

# Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

## Oral evidence: Fisheries Negotiations, HC 491

Tuesday 23 January 2024

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Members present: Sir Robert Goodwill (Chair); Steven Bonnar; Ian Byrne; Rosie Duffield; Barry Gardiner; Dr Neil Hudson; Mrs Sheryll Murray; Selaine Saxby; Cat Smith; Julian Sturdy; Derek Thomas.

Questions 1 - 68

### Witnesses

**I:** Rt Hon Mark Spencer MP, Minister of State for Food, Farming and Fisheries; Mike Dowell, Deputy Director for EU Fisheries Negotiations and Policy, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; and Colin Faulkner, Deputy Director for External Fisheries Negotiations, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Written evidence from witnesses:

–[Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs](#)



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Mark Spencer MP, Mike Dowell and Colin Faulkner.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to the EFRA Select Committee where today we are having a briefing and questions about the outcome of the fisheries negotiations and the implications for UK fishermen. We are very pleased we have the Minister with us.

We also have a new member, Selaine Saxby, who is bolstering the south-west contingent on this Committee, which is already very strong. Welcome, Selaine, and we are looking forward to your input.

We don't normally do this but you are going to give us a quick 10-minute presentation. I have made it very clear that we won't interrupt your presentation and we will keep our questions to the end. That will probably set the scene and give us a bit of a feel for how successful we have been in the recent negotiations as an independent coastal state with some autonomy and more to come. Minister, over to you and introduce your officials, please.

**Mark Spencer:** Yes, of course. I was going to say right at the beginning that while I would like to bask in the glory of those successes, it is the two gentlemen either side of me who do the hard work, Colin and Mike, who negotiate on behalf of the UK. I think they have been very successful in those negotiations. While there is always more we can achieve and more we can do, the UK fishing sector owes these two gentlemen quite a lot of gratitude for what they have been able to secure in the negotiations.

I am conscious that there is a lot of expertise within the Committee already so some of this is telling you what you already know, but I don't apologise for that really in that there may be people who are watching this at home who don't have the depth of knowledge that some people around the Committee table have.

**Chair:** As a former Fisheries Minister, I have found that the more I have got to know about it the more I realise I didn't know.

**Mark Spencer:** Yes, absolutely. If we can go to the first slide, that would be helpful. As an independent coastal state now outside of the EU, we negotiate on several levels. We negotiate bilaterally with the EU directly but we also negotiate in a trilateral with the EU and Norway and we also negotiate with our coastal neighbours, which include Faroes, Greenland and the Danes as well as the Norwegians and the EU. Those three buckets make up our negotiation challenge. The negotiations obviously interact with each other and they are complicated but also lead to opportunities to work with our coastal neighbours on a number of different levels.

It is worth pointing out some of the key outcomes. Since leaving the EU we now have a fishing sector that is worth £970 million based on historic



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

landing prices. That is 750,000 tonnes of fish, up 80,000 tonnes more than it was in 2023, and we have another 120,000 tonnes more in quota than we would have had in 2024 as an EU member state. I think that demonstrates that there has been some Brexit benefit. Of course there is more we can achieve and we will continue to work with the sector and with our neighbours to try to achieve that as we move forward.

As I say, we concluded three main agreements this time. If we can move on to the next slide.

**Chair:** We will put these slides up on the Committee website as well, so if any members of the public are trying to scribble down or take screenshots they will be able to catch up on that.

**Mark Spencer:** Perfect. Turning to our relationship with the EU, it is a very important relationship, which we managed to conclude on 6 December. That is 130,000 tonnes of potential fishing opportunities across approximately 70 different types of fish stock. That is a huge £340 million worth of fish available to the UK. It also means that we have continued access to non-quota stocks in EU waters, which have been worth about £30 million in previous years.

Of course, the initial assessments of the total allowable catches align with ICES advice and our impression is that they are slightly better than they were last year, although we are waiting for CEFAS to do its formal announcement, which should be announced very soon. It traditionally does that in January so we should get that soon. We have managed on a number of those species to set TACs that are directly aligned with scientific advice, although in some cases better than the advice that was given. I want to try to mitigate the peaks and troughs if we can where some years you get huge increases in quota that can often lead to huge decreases in quota at some point in the future. We want to try to ride out those peaks and troughs where we can to give stability to the fishing sector.

If we move on to the next slide, which is the trilateral agreement between the three nations, Norway is a very important neighbour of ours. We share a number of fish stocks and working with them quite closely we have been able to have some wins and some advantage here for the UK. You will see from some of those TACs that we have taken compared to 2023 there have been rises in the stock that is available to the UK fishing sector. I think that whiting is worth flagging. You will see an increase there of 124%. ICES advice was much higher than that and we have decided to set that total allowable catch a little bit lower as an example of trying to ride out the peaks and troughs and bring a bit more stability to the sector.

Going on to the next slide, the bilateral between Norway and the Faroes, again the Faroese are close neighbours. We continue to negotiate with them. We don't have an agreement now but there is an area between the Faroe Islands and the UK that has been a shared fishing zone for some



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

time. The Faroese have agreed not to allow Russian vessels into that special area for the first time in 2024. I think that is a huge step forward and it is worth recognising that the Faroese have taken that decision. Obviously we encouraged them to do that but it is a decision they have made and I think that is the right decision. We continue to negotiate with them to try to work out how we can work even more closely going forward.

The Norwegians are very close neighbours and we work very well with them, albeit they are very skilled negotiators but we have got great outcomes there, £5 million-worth of fishing opportunities in the North Sea, which I think is worth flagging.

Moving on to the next slide, regional fisheries management organisations, again the UK has played a key role here in agreeing some of the measures that we have seen introduced. We have led the way here, particularly looking at the impact of climate change and stocks and ecosystems and we have seen some great gains in our environmental credentials. I think we should be very proud of what we have done there and of course introducing new opportunities with Atlantic tuna, for example. I think that is all we can say on that although I am happy to take questions.

The final bucket is our full range of coastal neighbours, one of which you will see is the Russian Federation, of course, and it can be quite tricky in negotiating or not talking to our Russian neighbours. We have obligations to try, on an international basis, to make sure that our coastal partners are acting in a way that is environmental and sustainable for the future. Of course, we will continue to bring whatever influence we can have there.

I have one more slide, if we can go to the final slide talking about funding. We have invested a huge amount of taxpayers' money into the seafood sector and not only the £32 million across the sector that we committed to but the £100 million in the UK Seafood Fund, which was part of the Brexit deal. I know that many of you up and down coastal communities will have seen that investment, particularly in infrastructure, better refrigeration, improvements to ports, dry docks and processing. There have been some really good schemes, which I hope communities will see as added value to try to make UK fisheries more sustainable but also have the investment to keep them going into the future.

Chair, I will be delighted to take some questions if those slides have stimulated people to question.

**Q2** **Chair:** Thank you very much. I had never heard of porbeagle as a species. Do we get that? What is a porbeagle? Is it a very deep water fish?

**Colin Faulkner:** I think the specific reference on the slides was to porbeagle within the tuna fisheries in one of the RFMOs. That was in the



context of the management of Atlantic tuna, not within our own waters, but we agreed some measures with the other members of ICCAT, the Atlantic RFMO, to protect porbeagle in the Atlantic tuna fisheries, which was quite a good step forward. It is an important species to protect. There are some porbeagle in other waters but it is a prohibited species anyway.

**Q3 Chair:** It was just a new one on me. I had never heard of it. I shall be googling it when I get back to the office. We have more fish across a range of species, including particularly whiting and haddock. Is that because there is more fish around or have our other negotiating partners had to lose out and not get such a good deal?

**Mark Spencer:** Obviously we follow ICES's advice. The science in some of those species is positive and they say that they can increase the total allowable catch in those species. We follow that scientific advice wherever we can and take that into full account when making those decisions. We have been blessed with some of those species where the total allowable catch recommendation has increased. Of course there are other species of fish where it is going in the opposite direction, which brings its own challenges.

