



The Northern Ireland Marine Task Force (NIMTF) is a coalition of non-government environmental organisations – it includes RSPB NI, Ulster Wildlife, Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, WWF Northern Ireland, National Trust, Friends of the Earth, Irish Whale and Dolphin Group, and Northern Ireland Environment Link. The NIMTF has the support of approximately 100,000 local people. We are working towards healthy, productive and resilient seas for Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland Marine Task Force response to:

Consultation on the draft Joint Fisheries Statement

Submitted on 09/04/2022

General comments (Q10)

The Northern Ireland Marine Task Force (NIMTF) welcome the opportunity to respond to the Joint Fisheries Statement (JFS) consultation following the Royal Assent of the UK Fisheries Act in 2020. The inclusion of ‘sustainability’, ‘ecosystem’ and ‘climate change’ objectives in the Act, is a direct acknowledgement that fishing is not only vital for thriving coastal communities and food production, but also fundamental to the health, resilience and productivity of our seas and marine wildlife. Therefore, NIMTF welcome the ambition and much of the interpretation, principles, and policy guidance set out in the JFS to ‘*deliver world class, sustainable management of our sea fisheries and marine aquaculture across the UK*’.

However, we are in the midst of twin biodiversity and climate crises that are having an ever-increasing impact on the marine environment, and it is the responsibility of all sectors and industries operating at sea to play their part in protecting nature and allowing it to recover. According to the latest UK Marine Strategy assessment¹ at least 47 % of marine quota stocks and 37 % of national shellfish stocks are fished unsustainably, i.e. above Maximum Sustainable Yield, (MSY). Therefore, it is critical that the JFS and subsequent Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs) ensure targeted action to deliver the change necessary for sustaining fish stocks for generations to come, while allowing marine ecosystems to recover.

Generally, NIMTF warmly welcome specific mention of aligning fisheries management policy and decision-making with the goals of the UK Marine Strategy and Good Environmental Status (GES). Equally, NIMTF acknowledge the recognition throughout the JFS that measures to preserve and promote marine ecosystems ultimately help, not hinder the fishing industry, by increasing the number and biomass of healthy fish stocks. NIMTF are also cautiously welcome the commitment from Fisheries Policy Authorities (FPAs) to embrace ecosystem-based management to ensure ‘*that the collective pressure of human activities is kept within levels compatible with the achievement of good environmental status, and does not compromise the capacity of marine ecosystems to respond*

¹ [Marine Strategy Part One: UK Updated Assessment and Good Environmental Status \(2019\)](#)



to human-induced changes'. Given the ever-increasing demand placed on our seas, NIMTF strongly believe such an ecosystem-based approach is critical to ensure the future of the fishing industry and the health of our marine environment.

NIMTF also believe there are several and important gaps in information and detail within the JFS which need to be addressed and clarified:

1. Time bound commitments to deliver environmentally sustainable fisheries and recover stocks:

The JFS needs time bound commitments for delivery of the Fisheries Objectives by the FMPs. If the JFS and FMPs are to deliver the socio-economic and environmental benefits offered by an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management, they must be practical, realistic and time bound. Fisheries management has an essential role in recovering our seas, particularly in the face of the twin climate and biodiversity crises. Including time bound commitments will reflect and help deliver the urgency required to respond, as well as framing the evaluation of the UK's progress towards achieving the Fisheries Objectives.

2. Ensuring delivery of the Fisheries Objectives through FMPs and other tools:

While the detail of *how* the Fisheries Objectives will be met will be laid out in the FMPs, the JFS must include commitments for the design and function of every FMP to have a transparent and criteria-based assessment of how it contributes to each of the Fisheries Objectives. Additionally, the JFS must include a collective evaluation of progress by the four nations towards delivering the Fisheries Objectives through the FMPs. The JFS must include tools for managing non-quota or data deficient stocks and other fisheries issues not captured by FMPs, for example, decarbonisation of fishing fleets, and impacts of displacement. Without these critical changes, the JFS is not comprehensive enough to encompass its wide-ranging remit and achieve the commitment to sustainable fishing as enshrined in The Fisheries Act 2020.

