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Cc: DG MARE  
Cc: North Sea Member States  
Cc: NWW Member States Group

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### **NWWAC/NSAC contribution to the MMO Stage 3 consultation on management of fishing activity impacts in marine protected areas (MPAs)**

*This paper was approved with consensus by the NSAC and NWWAC Executive Committees on 25 September 2025.*

The North Western Waters and the North Sea Advisory Councils hereby provide joint response only to the 'General comments' of Stage 3 Consultation on UK MPAs<sup>1</sup>, leaving regional and site-specific feedback to individual organisations affected in the area.

#### **1. Do you have any additional information about the location, condition, or sensitivity of the designated features?**

Both Advisory Councils consider that the characterisation of the designated features has major shortcomings and question the scientific integrity of the decision-making process. None of the site-specific documents provide the reliable percentages of actual habitat coverage or take proxy conservation advice from other sites because no specific package exists for the site (South West Approaches to the Bristol Channel MPA, for example). We believe that biogeographic data should be complemented by on-site surveys (notably for Greater Haig Fras and NE of Haig Fras). Moreover, ACs note that most evaluations are based on outdated data, some dating back to 2014 (for Margate and Long Sands, for instance), which fails to meet the principle of best available science. Extrapolations or estimates cannot replace robust, site-specific assessments of environmental status. The ACs believe that the same method as the one applied in Land's End and Cape Bank should be used in all sites<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/marine-protected-areas-stage-3-consultation>

<sup>2</sup> <https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/cape-bank-mpa/>

## **2. Do you have information on the type, location, frequency, or intensity of fishing activity within the MPAs?**

After thorough analysis of all available documents on the consultation webpage, it appears that the fishing activity data used is not relevant and contains significant gaps. More precisely, the data used is spatially inadequate (in particular for vessels under 12m), incomplete for EU vessels, and does not integrate seasonal aspects. Yet, such data exists<sup>3</sup> and some of it is readily available to the UK administration through the data exchange mechanisms put in place within the TCA framework. Furthermore, for more precise data, for instance on the activity's seasonality, all producer organisations stand ready to contribute and exchange directly with the MMO. Moreover, the economic data is grossly inaccurate and obsolete, although national economic institutes and private actors<sup>4</sup> continuously carry out projects on those matters.

Based on these observations, the NWWAC and NSAC urge the MMO to enhance the spatial and temporal resolution of data used, considering that such data exists. The European fishing sector stands ready to contribute and to organise bilateral meetings to provide accurate and relevant inputs.

## **3. Do you agree or disagree with the proposed management measures? Do you have any suggestions for other management measures?**

AC members strongly oppose the blanket ban and the MMO's binary approach. We consider the approach disproportionate and methodologically flawed. Instead, we advocate for a gradual, iterative and adaptative approach that considers full-spectrum sustainability – environmental, social and economic. This approach should take into account the following aspects:

- Differentiated area designation (e.g. 20% core zone and 80% dynamic management for large MPAs >1000 km<sup>2</sup> such as Western Channel, SW Approaches to the Bristol Channel and SW Deeps East);
- Alternative technical measures (e.g. fishing gear modifications, seasonal restrictions, spatial quotas, etc.);
- Comprehensive management approach across the whole MPA network, to minimize socio-economic impacts while maximizing ecological benefits (e.g. If two similar habitats are observed, prefer a complete closure in a low-activity MPA and have more adaptative management in the used one);
- Biennial revision instead of five-year (e.g. using determined trigger criteria);
- Ecological indicators instead of activity proxies;
- Transition period (e.g. at least 2 years with technical measures before enforcing the bans);

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<sup>3</sup> For instance FDI data

<sup>4</sup> For instance Seafish (UK) and FranceAgriMer (FR)

- Transboundary coordination to harmonise measures at the sea basin scale and ensure a coherent regulation (e.g. with France for Bassurelle Sandbank and Wight-Barfleur Reef).

The approaches suggested above will ensure progress towards good environmental status while minimizing socio-economic impacts. The ACs urge the MMO to revise their methods and to consider each of those points very closely.