**Q4 Chair:** Is that because we have made some tough decisions in the past?

**Mark Spencer:** Yes, I would like to say that. I think some of that is true and where we have made those decisions, some of it is environmental with the impact that climate change and warmer waters is having on different species and how they respond to that. Some of it is about the amount that we have been catching, but I think it is clear that these are very complex ecosystems that integrate with each other. There is not a single silver bullet that says, "If you do this, this species will go up in number". It is much more complicated than that and affected by lots of different factors.

It is worth recognising, of course, that while the UK may do the right thing, other nations may take a different view and take a larger TAC, which again will have its impact. We need to think about how we negotiate and talk to our neighbours to make sure that internationally we are doing the right thing. We have seen examples of where the UK has demonstrated that international leadership to encourage others in the right direction.

**Q5 Chair:** There have been some losers, particularly the cutting in pollack. Is it fair to say that by and large there are more winners than losers but there are some sectors that have had a rougher deal?

**Mark Spencer:** Yes, I think that is true. Of course, that is not within our control. In northern waters we have seen increases in total allowable catches. I think there is an argument to say that particularly for those in the south-west who are trying to catch pollack there are some challenging sources of data, which mean that we are not in a position to allow that stock to be caught. Hopefully, we can invest, that is an



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

investment in the future so that pollack will return at some point and that industry can restart but these are very difficult decisions. I am very much aware of the impact that has on not only individual fishermen but fishing communities.

**Chair:** Sheryll, I think you want to come in on the back of that and then you have your own questions to follow.

**Q6 Mrs Murray:** This is just a couple of observations and questions from the presentation. Minister, I notice you said we have X amount of tonnes of fish. It might be helpful in the future if you could break those down to ICES areas. You mentioned the North Sea a lot, which is area 4, but it would be really good for us to know area 6 and area 7 individual figures. I know not everybody will understand what I am saying but there is a lot of fishermen who would like to see that detail.

The other thing is I noticed you mentioned the fisheries fund, the £2 million for more environmentally friendly engines. Do you talk to the Department for Transport about the requirements, the M notice that was put out for any new engine to be tier 3? Is it your intention to focus this on engines that do need to comply with the tier 3 M notice?

**Mark Spencer:** On the first bit, I am conscious that the fishing sector is very complex and you can soon dive into a lot of detail that is not understood by members of the public who might be watching these proceedings. I am trying to strike the balance between making sure those who are not engaged in the fishing sector can follow and understand what we are trying to achieve but also supply the right information so that you guys can scrutinise it. We can supply that data in slow time to the Committee, which I am sure you can share with those who have an interest.

On engines, we want to try to work with colleagues across Government to get to the right point and that involves lots of conversations with different Government Departments. Of course we work with the Department for Transport to try to improve the sustainability and the greenness of those engines. That is why we have put cash up front to try to help people go through the transition to improve the greenness of their fishing boats while they are out there fishing.

It is worth putting on record that I still see the fishing sector as one of the greenest forms of food available to us. When we get it right, it is sustainable in every sense. It is renewable in that the fish renew themselves as long as we allow them the conditions to do that.

**Q7 Mrs Murray:** I have a final question on the presentation. You said about the scientific assessments of the stocks. How many are subject to an analytical TAC and how many are set through the precautionary principle?

**Mark Spencer:** That is probably a detailed question for either Mike or Colin. I don't have that stat to hand. We might have to write to you with that detail.



Q8 **Mrs Murray:** The analytical one, of course, is where you have the real information to feed into the science and the precautionary principle is what the scientists think may happen because they don't have the evidence to back it up.

**Mark Spencer:** We take all of that into account of course and there is to a degree an assessment within the Department as well to balance that out between what is direct scientific advice and what may be perceived. We have to balance all of that with sustainability going into the future but also the social impact that has and the impact on fishing communities and trying to ride out those peaks and troughs. Mike, I don't know if you or Colin can comment.

**Mike Dowell:** I am happy to. Thanks very much and good afternoon, everyone. On the exact breakdown, we can get certainly get you those numbers.

Q9 **Mrs Murray:** You could write to us with the individual stocks as well.

**Mike Dowell:** Yes, that is not a problem. We can do that. I don't know the splits off the top of my head but to check my understanding that is where the International Council for Exploration of the Sea provides advice, some of it very data rich, category 1 stocks, where there is full maximum sustainable yield advice provided. Then there are other stocks where it is data limited and there is that precautionary element. We are very happy to give you the breakdown of both the numbers and the stocks.

**Mrs Murray:** Thank you very much.

**Chair:** Do you want to go on to some more points you have there or have you covered it?

Q10 **Mrs Murray:** I can, yes. I will continue with why were only 35% of the TACs under the UK-EU agreement for 2024 aligned to the scientific advice?

**Mark Spencer:** We take that decision in the round. That is actually an improvement, better than it was last year. We continue to move in the direction of trying wherever we can to follow that scientific advice. As I say, we have to balance that between the social impact, the impact on the fishing communities and the long-term sustainability of the fish stock itself. In regular meetings with fishermen, I very rarely meet a fisherman—or I don't think I ever have—who doesn't believe in the sustainability of what they are doing. They want not only for them to be able to continue fishing the seas but for their children and their grandchildren to carry on doing that.

Q11 **Chair:** Does that include the nomadic scallopers? Some of them are a little less sustainable.

**Mark Spencer:** I have not met a nomadic scalloper yet, Chairman, so maybe that will bring my boast to dust, but I think the majority of



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

fishermen up and down the UK coastal communities want it to be sustainable in the short and long term.

- Q12 **Mrs Murray:** Can I turn to pollack for a minute? I know that it has been suggested that there are alternative species that some pollack fishermen could target instead, but do you have any knowledge of the economic impact? Typically, pollack sells on the market for £7 a kilo. If you said target skates and rays instead, that is reaching 26 pence a kilo. A small cove fisherman could not maintain the economic viability of his vessel on that difference in the price. What plans do you have to compensate them for any losses?

I know these figures because, as I am sure you know, for 25, 26 years fishing provided my family with an income, so I do understand and unfortunately my late husband paid the ultimate price for going and trying to provide fish on our plates. I think that that needs to be looked at instead of just saying, "You can go and get this fish instead of catching this fish because we have stopped you". £7 a kilo versus 26 pence a kilo, Minister, is not going to keep that boat in business.

Does the Department have any plans whatsoever to compensate them for the couple of months that they target? We are only talking about January and February.

**Mark Spencer:** As you identify, it is very individual to different fishermen. There will be those who will specifically target or have traditionally targeted pollack in the first three months of the year. It will be very difficult for those fishermen because it is not possible to shift your fishing practice to another species very rapidly. I wholly accept that.

I think the principle of compensating fishermen for the loss of fish stocks is, if I am being completely straight with you, the thin end of a very big wedge. If we were to say we are going to compensate those who have targeted pollack for the first three months of the year because the scientific advice is that it should be a zero TAC, if I were a crabber in the north-east I would then say, "Wait a minute, when I saw the collapse of crab stocks due to dieback, where was my compensation package?"

- Q13 **Mrs Murray:** There is a difference because dieback is a naturally occurring thing whereas these fishermen were told by your Department, Minister, that they could not go out and catch pollack about two weeks before they were going to start to go out. There is a difference.

**Mark Spencer:** I am not sure that is true, actually. I think it was six months when we were talking about—

- Q14 **Mrs Murray:** The scientific assessment was carried out using trawlers when they do not operate and cannot operate on the reefs where the pollack tend to congregate. Instead of taking like for like, the scientific assessment—and I understand the committee questioned this, not our Committee but the scientific committee questioned the fact that it was trawler figures that were used when the netters were operating on reefs





and that was not taken account of.