3. Urgent and effective action to tackle wildlife bycatch in NI waters:

The level and extent of unintentional capture of sensitive species such as seabirds and marine mammals in Northern Irish waters remains unknown. Commitments in the JFS to address this issue are underwhelming, with actions from the Bycatch Mitigation Initiative (BMI) yet to be published. Urgent and effective action to eliminate sensitive species bycatch in NI waters, must be incorporated into the JFS, including new bycatch monitoring and data collection programmes.

Overall, NIMTF believe the JFS is a welcome framework to bring the UK administrations together with a shared goal to *'recover stocks, support a sustainable fishing industry and safeguard the environment'*. However, it must be underpinned by adequate financial support, and it must deliver tangible, practical actions based on a comprehensive, co-developed, four-nation approach, with integration of cross-border issues that can impact wider ecosystem based fisheries management. A



useful and successful JFS will deliver not only for coastal communities, but drive the transformational change needed to achieve a healthy marine environment.

7. To what extent do you think the policies articulated in the draft JFS will achieve, or contribute to the achievement of, the fisheries objectives? Please explain your answer, with reference to specific content in the JFS where possible.

2.1 Interpreting the Objectives

2.1.1 Sustainability objective

NIMTF welcome that *‘the fisheries policy authorities will place emphasis, where required, on rebuilding stocks and protecting the environment’ (2.1.4)* and that they will also *‘consider both the short-term and the long-term impact of decisions on fish stocks and the fishing industry before acting’ (2.1.2)*. However, NIMTF suggest that the subsequent text should be changed to read that *‘short-term socio-economic decisions should not significantly compromise the long-term health of the marine environment’* to reflect the importance of a healthy, fully functioning and uncompromised marine environment not only for thriving fish stocks, but also for the provision of other vital ecosystem services on which society depends.

2.1.5 Precautionary objective

The precautionary approach should always be taken by Governments and relevant public authorities when managing the environment. This is particularly important in fisheries management where there is often a lack of sufficient information and data. NIMTF welcome the commitment that *‘the absence of sufficient scientific information is not used to justify postponing or failing to take management measures to conserve target species, associated or dependent species, non-target species or their environment’ (2.1.6)*.

The commitments to Maximum Sustainable Yields (MSY) are welcome in the JFS, as they were in the Fisheries Act (2020). All fishing activity must be limited to the MSY (or best suitable proxy) of the fishery, but it may also be necessary for Fishery Policy Authorities (FPAs) to set limits on fishing below the MSY, for example in instances where the aim is to increase the stock rather than to maintain current levels. Therefore, explicit reference should be made not only to the environmental merits of fishing at MSY, but also to the appropriateness of fishing *below* MSY where the scientific evidence points to it being the most appropriate action.

2.1.10 Ecosystem objective

The Ecosystem Based Approach to fisheries management is an essential component of sustainable and climate friendly fisheries. NIMTF welcome the foundation the JFS sets for its use in future UK fisheries management. Recognition that *‘The sea fishing industry operates in, and depends upon, a high-quality marine environment, and the fisheries policy authorities will have an awareness, and appreciation, of the varied interactions which occur between fish stocks, fisheries, and the environment’ (2.1.12)* is particularly important for a thriving fishing industry, especially as the



negative impacts of climate change are beginning to be felt more acutely by industry and other sea users.

The integration of the JFS policy commitments with that of the Marine Strategy UK in achieving GES is fundamental to the success of the JFS, the FMPs, and the overall objectives laid out in the Fisheries Act (2020); *'The fisheries policy authorities will achieve, or contribute to the achievement of, the ecosystem objective and GES through management regimes, which maintain or, where required, recover, protect, and improve the health of marine ecosystems by minimising the impacts of fishing'* (2.1.13). NIMTF also welcome the duty placed on FPAs to recognise the role played by the fishing industry in achieving a wider healthy marine environment *'beyond individual stocks, such as damage to seabed habitats and bycatch of sensitive species, while allowing appropriate human uses of our seas for the benefit of current and future generations'* (2.1.13).

