

Mr Costas Kadis
Commissioner for Fisheries and Oceans
European Commission
Rue de la Loi 200
1049 Brussels
Belgium

Brussels & Dun Laoghaire, 23 July 2025

Subject: Joint NWWAC & NSAC letter on the MMO's Marine Protected Areas Stage 3

Dear Commissioner Kadis,

The North Western Waters and the North Sea Advisory Councils wish to draw your attention on the ongoing consultation on **new management measures in forty-two marine protected areas (MPAs) in English waters**¹. Among the MPAs facing an expansion or a first implementation of a bottom-towed gears ban, twelve are in the North Sea region² and twenty-nine are in of the North Western Waters³⁴⁵. In addition, five zones are facing a static gear (nets, pots and lines) closure.

First, we must underline the rather cynical approach that the UK makes of stakeholder consultation. Opening a twelve-weeks long consultation, during the summer holidays, on forty-two areas with thousands of pages of technical documents to navigate through does not constitute a proper consultation. For comparison, the previous MPA consultation on thirteen MPAs had the same consultation period. Likewise, the consultation on sandeel in the North Sea was done in a hasty manner. **Therefore, the ACs thank the Commission for its successful request to the UK for an extension of the deadline.** The additional four weeks obtained will allow us to adjust our working processes and to provide constructive collective answers.

Secondly, we stress that, if those measures were to be applied as laid out in the consultation documents, European fleets operating in the region would lose access to significant amount of their fishing grounds. The MPAs as defined in the stage three consultation are intensely

¹ Consultation document : https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68469c3fe5a089417c806127/MMO_Stage_3_Consultation_document_-_FINAL.pdf

² North Sea byelaw : <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-north-sea-marine-protected-areas-fishing-gear-byelaw-2024>

³ Eastern Channel byelaw : <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-eastern-channel-marine-protected-areas-fishing-gear-byelaw-2024>

⁴ Western Channel byelaw : <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-western-channel-and-southwest-marine-protected-areas-fishing-gear-byelaw-2024>

⁵ Irish Sea byelaw : <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-irish-sea-marine-protected-areas-fishing-gear-byelaw-2024>

more restrictive in the prohibition of bottom towed gears than was originally described in the stage 1 and stage 2 consultations.

As we have seen regarding the consequences of the closure of the sandeel fishery in the North Sea, we particularly alert you to the **displacement effect** that will follow and the **impact on all maritime activities, on security at sea and on habitats and stocks in European waters**.

In the areas consulted on, we project that at least 87 Spanish vessels, 122 French vessels 55 Belgian vessels and 85 Dutch vessels using bottom-contacting gears are regularly active and will be impacted. These are first provisional numbers, but they provide estimates of the **magnitude of the socio-economic repercussion for neighbouring member states**, and of the **predictable consequences on stocks and habitats in neighbouring European waters, which will be impacted by displaced fishing effort**. The impacted fleets of Member States and the UK will undoubtedly transfer their fishing effort to near-by areas. Hence, they will not only transfer it but also increase it and concentrate it at the fleet-level with considerable adverse cumulative and 'in combination' impacts. The **development of offshore renewables and other marine uses** will strengthen this effect. For those reasons, we strongly argue that, **at a marine region scale, the ban MPAs will be counter-productive and will not achieve the objectives put forward by the MMO**.

Moreover, **we call for your services to analyse carefully the link between the conservation objectives of these MPAs and the measures proposed**. The "stage 3" refers to habitats with lower ecological value (i.e. to more commonly found habitats). These measures need to be challenged, as well as the underlying concept of a pristine marine environment, where fishermen have been active for centuries. In relation with this analysis, **we expect the Commission to recall the impacts on European food production and food sovereignty in the debate**. Lost fleets will hardly be retrieved, whereas considering the current geopolitical situation, Europe - including the UK - should secure a local, productive and healthy food system. Wild blue foods will play a strategic role in this system.

Finally, even though we recognise the right of the UK to develop and implement its own environmental policy, **we wish to see the Commission investigate the legal implications of the measures' impact on the access to waters and stocks as agreed in the Decision n°1/2025⁶ of the Specialised Committee on Fisheries**. Those measures will prevent European fleets to fish for the quotas they are entitled to, as well as to catch non-quota species at the historical levels. According to article 506 of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), **the EU may consider remedial measures such as the suspension of preferential tariff treatment** if it considers that the UK is failing to comply with its obligations under the TCA.

To conclude, the European fishing sector stands ready to contribute constructively as individual organisations and collectively to this consultation. We will come forward with alternative measures and with information and data supporting our arguments, accepting this

⁶ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/FR/TXT/?uri=OJ:L_202501231

would be more robust with the allowance of a reasonable timeframe to complete the necessary analyses.

In parallel, we urge the Commission to react politically to the bans proposed, for all of the arguments cited above. The TCA does not cover environmental policies, yet this development will directly and severely impact European access to fish stocks in British waters.

We thank you for your close attention on this pressing matter, and we look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,



Alexandra Philippe
NWWAC Chair



Kenn Skau Fischer
NSAC Chair