**Mark Spencer:** Dealing with the science first, if you look at the data, not only on the assessment of pollack within the sea but also the landing numbers of pollack, you will see that since the 1960s pollack figures have come down in a pretty straight line.

**Mrs Murray:** Minister, if you keep cutting the quota then you are obviously not going to be able to land as much anyway.

**Mark Spencer:** Those figures follow the same trajectory. The assessment of fish in the sea and the assessment of what is landed literally have plotted the same pretty straight downward line. That is what the science boys do, so that tells me there is a huge issue with pollack stocks not only in the sea but what we have been able to land.

Q15 **Mrs Murray:** A final question on pollack, Chairman, if I may, before I turn to the couple of questions on other stocks. I heard around six years ago from a local fisherman that representatives went to the MMO, raised concerns about the pollack stocks diminishing slightly and suggesting that a closed season and a minimum landing size was introduced. At that time they were told there was not a problem with the pollack stocks. That is six years ago, Minister. The industry claims that it came to your Department or the MMO and made this suggestion. I am not expecting you to answer this question today because I know full well that you will have to look into it, but could you please go and investigate and write to this Committee with an explanation, if this did happen, as to why they were told six years ago that there was not a problem with the pollack stocks and now small boat fishermen around our coast have been told, "You cannot go and earn a living and, by the way, you might be able to go out with different gear, because you would have to buy different gear, catch skates and rays for 26 pence a kilo rather than realising the £7 a kilo you were expecting to realise just before Christmas".

**Mark Spencer:** It is worth pointing out that six years ago, of course, we were a member of the EU, so it would not have been for the UK to have set those quotas independently. At least we are now in a place where we can set those quotas independently. It is also worth pointing out, of course, that in those bilateral discussions and negotiations we spoke about earlier, we are obliged to work with our colleagues in the EU to try to find the right outcome. I think in setting a bycatch quota of 200 tonnes we have been able to mitigate some of the impact so we are not causing a choke and stopping fishermen going out trying to catch other species of fish. That would be the danger if we were not able to introduce that bycatch quota.

Q16 **Mrs Murray:** I believe that bycatch is set at 100 kg a month, so actually you are stopping them from going to sea.

**Mark Spencer:** That is one of the dangers, of course, but Mike—

**Mike Dowell:** The overall UK quota is around 200 tonnes—



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Mrs Murray:** The individual vessels are restricted to 100 kg month.

**Mike Dowell:** —but you are right, to manage it you have to have a kilo limit per month for the bycatch.

Q17 **Mrs Murray:** Thank you. I think that is something I was led to believe was not in place a couple of weeks ago when we met and I asked if there was any restriction, but I understand from my fishermen that it is indeed 100 kg a month.

**Mark Spencer:** We must not allow people to continue to target pollack and claim it is bycatch, because that would be a breach of our international obligations and we would soon find ourselves in court.

Q18 **Mrs Murray:** I fully understand that but you would much rather see fishing boats go out of business for the sake of paying them a couple of months compensation to cover their costs.

**Mark Spencer:** No. We do have a plan through the FAS scheme to try to help and support those people.

**Mrs Murray:** It is not in place yet. It does not open until February.

**Mark Spencer:** It is about to open in February. I want to try to encourage and support those fishermen who have traditionally caught pollack.

Q19 **Mrs Murray:** Minister, we are talking about January and February. That is too late. They will be gone.

**Mark Spencer:** I think it is also worth recognising that it is unlikely that that pollack fishery will return next season, so we will find ourselves in the same place next year and, if we don't get this right, the year after. How are we going to help those fishermen in the long term move their business to another species or to be able to survive in the long term? That is why I want to try to help them.

Q20 **Mrs Murray:** You could compensate now because not only will they potentially lose their boats, but they will lose their homes as well. I really do believe that two weeks' notice to tell somebody they cannot go out and earn a living is totally unacceptable.

**Mark Spencer:** Let's be clear, there was not two weeks' notice here. The stats on pollack have been coming for a long time. The first indications that we would end up with a zero pollack catch were over six months ago. It was fairly obvious that that was the direction of travel.

**Mrs Murray:** I think we probably need to move on, Chairman.

Q21 **Chair:** Obviously we are talking about a fisher that operates January, February and into March. Typically for an under-12 boat that is targeting pollack, what proportion of their annual income will come from that seasonal pollack fishery, because presumably these guys will go and



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

target other species for the other nine months of the years?

**Mark Spencer:** We are talking about individual fishermen who operate in an individual way. Some people may well have bass quota, for example, that they can go and catch. Not everybody has that available to them. Some people are able to go and target mackerel. Others can move into other species and with new gear go and target other species that are available, but it is not easy. I don't sit here and pretend that it is easy; it is very challenging.

Q22 **Mrs Murray:** Minister, it is very naive not to realise that fisheries are seasonal. Pollack is the mainstay for January and February and then they may move on to other species but it is January and February and the loss of the pollack quota that I am referring to. A scheme that opens in February is too late for them. The only thing that you can do to keep those vessels in business is to look at the possibility of compensating them. We are not talking about compensating for complete loss of earnings because at the end of the day they won't have their fuel overheads and things like that, but some limited compensation scheme for these little tiny boats that can't focus on anything other than what they have done in the past and they can't migrate, to give them a small compensation scheme for January and February based on perhaps the last three years catch. You will have the information because it is reported through the catch app and you could look at this.

**Mark Spencer:** I don't want to give the Committee the impression that that is likely because I think that is very unlikely, to be completely straight, and I don't want people to be relying upon the possibility of a compensation scheme. I think the likelihood of us being able to deliver that, to get the Treasury to agree to that, to stack that system up within the timescale that you are talking about would take too long. If I decided, sat here unilaterally, to say we will introduce a compensation scheme, as members of the Committee will know to get that through the Treasury, to set that scheme up would probably take us four, five months, which you are telling me would be too late anyway.

The way to expedite that support is through the existing FAS scheme to try to help to find a way to support those fishermen to divest in another direction. I know that is not ideal. I wholly accept that that is not ideal for those individual fishermen. It is enormously challenging to them, but I honestly think the way to expedite that to get the cash to them, to try to help them look in another direction for future years is to go through that scheme and try to divest into another species.

**Chair:** I think we need to make some progress.

Q23 **Mrs Murray:** We do. On the TACs, why is there no agreement among the north-east Atlantic nations on how to share out the agreed TACs for blue whiting, mackerel and herring, which leads each year to overfishing of these stocks?



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Mark Spencer:** Again, they are subject to negotiation and we, of course, play our part in those negotiations and set the right TACs. For blue whiting we have taken a TAC that is below scientific advice, as I said earlier. It is very challenging and we are negotiating with our neighbours but we want to set that TAC as high as we can in a sustainable way. That is what we are trying to achieve. Colin, do you want to add anything?

**Colin Faulkner:** Yes, thanks, Minister. There is a timetable of negotiations on those three stocks that you highlight. There are three rounds of negotiations on those stocks between now and the end of March. Round 1 is literally as we speak; it is going on currently and we hope to agree comprehensive quota shares across those stocks by the end of March. That is certainly the UK's ambition and that is an ambition that I think is shared by the other coastal states who are party to those stocks. There is a timetable in place and we look forward to good progress.

Q24 **Mrs Murray:** Thank you. Where data are considered limited for a stock such as monkfish, how can knowledge be improved to allow a full stock assessment and accurate scientific advice? I will add pollack to monkfish as well, because we know that there is not enough information out there about pollack.

