



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Fisheries and the marine environment, HC 680

Tuesday 1 April 2025

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Members present: Alistair Carmichael (Chair); Sarah Bool; Charlie Dewhurst; Helena Dollimore; Sarah Dyke; Jayne Kirkham; Josh Newbury; Jenny Riddell-Carpenter; Tim Roca.

Questions 1 - 27

Witnesses

I: Daniel Zeichner MP, Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs; Colin Faulkner, Head of External Fisheries and Trade, Defra; Mike Dowell, Head of EU Fisheries Policy and Negotiations, Defra.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Daniel Zeichner MP, Colin Faulkner and Mike Dowell.

Chair: Good morning, Colin and Mike. As with your predecessors, can I invite you to introduce yourselves and tell us your roles for the benefit of the official record and for those following our proceedings?

Colin Faulkner: Good morning, I am Colin Faulkner, head of international fisheries in DEFRA.

Mike Dowell: Morning, I am Mike Dowell, deputy director for marine and fisheries, and I am responsible for UK-EU fisheries.

Chair: You are very welcome. I should say at this stage that Jayne Kirkham was very keen to be part of this discussion, but unfortunately she has been pulled away to business in the main Chamber, which as we all know always takes precedence. We have a number of questions to put in her absence. Charlie, can I invite you to pick up the questions around delivering sustainable fishing opportunities?

Q1 **Charlie Dewhirst:** Yes, perhaps we could start off with the quotas and how that is decided. Only 46% of quotas were set in line with scientific advice last year. I hear concerns from the fishing community that we are not being responsive to either increasing or declining fishing stocks of various species. So how can we move to a more environmentally sustainable process in the long-term interest of the fishing fleet going forward?

Daniel Zeichner: That is a very big question, and I will probably call on my colleagues to give you the more detailed answers. But the overall view is that we very much follow the scientific advice, which is a starting point. That 46% level is broadly similar to the level the year before. Basically, I rely very heavily on the advice from officials, and in turn we rely very heavily on the advice from our expert scientists at places like Cefas.

Having got the scientific advice, as Ministers we then have to make a series of judgments, balancing a range of factors. Obviously, we operate within the legislation from the Fisheries Act from a few years ago and try to achieve, exactly as you say, that balanced outcome, which ensures sustainability into the future, but also maintains a viable, successful fishing industry. For me, as the Food Security Minister, it is really important that we appreciate the role that fish plays in the food system.

Q2 **Charlie Dewhirst:** To take one particular example that Jayne wanted to raise, and I have heard this from others, pollack is a species that is on the rise, yet our fishermen are unable to land it and a lot of it is thrown back. Is that something you are looking at to try to address that problem specifically?

Daniel Zeichner: A lot of time has been spent discussing pollack over the last few years, and I will probably bring my expert colleagues in. But



immediately I would say that part of the problem is that the advice is that it is not necessarily thriving, and that is what we have to follow. That then leads us into the complex issue of choke catches and so on. I will hand over to Mike to go into the finer detail.

Mike Dowell: Thanks, Minister. With pollack, the latest best available scientific advice is zero catch. So the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea issues us advice on a range of stocks every summer, and then in the autumn/winter we set the limits in partnership with other coastal states. In the case of pollack, that is with the European Union.

We absolutely hear and understand, particularly from fishers down in the south-west, that they are seeing good pollack on the grounds, and we are working with them on a range of studies to see if we can improve that scientific assessment. One of the challenges with pollack to date has been the quality or the category of its assessments from ICES; that category of assessment is not as top-notch as it could be, and we are working to try to improve that, which may or may not, of course, bring a different result in terms of the catch limits that they advise.

Q3 **Charlie Dewhirst:** Moving to another species—monkfish—we have seen a big increase in the quota in Scotland and the North sea, which is contrary to some of the scientific advice. How do you explain that decision?

Mike Dowell: So—

Daniel Zeichner: You carry on, Mike.

Mike Dowell: Sorry—I am getting carried away with myself.

Daniel Zeichner: No, please do.

Mike Dowell: Again, the monkfish is a stock where ICES produce the advice every two years, and the previous set of advice—for the 2023 and 2024 fishing year—was for cuts. The Minister took decisions not to take the full cuts in those years. Then the category of advice improved, and when ICES issued advice for the 2025 fishing year, there was a significant increase in the amount they advised could be caught, and we have set the limit for the 2025 fishing year at that full advice.

Q4 **Chair:** Is monkfish still a data-deficient species?

Mike Dowell: In terms of its data quality it is not category 1, but it is a much more improved scientific advice stock.