#### **4. How would the proposed management measures affect you? Or those you represent?**

Across all sites, we estimate that at least 87 Spanish vessels, 160 French vessels, 120 Irish vessels, 55 Belgian vessels and 85 Dutch vessels using bottom-contacting gears are regularly active and will be severely impacted. For the French fleet, the activity within those sites yield to more than 9.5 million euros of direct revenues on average annually. Here, we must underline that further socio-economic considerations have to be quantified to obtain a complete understanding of potential impacts. In particular, the MMO should consider the redeployment costs to alternative areas for the fleet, and all ramifications for the downstream sector (ports, fishmongers, etc.). More precisely, the ACs recommend:

- An economic analysis by fishing port (e.g. Boulogne-sur-Mer, Ostende, Urk, etc.);
- An estimation of redeployment costs (e.g. fuel costs, gear adaptation, etc.);
- An estimation of the impact on direct and indirect employment within the sector;
- A territorial compensation (i.e. the reopening of less-sensitive areas or any other closed to compensate for the new loss);
- An adaptation support (e.g. technical and/or economic support for gear innovation).

#### **5. What impacts, if any, do you anticipate the proposed management measures will have on UK fishing vessels, operators, or supply chains?**

From a European perspective, it appears that even the impacts on the British fleet are largely underestimated. Qualitative socio-economic data such as the one produced by Seafish was not considered in the analysis, and, as for the European and UK vessels, the displacement effect was not evaluated, while the displacement effects are projected to take place on fleet level. Forcing the same number of vessels into smaller areas drives up fishing intensity and causes greater ecological and socio-economic impacts (e.g., increased pressure on local stocks, gear conflicts and safety issues...) than would result from balanced, targeted measures, as opposed to blanket bans and complete closures. Further, the coastal fleet of under 12 meters was insufficiently taken into account due to a weak spatial confidence in the data.

The ACs insist on the need to treat all fleets equally, to model the displacement effect, to provide alternative solutions aimed at maintaining the activity and to conduct true and honest participative workshops (e.g. using serious games<sup>5</sup> with stakeholders, etc.).

**6. What impacts, if any, do you anticipate the proposed management measures will have on non-UK fishing vessels, operators, or supply chains (including those from the EU)?**

The ACs consider that the impacts of the proposed measures are disproportionate and highly discriminatory for the European fleet. We base this statement on several observations:

- No prior consultation of the impacted EU Member States;
- No consideration of the historical fishing rights and more generally of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA);
- Lack of critical data;
- Lack of economic analyses conducted at the Member State level;
- Lack of an evaluation of redeployment possibilities.

In light of those critical issues, we urge the MMO to consider following recommendations:

- Thorough and honest consultation of European Member States and stakeholders;
- Impact analysis at national level;
- Identification of and consultation around possible redeployment scenarios;
- Transboundary harmonisation and cooperation on fisheries management and spatial planning;
- Collaborative management, e.g. using the Specialised Committee on Fisheries or other instances, such as in place for the Dogger Bank management.

**7. What other impacts could the proposed management measures have? For example, on fishers, the wider fishing community, coastal communities, employment, upstream and downstream supply chains, people with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010, fish stocks, the marine environment.**

The ACs identify a number of other impacts and issues, most importantly:

- Environmental impacts:

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<sup>5</sup> Serious games can be used in natural resource management as a facilitation mean between stakeholders. The approach consists in modelling a socio-ecosystem, in their most common form as a board game. They allow stakeholders to step into each other's shoes, to experiment management scenarios over multiple cycles, and to explore several of those scenarios. They have been successfully used in water management in North Africa and South America, in tropical forest exploitation, and many other projects. For more information : <https://www.commod.org/en> .

- Displacement effect to near-by areas leading to an increase and concentration of the effort at the fleet-level with considerable adverse cumulative and 'in combination' impacts on those areas;
- Cumulative effects with other marine uses (offshore renewables, etc.);
- No transboundary consideration of the ecological connectivity between protected areas.
- Socio-economic impacts:
  - Impact on coastal communities (particularly on employment, from a wide perspective);
  - No consideration of territorial equity (between regions and countries);
  - Economic viability.
- Regulatory impacts:
  - Risk of creating a legal precedent and widely adopting an approach despite all its shortcomings;
  - Deterioration of the EU-UK relations in matters of fishing, with the potential to spill over to other areas.
- Traffic security issues:
  - The displacement of vessels in already dense and narrow sea basins such as the Eastern Channel (e.g., Foreland MPA) increases the risk of maritime accidents. Such incidents could lead to human casualties and environmental damage.

The ACs believe that the MMO should consider and address each of these points and, in doing so, systematically assess the cascading impacts of proposed measures. Proper evaluation, planning and monitoring would enable the development of appropriate mitigation methods, and where possible, the adoption of alternative scenarios that minimise socio-economic impacts and ensure that environmental management measures are considered credible, legitimate and relevant.

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