**Mark Spencer:** I share that view. I think in these circumstances data is our friend and clearly science is our friend. We should not just be relying upon ICES and CEFAS for that data. We should be using the fishing industry to gather that data at the same time. There is an interesting concept around remote electronic monitoring of fishing vessels. We can get GPS data of what they are catching and where they are catching it. We continue to talk to the fishing sector about remote electronic monitoring and how that may help, but I think that that could be of huge benefit long term to fishers up and down the country because that data will be undisputable really. We can identify where fish are and how much is being caught using GPS technology and cameras on boats. That could make a huge part of the data going forward and would help ICES, CEFAS and the Government make informed decisions.

Q25 **Mrs Murray:** My late husband used to take science sight on his vessel quite frequently from CEFAS, so I think perhaps persuading more fishermen to do that as well would be helpful.

Finally, following this year's negotiations, how optimistic are you about the sustainability of fish stocks in UK waters?

**Mark Spencer:** I think it depends which species you are talking about. Clearly there are species that are bouncing forward, and we have talked about some of those species earlier in the session, but there are others—pollack and monkfish—that are under huge pressure. We are seeing bass recover slightly but there is a long way to go on that. It depends, it varies species to species. We have seen for the first time a quota on spurdog, for example, because of the numbers that have increased on spurdog.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

There are always those that are going in the right direction and those that are going in the wrong direction. I think anglerfish, monkfish are one that you identify that I worry about. They are a very valuable stock to fishermen and we want to make sure that that stock is available for generations to come.

**Chair:** They are very slow growing.

**Mark Spencer:** Yes.

Q26 **Mrs Murray:** I know that we have seen an increase in tuna coming into our waters, particularly in the south-west. That is seen by some fishermen as being a problem because we don't have a quota, there is not a market. We have the tag and release scheme but tuna feed on other species that they target and they can catch. Is DEFRA or the MMO or the scientists looking at the predatory nature of some species that are moving into our waters?

**Mark Spencer:** Yes, of course. We are looking at whether we can introduce a quota for tuna going forward. There are two opportunities there. One is catching and landing tuna as a fish stock for us to consume but there is also a huge sporting industry of individuals who like to go out and catch those large tuna that are heading in our direction physically in the ocean. If we can help and support fishermen to divest into those different sectors going forward in the medium term, we should be helping and supporting them to do that.

**Mrs Murray:** Thank you, Minister. You have been very patient. Chairman, thank you to the Committee because I think you have all been very patient as well.

**Chair:** Thank you, Sheryll.

Q27 **Ian Byrne:** That was fascinating, Sheryll. Minister, the UK-EU agreement includes the aspiration for the UK and EU respectively to apply identical technical measures to support recovery of Celtic Sea cod. What are the prospects of reaching agreement and do you see this as a model to manage any other stock?

**Mark Spencer:** I think they are actually pretty good. I will hand over to the gentlemen who are having those conversations in a moment but I think they are pretty good. We worked collaboratively with the EU on this issue really closely. The joint data collection that we undertook last year identified areas of the highest cod catches. Mike, what would you add to that?

**Mike Dowell:** The Celtic Sea technical measures work has been going on for a few years now and we are working very well with the EU on this within the specialised committee on fisheries, which is one of the specialised committees under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement with the EU. We are now at a point where we have done a joint evaluation and it is about working with the EU on what measures we think will be



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

worthwhile and effective. We are trying to prevent the catch of Celtic Sea cod, which is another zero catch advice stock, so that you can carry on prosecuting the rest of the mixed fishery, which is doing a lot better. That work is going pretty well. The Celtic Sea has a number of zero catch stocks within it and we are hoping, having done all this work for Celtic Sea cod, it might prove that this work is useful to try to make improvements for the selectivity of the other zero catch stocks in the Celtic Sea.

**Ian Byrne:** A very positive answer. Thanks, Chair.

Q28 **Chair:** What sort of measures are we looking at? Is it mesh size or is it lights in trawlers and all that sort of stuff?

**Mike Dowell:** It is usually to do with net design.

Q29 **Rosie Duffield:** First of all, Minister, I need to echo everything that Sheryll said because in Whitstable we also have a fleet of very small boats. Some guys have been out for decades and they are now going out of business or having to look at a whole new career and it is happening every day. Having to swap from these expensive fish that they can sell to tiny wee things that won't sell is not sustainable and they can't afford it. It is all very well saying they need new landing gear and they need to adapt but they can't afford that either and the insurance that goes with it. Then there are all the bans on them just changing—they have worked so hard to try to adapt but it is incredibly difficult. I am grateful that some DEFRA officials came out to Whitstable in November and were really listening to them. I think that made a big difference. I will now move on to my proper question, sorry.

Talking about the distant water fleet, why was there a further reduction in the UK's cod quota around Svalbard, along with only 700 tonnes of Arctic cod, under the UK-Norway agreement?

**Mark Spencer:** The Norwegians set their quota within Norwegian water. We obviously negotiate with our friends in Norway. It is for them to set that TAC and if they reduce the overall TAC the UK has to follow in line with that reduction and play our part. The short answer is that the Norwegians lowered the totally allowable catch and the UK had to follow pro rata.

Q30 **Rosie Duffield:** Thank you. How do you respond to the argument that the distant water fleet has been failed by Brexit? I know you were saying earlier about the Brexit benefits.

**Mark Spencer:** It is very difficult. Technically it would be possible to swap other stocks for cod, for example. If the Committee has recommendations on which stock you would wish to reduce to gain cod, I would happily take those recommendations from the Committee. If you want to give up anglerfish for cod, I am more than happy to take those recommendations on mackerel or—you tell me. Who do you want to disadvantage to advantage? That is what happens in those negotiations.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Whenever you get a winner, you get a loser. Everybody likes winners and nobody wants to tell the losers.

**Chair:** It is an argument we get when people want more money spent on something and you say, "Where would you like us to cut?"

**Mark Spencer:** Yes. It is worth pointing out that under NAFO there is an area quite close to the Canadian shoreline where we have extra cod that is available to companies like UK Fisheries to go and exploit that. I am sure they would like further opportunities and I would like to give them further opportunities but it does mean disadvantaging somebody else to do that.

Q31 **Chair:** These are fish that will end up in our fish and chip shops by vessels like the Kirkella whereas a lot of the other species we have been talking about are exports. For food security, maybe that is a species we should think about and the distant water fleet should not be discounted.

**Mark Spencer:** As I say, I am happy to take your recommendations.

**Chair:** I think Sheryll wants a short point.

Q32 **Mrs Murray:** Just a very short point, Minister. Surely these are members of a producer organisation and they could negotiate their own international swaps. Does the Department still have to sanction those international swaps?

**Mark Spencer:** That is a good question, which I do not know the answer to.

**Mike Dowell:** It depends who you are making the swaps with. If it was a UK-EU swap, we would effectively rubber stamp it.

Q33 **Mrs Murray:** When I was chairman of the South Western PO, if we had engaged in a swap with a French PO, DEFRA used to have say, "Yes, you are able to go and do that".

**Mike Dowell:** MMO still facilitate it all and there is a devolution aspect here as well. I think within England MMO would take a look at those producer organisations for producer organisation swaps, but it is very unlikely that the MMO would intervene because it tends to be a business decision.

**Mrs Murray:** If it was individually they could perhaps swap, so they would make the choice, Chairman.

Q34 **Derek Thomas:** Thank you for coming along, Minister. What is your approach to managing the EU-UK fisheries following the golden date of 30 June 2026?

**Mark Spencer:** Clearly that date is in the diary, that date is coming. If you are asking me to sit here and tell you what I want to achieve, I am not going to declare my hand at the negotiating table sat here. Clearly



both the UK and the EU are aware of that date. Of course we want to try to achieve and continue to build the Brexit opportunities that we have, but I think it would be unhelpful and inadvisable to sit here and go through what we might want to achieve. The second you put that out in the public domain, you make it much more difficult to achieve that.