Q5 **Chair:** So why do we still have data deficiencies for very valuable species like monkfish, after so many years?

Daniel Zeichner: That is a very good question, which I will go away and see if we can find the answer to. I suspect, as in so many other things,



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that there is always more that we can do, but of course we are dependent to some extent on international advice.

Q6 Chair: Just when you talk about ICES advice in setting zero TACs, what is the question that ICES poses that produces the answer of zero TAC?

Daniel Zeichner: May I look to you for that one, Mike?

Mike Dowell: Yes, I am happy to pick that one up and happy to write as well—

Chair: Let me tell you what I have understood it to be, and you can tell me if I am completely wrong about this—because that, let me tell you, is not without precedent. I am told that the answer that comes with a zero TAC is, “What fishing effort do you allow to see a return to a safe spawning stock biomass within 12 months?” Is that correct?

Mike Dowell: I will have to write on the specific details, but you are right, it is to do with the safe biological parameters of biomass and—

Q7 Chair: Yes, but nobody is ever going to return something to any safe levels within 12 months, are they?

Mike Dowell: Well, it is a very difficult choice to do that. In most cases where you find these zero catch advice stocks, they are within mixed fisheries. If you set that stock to zero, the entire fishery cannot be prosecuted.

Q8 Chair: In a mixed fishery, that is what produces choke species, is it not? So this really matters in day-to-day terms.

Daniel Zeichner: It absolutely does, but it shows the complexity of the decisions that are being made. As a Minister, I can only follow the scientific advice we are being given.

Q9 Chair: To understand the advice, you have to understand the question that is asked to produce the advice, and that is why I am asking the question. Colin, do you know?

Colin Faulkner: It is exactly as described: it is about returning the stock to a position where spawning stock biomass is within sustainable limits within the year after the quota year for which the quota is being set. But, as you say, there are many stocks where you have a zero TAC advice that are in mixed fisheries. In many cases, quotas are therefore set at a higher level than zero in order to allow those mixed fisheries to continue.

Q10 Chair: The use of language matters here. When people who do not have the understanding of the very nuanced picture within fishery science just hear the Minister set a TAC that was not in accordance with ICES advice, that does not really tell the whole story, does it?

Daniel Zeichner: It does not tell the whole story, because we are working, as I say, within the legislative framework that was agreed by Parliament under the Fisheries Act. Our task is to make those judgments.



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Chair: I will pass back to Charlie, but I see the voice of Cornwall has been restored to us—welcome back, Jayne.

- Q11 **Charlie Dewhirst:** I will let Jayne get back to the specifics, but can I just ask a more general question about the spatial squeeze in our waters? The feedback I get from fishing organisations is that there is not joined up thinking across various Departments. We have pressures with renewables and the impact of those wind farms, we have other infrastructure out at sea that needs protecting, and it would help enormously if Government could take a wider look at fishing strategy going forward, taking into account forecasting of climatic effects and likely species changes going forward. Is that something you might commit to?

Daniel Zeichner: I refute the idea that there is not a joined-up approach across Government. I have been really impressed by the marine spatial prioritisation programme that we are undertaking; that is working with a number of different Government Departments. I totally understand why people in the fishing sector are anxious, and I am absolutely making their case, for the reasons I outlined a bit earlier: that as Minister for Food Security, I know that the role that fish plays in our food system is really important.

There was a written statement issued, probably two months ago now, on this. It is a really complicated problem, and I am absolutely supportive of the drive to achieve renewable energy, but there is a real conflict for space—it is a bit like the land use framework discussion on land. But we absolutely do have a cross-Government approach to this, and I thank the fishermen's organisations for the data that they have brought forward. It has been a very positive and constructive discussion, but I understand why people are concerned.

- Q12 **Jayne Kirkham:** I was not in the room for the start of your answer about pollack, so I apologise for going back to pollack, but I am from Cornwall. I understand that it went down to zero TAC. The compensation ended this year for the fishers, and they are reporting issues with bycatch, which is stopping them fishing for other things. The science and anecdotal evidence seem to show that the stock is recovering, so would this be something you might be able to look at—perhaps even looking at what the science shows mid-year, in about June, rather than waiting—because this is quite a significant issue?

Daniel Zeichner: To reprise the pollack answer, I will let Mike do pollack.

Mike Dowell: Very happy to. Just to give a brief recap, we certainly hear from a lot of our fishing colleagues down in the south-west and the heads of the producer organisations down there that fishermen are seeing more pollack on the grounds and good pollack, even when they are trying to avoid it, as we know they are—as you say, it is a bycatch stock at the moment.