2.1.14 Scientific evidence objective

NIMTF are fully supportive of the evidence-based approach to fisheries and marine conservation management. A concentrated effort to address the many evidence gaps, some of which are outlined in the latest MSUK assessment in 2019² should be coordinated at either a national or UK level where appropriate. Commercial fish stock assessments are limited by current data collection but this may quickly be improved with appropriate monitoring schemes and new data collection technologies, supported by appropriate levels of investment, so that FPAs have sufficient information and knowledge to make effective management measures. Crucially, research to further understand the ecosystem level impact of fishing activity on the marine environment, as well as the policy and technical measures which could help reduce those impacts, is fundamental to the successful implementation of the Fisheries Act (2020) objectives.

2.1.16 Bycatch objective

Worryingly, where the JFS details how the Fisheries Act (2020) Bycatch objective should be interpreted (2.1.17 & 2.1.18), there is no mention of seabird, marine mammal or elasmobranch bycatch, all of which are extremely common in some UK fisheries (reference –RSPB new report/campaign). Bycatch of sensitive species in particular (e.g., species that are rare, vulnerable or threatened), is a major hurdle for fisheries aiming to become sustainable, and represents a significant challenge for FPAs employing the ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management. The explicit understanding and interpretation of the Bycatch objective must include bycatch in all its forms.

2.1.24 Climate change objective

NIMTF welcomed the inclusion of the Climate Change objective in the Fisheries Act (2020), and it is positive to see the importance of healthy seas in mitigating and adapting to climate change recognised. Specific references to the fishing industry's role in contributing to societal decarbonisation as part of wider UK net-zero commitments (2.1.25) is particularly important, as is the commitment that *'fisheries policy authorities will pursue appropriate policies to control fishing*

² Marine Strategy Part One: UK Updated Assessment and Good Environmental Status (2019)



activity on vulnerable stocks and to protect, recover and enhance valuable blue carbon habitats’ (2.1.26). As the environmental impact from climate change increases in the coming decades, investing in Nature Based Solutions (NBSs) and the protection and restoration of habitats and species which capture and store carbon, is vital to the long-term sustainability and productivity of commercial fisheries and healthy seas.

3.2 Science and Evidence

Recognition of the important work of International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) in helping countries manage their fisheries by supplying the best available evidence on fish stocks in the North East Atlantic, is welcome. The newer work of ICES technical groups such as WKIRISH are also fundamental in managing stocks during changing environmental conditions, and how this could be underpinned by ecosystem modelling and adjust MSY according to environmental drivers. A recognition of the role of wider cross-border stock assessment and ecosystem modelling should also be included.

A specific commitment to adhere to the best available scientific advice when setting Total Allowable Catches (TACs) is fundamental for obtaining sustainable fisheries. The UK can’t credibly claim to ‘*deliver world class, sustainable management of our fisheries and aquaculture*’ without a definitive statement to never set quota limits above that which are scientifically deemed sustainable.

The timeframes for regular reporting (3 year) and reviewing of the JFS and FMPs (6 years) will help ensure Fisheries Act (2020) objectives are achieved. Adaptive fisheries management is particularly important as the environmental impacts of climate change increase and warming seas effect fish stock health and distribution in UK waters (as demonstrated by ICES WKIRISH work). Similarly, commitments to appropriately evaluate the impact of the JFS though existing and where appropriate, new data sources is welcome (3.4.1 & 3.4.2).

4.2 Our Approach to Fisheries Management

Recognition that the benefits that flow into coastal (and often rural) communities from the fishing industry themselves all depend upon healthy seas and fish stocks is welcome (4.1.1). Within fisheries management, prioritisation of other factors other than sustainability will ultimately lead to the decline of not only fish stocks and the marine environment, but also to the decline of the other socioeconomic and cultural benefits which sustainable and low impact fisheries can deliver for coastal communities.

Specific mention of ‘*the impact of stock levels on the processes and functioning of the wider ecosystem - for example, removal of prey species*’ (4.1.1) is fundamental to improving the health of our marine environment. For example, a recent report by RSPB³ highlighted how the sandeel is critical to the healthy functioning of marine food webs in UK waters, as well as for some of our most threatened seabirds. Furthermore, there is evidence that the international North Sea sandeel fishery is a contributory factor to the decline of some of those species, and is affecting the resilience of seabird populations to chronic climatic shifts in their food resources.