There are two dangers. One is that you set out what you want to achieve and the other is that the EU may take that as a threat or sabre rattling or aggressive in its approach. I don't want to send either of those messages. We want to achieve a negotiated outcome from that discussion. We are both aware that that discussion is coming very soon but that is best done behind closed doors because people can read into comments messages that you don't want to deliver. The only message I want to deliver to our friends in the EU is that they remain our friends. We, of course, want to achieve what we can for UK fishermen, opportunities for fishermen in a sustainable way going forward.

**Q35** **Derek Thomas:** Bearing in mind the word "sustainable", without having to show your hand what would be the consequences of introducing a ban on non-UK fishing vessels into the 12-mile limit?

**Mark Spencer:** I think that is an admirable aspiration but if I were to sit here and say that is what we are going to achieve, I don't have the power to achieve that on my own. I have to work with my friends in the EU to achieve that.

**Q36** **Derek Thomas:** Well, I don't think you do because we can do that, but what would the consequences be if we were to make that the position for the management of UK waters?

**Mark Spencer:** We have the right, of course, under that agreement to control our own waters. That is what we negotiated departing the EU but we have to balance that going forward with working with our coastal neighbours, as you have seen from the slides, whether that is Norway, the EU, Faroes, Denmark, Greenland. We have to continue to work with them and make sure that we, as an international community, are acting in a sustainable way. I am being very cautious because I don't want any perception that there is any aggression or threat in what I am saying, but clearly we want to achieve the best we can for the UK. Those negotiations are better done behind closed doors than they are via the media because I think you can send the wrong messages.

**Q37** **Derek Thomas:** I think that is fair but it is also good to understand what the consequences might be. For example, I understand an agreement that might be applied to export, for example, or even there might be a restriction on going into waters elsewhere. Do you think they are possible?

**Mark Spencer:** Clearly we control our waters and the EU will control its waters. There is a danger here that we can start speculating about all of this stuff and start a war or some antagonism that is unnecessary. I don't want to send a message to our own fishermen that we are unambitious,





because we are not—we are ambitious. We want to achieve the best for them, but at the same time we have a relationship with the EU that we need to maintain and that is much better in a positive frame than it is falling out. If we upset them greatly, they will take action in an opposite direction and you end up in a space that is negative not positive. I think there are opportunities for both but let's get those negotiations under way and do that privately where we can look each other in the eye and work out the best way forward and explore things that are best explored in private.

**Q38 Derek Thomas:** Even if we were to preserve the 12-mile limit for UK fishing vessels, there would still be annual negotiations around fish stocks elsewhere. Would you favour a multiannual approach to catch allocation after 2026?

**Mark Spencer:** Yes, I think so. We start from the premise that if the fish is in our water we are obliged to make that our fish. That seems to me like a fundamentally fair way to start those negotiations, but again these are complicated negotiations and you are probably better hearing from the two gents who have to sit around the table and do that.

**Q39 Derek Thomas:** Let me just add one more and then answer as you will. Should the future approach be based on zonal attachment?

**Mark Spencer:** That is the point I was making. I think zonal attachment is quite important because if the fish is in our water I see that as our fish. It seems like a fairly credible way to base those negotiations, particularly applicable to mackerel, for example, because when the mackerel are in our water they are at the highest level of oil. That is why everybody wants to come and catch that fish in our water—it is very valuable.

**Colin Faulkner:** If I may link back to an earlier question, zonal attachment is the primary basis on which we are taking forward the negotiations on quota shares in the coastal state forum on mackerel, blue whiting and herring, as we mentioned earlier. That is the departure point that we use. We believe that a coastal states quota share should be largely influenced and determined by the presence of fish in the waters. That is a policy position we have had for some time and a policy position that is shared by some of the coastal states and it is likely to be one that we will adopt for some time, I suspect.

**Q40 Derek Thomas:** Given that you are ambitious, Minister, and given that just because we might want to preserve some of our waters for UK fishermen, that does not necessarily need to be entirely negative and a very bad outcome for EU fishermen.

**Mark Spencer:** No.

**Derek Thomas:** When do you start having a sensible sit-down around the table and talking about what life might look like after 2026? Our fishermen are certainly sitting around tables in certain venues having that conversation.



**Mark Spencer:** Yes, of course they are. We are gathering our thoughts now as to what we might want to try to achieve. We have not specifically started those negotiations with the EU but of course in having bilaterals, trilaterals, these conversations obviously take place regularly, as we are today, speculating about what the future may hold. It is a very slow process to get to the right place. The good news is that when you look at what we have achieved through those negotiations to this point, it demonstrates that we can work with our coastal neighbours in a constructive way and I see no reason why that will not be the case when it comes to negotiating that 2026 going forward.

Q41 **Derek Thomas:** That is good because our fishermen certainly need to know that the Government are on their side.

**Mark Spencer:** It is very difficult to send that message directly without it coming across as a threat to those who we are negotiating with. I am trying to strike that balance.

**Derek Thomas:** I appreciate that.

Q42 **Chair:** Minister, you may recall when we were in advanced negotiations on the Northern Ireland protocol, which eventually resulted in the Windsor framework being agreed, the European Union was quite unreasonably linking the Horizon scientific research project as part of it, two completely disconnected things that were connected by it. In fact, I made the point to Vice-President Šefčovič. Do you share the concerns of many that that agreement in June 2026, where we have a lot of cards in our hand, may be then mixed up with negotiations on the energy agreement? Do you share my concerns that those are two separate things that should not be seen together?

**Mark Spencer:** I wholly agree. They are two separate matters that need to be negotiated. They are not connected in any way, shape or form. We would seek to find a fisheries agreement independently of any other issues that may be taking place with our friends in the EU, but they may take a different stance of course. That is how a negotiation works, but I would fiercely defend the autonomy of the fishing negotiations. They are independent of any other negotiations and I don't want anybody to be under the illusion that the fishing sector will be the price worth paying for something else to be achieved. We have suffered that in the past over decades and decades. My ambition is to achieve a good deal for UK fishermen in those negotiations.

**Chair:** Thank you very much indeed.

Q43 **Selaine Saxby:** Before I come on to my substantive question, in your presentation you rightly mentioned that there has been a large amount of taxpayers' money gone into fisheries in a number of schemes. Would it be possible to have a list of those schemes? I am aware that some of the smaller ports may not have accessed them and it would be good to see how that has been distributed before there are any further rounds. Thank



you.

Moving on to spatial squeeze, I need to declare an interest as I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the Celtic Sea, which has been championing floating offshore wind in that region. In my own constituency we have a project that the Minister is aware of where it is not the fishermen who are upset about it but the cable is causing some issues. I just put it on the record. How do you think fisheries can co-exist with offshore and floating offshore wind projects and with marine protected areas?

**Mark Spencer:** We have to recognise that there is that spatial squeeze. There is demand upon our seas and oceans to do more. That displaces traditional fishing areas and we have seen that in the past. That is why we have established a cross-Government marine spatial prioritisation programme to make sure that we look at that in a strategic way to try to mitigate the impact that that is having on some of those different sectors. We have worked closely with the fishing sector on a number of occasions to make sure that when offshore wind industries look at different sites they consider the impact that will have on fisheries. These are not easy challenges, if I am honest. There is the pressure of the spatial squeeze but I see one of my primary roles as being the champion for the fishing sector to try to make sure that they are accommodated and understood when those other decisions are being made.

Q44 **Selaine Saxby:** I know from dealing with the one wind project in my own constituency the number of Departments that are involved. Are you confident that those conversations are taking place with all the right Government Departments?

**Mark Spencer:** I am. Those conversations have to be had behind closed doors but I don't want the Committee to be under the impression that we don't enter with enthusiasm and vigour. We very much make sure our view is got across and understood by other Departments when they are considering what they may or may not grant. It is one of the frustrations of Government that other Departments can often make decisions that impact upon your Department. You just need to make sure that you are involved in that conversation and your view is got across.

