 50%. Reductions of over 50% were made, with the most successful boat achieving almost 70%. Judicious use by the UK of its allocation under the new European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF 2014-2020) will also be vital for driving such adaptation.

We urge MPs to back investment in innovation for complying with the CFP's new landing obligation.

Marine planning: The UK is leading the way through the MMO's proposals on marine planning although the process is still at a very early stage. We believe that, if properly implemented and enforced, marine planning is a key tool with which to achieve the sustainable development that recognises that healthy marine ecosystems are essential for economic growth.

MPs should seek reassurance that the 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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