³ [Revive our Seas: The case for stronger regulation of sandeel fisheries in UK waters. RSPB report June 2021](#)



As stated previously, the integration of the JFS policy commitments with that of the Marine Strategy UK in achieving GES is fundamental to the success of the JFS, the FMPs, and the overall objectives as laid out in the Fisheries Act (2020) (2.1.13). The JFS also states *‘The JFS forms an important part of delivering GES and the UKMS on both commercially targeted and non-targeted species of fish, as well as supporting achievement of a host of other targets including on cetaceans, seals, birds, food webs, benthic habitats, and marine litter’*, 4.1.2 yet, as mentioned previously, there is scant mention and no detail of how JFS will combat seabird, marine mammal or elasmobranch bycatch, all of which are extremely common in some UK fisheries (reference –RSPB new report/campaign). Bycatch of sensitive species in particular (e.g., species that are rare, vulnerable or threatened), is a major hurdle for fisheries aiming to become sustainable, and represents a significant challenge for FPAs employing the ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management. Explicit statement on how the PFAs will collaboratively and strategically address bycatch of sensitive species must be included.

4.1. NIMTF suggest more robust language regarding the duty of PFAs to deliver precautionary and sustainable fisheries. For example, section 4.1.8 should read *‘The fisheries policy authorities will also take a precautionary approach to fisheries management⁸ in accordance with the precautionary objective, and will aim to fish within sustainable limits based on the best available scientific advice...Fisheries policy authorities will aim to mitigate against negative outcomes for the environment, whilst having regard to the needs of fishing communities as required under the sustainability objective and the national benefit objective’*

4.1.10 NIMTF welcome the JFS commitment to *‘ensure our financial support does not undermine but delivers or contributes to the fisheries objectives’*.

4.1.12 The JFS rightly acknowledges the need to take robust action to tackle climate change, as well as the important role marine systems have to play in that process. While recognition that *‘fisheries policy authorities aim to minimise the adverse effects of fish and aquaculture activities on climate change’*, section 4.1.12 must be more explicit about the duty on PFAs regarding the fishing industry’s contribution to the UK and society’s decarbonisation targets. Therefore, 4.1.12 should read *‘The fisheries policy authorities will ~~explore~~ ensure, in partnership with the fishing industry, the best pathways are taken to contribute to net zero carbon targets within the timeframes specified by each fisheries policy authority, including through investigating and supporting reduction in fishing vessel and supply chain emissions’*

4.2 Achieving the Fisheries Objectives through our Policies

The term *‘British fishing fleet’* in section 4.2.1.1 is ambiguous as to how or whether it relates to the Northern Ireland fishing fleet. When referring either to parts of, or all of the UK, the JFS needs to be consistent and clear throughout.

NIMTF accept that negotiations to determine fishing opportunities may not always finish on time or as expected, but fishing opportunities determined on a provisional basis as stated in 4.2.1.4, should never jeopardise the achievement principles of the Fisheries Act (2020) and proceed using extreme caution under the precautionary objective.

4.2.1.9 NIMTF accept that fisheries management decision-making needs to be informed by economic and social as well as environmental factors. However, statements such as *‘We recognise that in order*



to balance our environmental, economic and social commitments, the trajectories (towards achieving these biomass levels) may need to speed up or slow down' (4.2.1.9) are unhelpful and belie much of the positive ambitious and intentions outlined in the JFS. As pointed out previously, without healthy and sustaining fish stocks, the economic and social benefits of fishing disappear. Therefore, measures to bring about more biomass and sustainable fisheries should not be 'slowed down', but rather prioritised, so that the full suite of benefits and advantages which stem from such well managed and sustainable fisheries can flow into coastal communities and society.