Q45 **Selaine Saxby:** Based on progress so far, what practical impact on spatial squeeze do you expect the newly-established Greater North Sea Basin Initiative to have?

**Mark Spencer:** Clearly they do have an impact, don't they? Wherever you build wind turbines or you put in marine protected areas, of course they have an impact on what has happened traditionally in those parts of the sea. We need to make sure that in making those decisions we have taken fully into account the impact that has on fishermen and their sustainability because it often means that they need to steam through those areas further, which has an environment impact in that they are burning more fuel, or it displaces them away from that area.



It can also have a positive impact in establishing marine protected areas. In creating zones that are not fished, you can create nurseries for the breeding fish, which can assist some stocks. We have seen examples inshore where we have created some of those areas working with IFCA and local fishermen and we have been able to establish those nursery areas, which has had a positive impact on fishing in that part of the sea.

**Q46 Dr Hudson:** Thank you very much, Minister and colleagues, for being before us today, and thank you, Minister, for that very encouraging update on the negotiations and the opportunities for the UK fishing industry. You said up to 120,000 tonnes more quota in 2024 than it would have received as an EU member state, and it is being done sustainably and negotiating with our friends and allies to keep our seas healthy as well.

I want to move on to highly protected marine areas and on to a brief discussion about marine mammals as well. When might we expect to see management plans published for the three highly protected marine areas designated in July last year and how will these take account of concerns from the fishing industry?

**Mark Spencer:** The MMO consulted on these measures last autumn, I think, and that included engaging with the fishing sector while doing that. When will we make that decision? Do either of you gents know when?

**Colin Faulkner:** It will be in the course of this year, but I don't think that we have a specific target.

**Dr Hudson:** Could you write to us?

**Mark Spencer:** I don't think that there is something pencilled in on the calendar but I can write to you with more detail on that. It is something that we are actively thinking about.

**Q47 Dr Hudson:** Further to that, the Government's response to our marine mammals report stated that further sites would be considered for highly protected marine area designation in 2023. Can you update us on that or could you write to us if you do not have it at your fingertips?

**Mark Spencer:** It sits slightly outside of my remit as a Minister. HPMAs sit within the remit of Lord Benyon, but it is something that I talk to him about regularly and its impact on the fishing sector.

**Q48 Dr Hudson:** We have had Lord Benyon before us on these issues. Can you get him to give us an update?

**Mark Spencer:** Yes, I am more than happy to do that.

**Q49 Dr Hudson:** Thank you very much. We have also talked about bycatch and in our marine mammals report one of the main areas we highlighted to put a spotlight on was the incidental and accidental catching of marine mammals in fishing gear. That is something that you will agree everyone



is concerned about and we want to reduce that where we can. What is the UK Government's approach to mitigating that? I am sure that you are keeping a watching brief on what is happening in France now where it has just announced a month-long ban on a lot of the commercial fishing vessels going on in the Bay of Biscay, to protect the dolphins. The estimates from French scientists is that potentially upwards of 9,000 dolphins per year die in that bay, caught accidentally in fishing gear. That is why the French have had to act. I want your thoughts on the UK's approach to mitigating and minimising the bycatch of marine mammals in our fishing industry.

**Mark Spencer:** I share those concerns and most consumers of fish would share those concerns as well. We have seen that in how consumers purchase fish, particularly tuna, where consumers will make decisions on which fish to buy based on how that sector treats marine mammals. That is a healthy way forward. We share the concerns that you raised. We regularly raise them in bilateral discussions with international colleagues. Some coastal states are better than others at delivering on that. The UK has a reasonably good record in that field and we will continue to try to lead the way on that.

Q50 **Dr Hudson:** On the UK fleet, you said in an earlier answer, Minister, that data can be our friend. On that and the monitoring of our vessels, there is a lot of call for cameras to go on many of these vessels to see what sort of incidental and accidental bycatch of marine mammals is taken. Can you update us on the Government's thinking about moving to collecting data so that we can mitigate and reduce marine mammal catch?

**Mark Spencer:** As a sector and as the Government we need to have a grown-up conversation about this, because there will be things that are caught accidentally on those boats. They are clearly not targeted and not something that fishermen want to catch within their nets. If we are going to have cameras on boats and monitor what is being caught, we need to have that grown-up conversation about the impact that that has but without putting those fishermen in a place where they are not being honest. We need them to be honest about what they are catching and be responsible in the way that we respond to that data, without becoming too excitable, but in the cold light of that data make decisions about how we can improve that.

Q51 **Dr Hudson:** I know that you and DEFRA have told me in parliamentary answers that DEFRA has funded various research programmes, including the ongoing Insight360 programme that will look at this. Can you give us any thoughts or any update or can you write to us about when the analysis of that programme might be completed, to say if we can start seeing cameras going on these vessels?

**Mike Dowell:** On bycatch mitigation, remote electronic monitoring and looking forward to reforming our policy on discards are all relevant to



bycatch and will benefit the bycatch of marine mammals. All of that has come together under my remit, which is why I thought that it was good to get in and say a few words. We are about to respond to our consultations on remote electronic monitoring and discards. They should be getting published pretty soon. A combination of those two policy areas in conjunction with the bycatch mitigation work is where we hope to see coherence about what we can do in England and using the learnings on various programmes that have been going on, including I360.

**Q52 Dr Hudson:** Can you give us any idea of a timeframe where we might see cameras on vessels?

**Mike Dowell:** As part of the consultation, we proposed for there to be some pilot fisheries. Once that consultation is out, in partnership with MMO and CEFAS we will be talking to some of those front-runner sectors about getting those cameras on boats and going from there. We want to do it very much in collaboration, recognising that electronic monitoring has those wider benefits for the data that they can provide for all sorts of reasons. It is not just about the enforcement angle of electronic monitoring. There is also the source sustainability elements and particularly for things like bycatch.

**Mark Spencer:** You might want to start with the pelagic sector, for example, because those boats are very technically advanced and often have cameras on already. Obviously the fishing sector needs to have confidence as to who has access to that data and to that imagery, because they will want reassurances in those senses. These are ongoing conversations and I very much want to work with the sector, not impose something on them without making sure that we have had those discussions and that we understand what they want to achieve.

**Q53 Dr Hudson:** We talked there about accidental catch of marine mammals in the fishing side of things. I want to move on to the more deliberate catching and hunting of marine mammals. The Committee has taken a close interest in this with our marine mammal report and in discussions with you about fisheries negotiations. The UK is very clear on its stance on whaling and the hunting of marine mammals, that it is unacceptable. There is no humane way to kill a whale, but there are some countries around the world that we negotiate with that still do this, countries like Norway, the Faroe Islands and Iceland, albeit Iceland has showed some encouraging noises in recent times that it might be trying to phase that out.

I have asked this question before to colleagues as well. What discussions have taken place when you are negotiating fishery arrangements with these countries, who are our friends and allies, to highlight the UK's thoughts and approach to this, that the hunting of these animals is unacceptable? What pressure can you put on in these negotiations to try to get these countries to change their ways?



**Mark Spencer:** First, we do raise these matters on occasions. You have to do that in the right way and at the right moment. That comes down to the judgment of very skilled people like the two gentlemen either side of me who choose those moments to make sure that we register that point. Clearly you cannot do that at the beginning of a conversation. You have to build trust and you have to build understanding. Then you can use that influence and leadership to guide, help and support countries to move in the right direction. It is one thing that we are good at. As UK plc, we are pretty good at that international leadership role, which we have demonstrated not only in fishing but in other areas as well, using that soft power to nudge people along in the right direction in as fast a pace as is possible.

Q54 **Dr Hudson:** That is very encouraging to hear, Minister, and you have said the same as your predecessor said, that it is raised. It is important for us to hear that and for the public to hear that. However, why is it not recorded in the negotiations that some of these discussions have taken place? In the discussions in 2023, the announcement contained no references to marine mammals in the UK-Norway discussions. This was also true of the record for negotiations for 2024. You are having these conversations, and I understand that this is soft power, behind closed doors, but why is there no record at all of it in the negotiations?

**Mark Spencer:** Those discussions are primarily about fishing quota. That is what is recorded within those minutes. Again, this goes back to having those grown-up conversations. If our ambition is to achieve a reduction in the death of marine mammals, which clearly is our ambition, is that served by embarrassing some of our colleagues who we are negotiating with over fishing stocks by putting that specific item in the minutes? I do not think that that achieves or assists our aim of reducing those details of marine mammals. We may want to make that political point, but does the making of that political point make it less or more likely that marine mammals will be harmed? I put it to you that using that soft power and having those conversations behind closed doors and nudging people in the right direction is going in the right direction. We can fall out about whether or not it is fast enough and the methodology of that but, as we have seen with Iceland, it is moving in the right direction. That says to me that that soft power, and consumer power as well, is having an impact and is moving us in the right way.

Q55 **Dr Hudson:** I take your point on minuting that. Colin and Mike, do you want to add anything to that? You are in the room for the bulk of these conversations. Can you assure us that the UK's soft power is being exerted?

**Colin Faulkner:** Absolutely, in the formal contexts of organisations like the International Whaling Commission but also informally. We know that the Committee's report on marine mammals looked at some of the Faroese practices that we are less than pleased with and we have raised that issue with Faroese on many occasions. Those conversations are not



recorded in the agreed record of the fisheries bilateral each year, simply because we focus quite strictly on the narrow issue of fishing opportunities and access arrangements. We tend not to record all elements of the totality of the relationship between the UK and Faroes or UK and Norway. We focus quite specifically on the narrow issues of fishing opportunities and access arrangements. However, we have robust conversations with our counterparts. They robustly set out their view of the world and we do likewise.

**Q56 Dr Hudson:** Thank you, that is helpful. We are talking about fisheries negotiations today. We have had Foreign Ministers and Trade Ministers before us. On trade negotiations, Japan still carries out whaling. Can you assure us from a Government perspective that those quiet discussions are going on in those discussions with that friend and ally to make the UK's view very, very clear?

**Mark Spencer:** Yes, but it is picking the moment. If I am to meet the Japanese farming Minister and the first thing that comes out of my mouth is, "By the way, I need to raise with you that you need to stop whaling", it then becomes a less fruitful conversation and you do not build the relationship that then allows you later to have that conversation in a trusted relationship. You do need to build those relationships before you can use soft power to encourage people in the right direction.

**Q57 Dr Hudson:** I very much take your point, thank you, that is very clear. One final quick question. You said in your brief, Minister, that following extensive diplomatic engagement from the UK, the Faroe Islands took the decision in December to exclude Russian vessels from fishing in the special area. I am aware that you will not be able to give us the sensitivities of some of the discussions, but can you reassure us that the UK Government are working very closely on that issue in continuing to put pressure on Russia so that we can show our support to our friends in Ukraine and that that is carrying on in the private discussions that you have?

**Mark Spencer:** We do not have any direct conversations with the Russians. Clearly there are formats where they are in the room and others chair meetings.

**Dr Hudson:** You are encouraging allies to have those discussions.

**Mark Spencer:** Of course. We do, and we are more overt in our expression of disquiet on what Russia has done in invading Ukraine. That is a different political point where clearly soft power does not work in those circumstances and you need to be overtly critical of what Russia has done to Ukraine. On a number of occasions at different conferences, I have, and will, open with, "We wholly condemn the action of the Russian state and its invasion of Ukraine". That is not one of those moments where you can be more subtle. You have to be absolutely direct and put it on the record that it has acted inappropriately.





**Dr Hudson:** If countries are putting indirect pressure on Russia through pressure on the fishing fleet from Russia, that is something that can be done as well. Thank you very much.

**Mark Spencer:** When I had lunch with the Faroe Islands Deputy Premier before Christmas and raised the issue of whaling, he was not surprised that we raised it. It is generally raised. When I was in Svalbard, although whale was on the menu, we were told that the taste for whale meat among Norwegians is very much an older-generation thing and they suspected that it would die out over time. Certainly you can have a grown-up conversation with people about this without necessarily cancelling the coffee order at the end of the meal.

Q58 **Mrs Murray:** Can I take you back to the unintended capture of marine mammals, Minister? I have seen within my APPG that companies are now looking at pingers as a deterrent rather than cameras, which fishermen might see as being the heavy, big brother thing. I tend to always try—unusually for me—to take the diplomatic way and ask how we prevent the unintended capture of these mammals in the beginning, rather than taking a big stick to a fisherman. Could you confirm that you are open, as a Department, to looking at things like pingers on nets to act as a deterrent? Also, I listened to Dr Hudson and I think that we have already had the pollack fishermen up in arms. What are they going to say if they think that they have big brother on every fishing boat looking at them? Can you confirm that any introduction of a VMS system and any cameras fitted aboard would be fitted in a way that perhaps the larger fleet has to take account of first? If it were an unintended cost to the small, under 12-metre vessels, there may be some financial assistance available to help them.

**Mark Spencer:** We have funded iVMS all the way through. I do not know the percentage of boats but it is very high now—high 80% if not into high 90%—of the boats that now have iVMS fitted. We funded that wholly to help and support fishermen to get that tech on board. Of course we will always work with the sector. When it comes to cameras on boats, I want to make sure that the fishing sector sees the benefit of that before we impose anything. Again it involves those grown-up conversations, as I said earlier.

Q59 **Mrs Murray:** It is not big brother as it could have been interpreted?

**Mark Spencer:** No. There is still the risk that some people will take that interpretation, but I should be clear that there is no plan at this moment to roll out remote electronic monitoring across the fishing fleet. It is an ongoing conversation. I want to work with the sector and make sure that we get the benefit of that technology, that they are not exploited by it and that we can use it to harvest more data.

There is mixed knowledge as to whether pingers work. I do not want to dismiss the impact that seal populations have on the fishing sector and the impact that they can have and the damage that they can cause to



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

nets and the stock within those nets. It can be huge. We are monitoring and recording seal populations. The good news is that seal populations are very positive in our biodiversity. However, you need to recognise that they can have an impact on fish stocks—a seal can eat a lot of fish. They also have an impact on the quality of fish within a net. Therefore, I want to work with the fishing sector to find methods and technologies to help and assist them deter seals away from nets once fish have been caught.

**Q60 Chair:** It is certainly an issue with the T and J net set off the Yorkshire coast where salmon have their livers ripped out by seals and it renders the fish completely unsaleable.

I would like to ask you about bivalve molluscs. You may recall that as members of the European Union we could export mussels to the rest of the Union, not only from the cleanest class A waters but from less clean class B waters for a depuration process in France. When we became a third country and we could not send these across, our French customers were disappointed and said that they were well experienced in the purification process. The French chair of the European Parliament fisher committee agreed with us, somewhat surprisingly. It seems to be on the back burner, particularly on the European side. Is there any chance of progress on that?

**Mark Spencer:** First, it is down to the EU to set its own rules, and it has done that. It does not take molluscs produced in class B waters from any third country. Now that we are outside the EU we are classified as a third country. We have not helped ourselves in the past with the way that we classified our waters and the quality of those waters. We have worked very hard with the Food Standards Agency to make sure that we have a system that is credible, legitimate and matches the classification that is used within the EU.

**Q61 Chair:** Are you saying that it did not matter very much whether it was class A or class B and therefore we did not try hard to get accurate testing done?