NIMTF are concerned about the lack of information or mention in the JFS regarding bycatch of sensitive species. While 4.2.7.4 briefly notes how FPAs 'are committed to working with the fishing industry to minimise, and where possible eliminate, the unwanted bycatch and entanglement of sensitive species', what the UK Bycatch Mitigation Initiative is or has done to reduce bycatch of cetaceans, seals, seabirds or elasmobranchs to date, or what its plan is to do so in the future is not clear. Much more detail on the collaborative and strategic approach PFAs and devolved nations are duty bound by the JFS to do on this issue is needed. Furthermore, a broader definition of 'sensitive species' is needed to include species which are not necessarily rare or threatened, and may even be common, but are vulnerable to bycatch in UK fisheries.

NIMTF welcome the commitment that 'fisheries policy authorities will ensure that marine plans include policies that consider fisheries, aquaculture and supporting habitats for fish stocks (nursery or spawning grounds)' (4.2.9). However, Northern Ireland currently does not have a marine plan in place. Without an effective and spatially prescriptive marine plan that considers fishing activity and prioritises nature positive and sustainable development at sea, then the goals of the Fisheries Act (2020) are untenable. It also needs to consider the consequences of planning decisions, especially those around fishing displacement and cumulative impacts. This will become more acutely important given the need for rapid growth of offshore marine renewables (as per the NI Energy Strategy Action Plan and new commitments under NI's incoming Climate Change Act).

NIMTF welcome the acknowledgment that PFAs have a responsibility in helping Marine Protected Areas achieve their conservation objectives (4.2.10.1) but it should be made clear that the Marine Strategy UK's GES is not the only, nor the primary, policy and legislative driver for establishing and managing a network of ecologically coherent MPAs in the UK. Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Area (SPAs) are designated under the Habitats and Wild Birds Directives, and Marine Conservation Zones fulfil the obligations of The Marine Act to contribute to an ecologically coherent UK network of MPAs as well as wider biodiversity commitments at North-East Atlantic and global level.

Specific mention of the aquaculture industry in section 4.2.12 is focussed on expanding the industry, and not on ensuring current industry practices and policies are sustainable, ecosystem based and climate friendly. Strategic guidance is needed here so that FPAs censure current and further aquaculture development, is sustainable and in keeping with the objectives set out in the Fisheries Act (2020). There are many environmental and welfare issues surrounding current UK fin-fish



aquaculture practices⁴. The JFS should include clear direction to the FPAs on how they will collaboratively and strategically tackle these issues in the future.

8. What are your views on the proposals for developing Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs)?

The proposals for developing FMPs seems appropriate, and they rightly *'place binding obligations onto the national fisheries authorities to seek to deliver the goals of each FMP' (5.2.2) and subject to public consultation (5.1.5)*. However, to clarify, the JFS should explicitly state that the FMPs place a 'legally' binding obligation on FPAs.

Furthermore, while the detail of *how* the Fisheries Objectives will be met will be laid out in the FMPs, the JFS must include commitments for the design and function of every FMP to have a transparent and criteria-based assessment of how it contributes to each of the Fisheries Objectives. Additionally, the JFS must include a collective evaluation of progress by the four nations towards delivering the Fisheries Objectives through the FMPs. The JFS must include tools for managing non-quota stocks and other fisheries issues not captured by FMPs, for example, decarbonisation of fishing fleets, and impacts of displacement. Without these critical changes, there is a risk that much of the positive intent in the JFS will 'fall through the cracks' at the delivery and implementation stage.

NIMTF strongly suggest the inclusion of Time bound commitments to deliver environmentally sustainable fisheries and recover stocks. Fisheries management has an essential role in recovering our seas, particularly in the face of the twin climate and biodiversity crises. Including time bound commitments will reflect and help deliver the urgency required to respond.

It is clear that the success, or not, of the Fisheries Act (2020) and the JFS, depends on the content, implementation and effectiveness of the FMPs, therefore, the UK Government, as well as FPAs must commit to the adequate resourcing of FMP delivery, or there is a very real risk that the positive high-level policy outlines in the Fisheries Act (2020) and here in the JFS, do not materialise into positive action for our fish stocks, marine environment, economy or society.

9. Are there any other areas of fisheries policy you think should be included in the draft JFS?

NA

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⁴ [Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee: report on the environmental impacts of salmon farming. The Scottish Parliament \(2018\)](#)