**Mark Spencer:** No, I am saying that within the EU it used a different methodology to measure class A or class B waters. I want to make sure that we are using the same system or a similar system to the EU so that we are not inadvertently disadvantaging the UK mollusc producers by being over stringent or using a slower method of analysing whether it is class A or class B water. We have been working with the FSA because you need to get the balance right between making sure that we are fair and reasonable in making that assessment, but the last thing we want to do is put public health at risk or cause a crisis of confidence in the sector. I think that we may have been overprotective or slow in the way that we analyse those waters. We try very hard with the FSA to find the right way forward there.

However, I still think that the EU is being a little bit overprotective and is not assisting us in trying to help those markets continue post-Brexit. I am



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

very keen to have conversations with our friends in the EU to try to unblock any blockage that there may be.

Q62 **Chair:** It is interesting in Lough Foyle where it is not quite clear which water is European and which water is Northern Irish. What impact is this having on the sector? Is this something that they are trading through?

**Mark Spencer:** It is having a detrimental impact on the sector in some circumstances. It also causes, on occasion, challenge at border points where enthusiastic EU officials may interpret paperwork in a different way. That has a huge economic impact on the individual who has sent the lorryload of bivalve molluscs on that occasion. It is something that we need to try to resolve, either via friendly negotiation or ultimately we will have to consider legal action to get a judgment that says whether we are or are not being treated fairly.

Q63 **Cat Smith:** I have some questions about crewing arrangements. While the majority of crew on vessels are from the UK, the majority of deckhands are not from the UK. On the attractiveness of the sector to a young UK national looking at career opportunities post-Brexit, why is a young person, say in Fleetwood High School, who lives in a fishing town and perhaps is the grandchild of a fisherman, not being attracted into the sector?

**Mark Spencer:** We should do all that we can to encourage the next generation into fishing. They need to see opportunity in that and that there is economic reward in doing that. It is quite a good opportunity to build a career. It depends which sector you are talking about. On some of the very smart, pelagic boats there is not a challenge in getting staff because they are very smart boats that are nice to be on and pleasant places to work. However, we have to acknowledge that some of the other sectors—I am not sure that I have the sea legs to go and work as hard as some of those people do. However, it is a great career if you have the inclination to go and do it, but it needs to be economically rewarding to achieve that.

Q64 **Cat Smith:** I admire your honesty on the lack of sea legs. When you look at the sustainability of crewing of UK vessels, do you have any concerns about the overreliance on non-UK workers to staff?

**Mark Spencer:** We need to find a way forward to try to help UK nationals enter into the fishing sector, whether that is in the processing sector or on vessels, but it needs to stack up economically. One of the challenges that we have now is that the value of the stock and the economic return is not large enough to justify paying some of those larger wages that are required. You then become reliant on overseas labour to fill those gaps. We are working very closely with our friends in the Home Office to try to make sure that the visa system works for the fishing sector but also to try to improve the economic plight of those vessels so that they can afford to pay UK nationals.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q65 **Cat Smith:** Can I push you on the conversations that you are having with the Home Office? How do you feel that the visa system is working for the industry?

**Mark Spencer:** That is probably a question best addressed to the Home Office. I am not a Home Office Minister and the visa system—

**Cat Smith:** No, but as Fisheries Minister you have contact.

**Mark Spencer:** We do have very enthusiastic conversations behind closed doors with our friends in the Home Office about the impact that the visa system has on the fishing fleet. We make those representations in private. I have some concerns on the impact that the visa system is having on the fishing fleet and we are working with colleagues in the fishing sector to make sure that our views are heard loud and clear within Government.

Q66 **Cat Smith:** You will know from the sector that there is some nervousness around the changes that are coming in April this year. Could you say whether or not you are making representations on behalf of the sector to do with the changes that are coming in in April this year and changes to the shortage occupation list?

**Mark Spencer:** Yes, is the direct answer. We are constantly in conversation with our friends in the Home Office to try to find the right way forward. I hesitate to say too much, because if other Government Departments waded into my area of government without telling me that they were going to do that, I would be a git grumpy. Some of these are questions that are best addressed to a Home Office Minister rather than to me. However, I am more than happy to go on the record to say that of course we have conversations with our friends in the Home Office about how the visa system is working, and we make strong representations on behalf the sector to the Home Office to make sure that they understand that when they are making those decisions.

Q67 **Chair:** It is particularly a problem for the Northern Ireland nephrops fishery because of the 12-mile limit. Some of the bigger Scottish boats are operating outside 12 miles, so the rules on immigration do not apply. Do you understand the particular problem faced by fishermen in places like Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel, where it is quite hard to not be within 12 miles of either Scotland or Northern Ireland in that fishery?

**Mark Spencer:** Yes, I wholly understand that challenge and I am working with the industry to make sure that the whole of Government understands that challenge as well.

**Chair:** I must declare that a lot of those nephrops end up in Whitby and get breadcrumbs put on them there to be served in pubs up and down the nation. Sheryll, you want the last word.



Q68 **Mrs Murray:** Yes, the last word. Minister, I understand from my Cornish colleague here that you have been on fishing boats in Newlyn so you must have sea legs. As a farmer, I am sure that you would be very able to operate a vessel at sea.

**Mark Spencer:** I can get seasick on a barge.

**Mrs Murray:** I want to point out, and ask for your opinion, that many fishermen are not employed. They are share fishermen and they get a share of the catch. Years ago, because I have been in the industry for a long time, the boats would take on what they would describe as a deckie learner; they would take them to sea. It was more or less like an apprenticeship. They would get a share of the catch and they would probably move on to buying their own boat. If the quotas are increasing and we are seeing an improvement, we must be able to see an improvement in the economic viability of that catch. That might make it more attractive to school leavers and people like that to go to college, do their fishing certificates and what have you and then get a job on a boat. Therefore, the situation where we are relying on foreign labour could be overcome purely and simply because it is within your gift. As your Department negotiates more quotas, we might be able to attract more young people into an industry that needs to attract UK labour.

There is the other problem where perhaps we find that it is the unsociable hours, but I hope that you agree with me that you could potentially see the UK labour market move more towards fishing. I hope that happens, because the industry has given my family a reasonable living for a number of years.

**Mark Spencer:** To a certain extent it is a lifestyle choice as much as it is a career, and there will be opportunities going forward over the next few decades but there will also be challenges. It is for Government and for Ministers to try to mitigate the challenges and exploit the opportunities. It is very much my mission to try to do that. It is painful on occasions and I am enormously sympathetic to those who find themselves at the wrong end of that dynamic, at the challenging end. We genuinely do sit within the Department trying to find help and mitigations to help people on that journey of change and to see those opportunities. I am very much aware that for individual fishermen in certain circumstances it can look quite bleak. I very much encourage those people who find themselves in those circumstances to reach out and ask for help. We will try to help where we can but there will always be another opportunity for something somewhere. Let's together try to build those opportunities for a fishing sector to be vibrant and financially rewarding over the next few decades.

**Chair:** That is a very good point to end on. For anyone wishing to enter the industry, I would recommend the Whitby Fishing School, shortly to become part of our Marine Training Centre, funded by the town bid, which Whitby was successful in.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thank you for your time, Minister. There are many challenges to being Fisheries Minister and you have identified some of them. You may recall that when Lord Benyon was made Fisheries Minister, on day one he was presented with various species by Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and had difficulty identifying some of them. The first skill that you will need is identifying fish species, including the porbeagle, which I had not even heard of, never mind knowing what it looked like. The other skill that I found when I was in your job was being able to go on a fishing vessel without being ill—and it sounds like you fail that test—and eating copious amounts of oysters, which are generally presented to the Fisheries Minister, without feeling ill either. That was another skill I acquired during my time in the job.

Thank you very much for your time and for being so open with us. I also thank Mr Faulkner and Mr Dowell for the few occasions where you needed a bit of inflight refuelling. Thank you very much indeed.