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The current best available scientific advice is that it is still a zero catch, but there is a process going on with the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, ICES, to reassess the stock. There are various working groups going on that our UK scientists are part of; in fact, those groups are open to industry representatives as well. So that is probably where the reports come from that there could be options for change within the advice and how ICES might choose, or not, to reissue that advice.

So, absolutely, we are part of those conversations and we are tracking those very carefully. As I said earlier, until you actually see what comes out of that process you never want to prejudge it. As much as it might look in some instances like advice is improving, when models are run it might not necessarily be the answer that people are looking for.

Q13 Jayne Kirkham: I also have a question about the recreational fleet. Are you looking at imposing any kind of measures upon them?

Daniel Zeichner: I really appreciate how strong the feelings are. I have been down and spoken to people, and I can absolutely see how difficult this has been, but I genuinely think we have to follow the scientific advice.

On the recreational side, yes, again, I understand the frustration that people in the commercial fleet feel. Voluntary guidelines have been issued by the various organisations; we need to make sure that they actually work, and if they do not, I am certainly minded to look again at it. It is genuinely unfair when commercial fishers see others taking stock that the commercial fishery is not able to reach, and we need to find a way to resolve that.

Q14 Jayne Kirkham: Thank you. I have another question, if I may, Chair, about spurdog. Apparently, the maximum landing size is 100cm and fishers are having to discard quite a lot of large fish. Again, that is affecting them with the bycatch, and there is a question of why that could not be introduced to market. Obviously, you are discarding dead fish, which seems a terrible waste.

Daniel Zeichner: I will pass that one to my colleague.

Mike Dowell: I am happy to pick that up. Spurdog came off the prohibited species list two years ago and became a viable fishery again, so there has been a cautious approach to how it is being caught. That maximum landing size of 100 cm has been in place, as it was a previous measure that was in place for the fishery many years ago now. We are reviewing it because we hear from the industry that to get a viable fillet for frying from a spurdog, it needs to be larger than 100 cm. So we are looking at that.

There have been projects that we have been running in partnership with the industry and Cefas, one of our arm's length bodies, to look at whether we can review that measure. It is something that is also part of



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our joint agreement with the EU, so we are also working through it with them. So we are very alive to the issue.

The reason for caution is that they are a very long-lived species; they only reach maturity after about 40 years. We want to bring that into a more profitable fishery, and we want to be able to let fishers land a lot more spurdog and get it to market, but we also want to make sure we do it so that it remains sustainable for the future and it does not end up back on the prohibited list.

- Q15 Jayne Kirkham:** I have just one more question, about sole. The Cornish industry feels that more sampling of sole could show that some stocks were linked and maybe lead to an argument for increasing the sole TAC, which would open up fishing of monkfish and megrim. Is that something that you are looking at as well?

Daniel Zeichner: Again, I am going to seek expert advice on that one.

Jayne Kirkham: It is a very specific question.

Daniel Zeichner: It is.

Mike Dowell: Absolutely. These are all very specific actions from this year's UK-EU written record. Again, we know it is a very important issue down in the south-west. The sole total allowable catch is there. In terms of what we are looking at with industry, the way advice is given for certain stocks is by area, and there are two adjoining areas for sole where the fishing industry has said to us that they feel like the mixing of the populations of fish there are one and the same. One stock seems to be doing reasonably well and the other stock is in less good shape, but if they were one area it might make the fishery a lot more manageable. So that, again, is something that we are certainly looking at and something that we would also agree with the European Union as well, if we can.

- Q16 Jenny Riddell-Carpenter:** I want to take you back to the reference that was just made to the land use framework. I appreciate it is outside your remit, but I am interested in your view on whether you see the merit and value in extending the land use framework to a land and sea use framework, given some of the challenges we spoke about earlier in this session about the co-ordination of offshore energy projects and being able to manage our fisheries and seas in that context. I appreciate that it is not an ambition that we would be able to deploy right now, but can you speak to the future of it?

Daniel Zeichner: You raise a very interesting issue, and I know your interest; indeed, I remember talking about this when in opposition. I am very happy to talk about the land use framework; in fact, I shall be meeting stakeholders later this afternoon to discuss it. The same principles apply in many ways, but the marine spatial prioritisation programme that DEFRA is undertaking is actually achieving the same thing, essentially. Through the joint discussions with the Crown Estate



and other government Departments, we are establishing a mechanism for resolving these very difficult issues.

These various things that we require from our maritime areas are very complicated. That includes, of course, making sure that we protect and conserve the maritime environment. There are lots of different things we are requiring from our seas, in exactly the same way as there are lots of things we are requiring from our land. But I would say that we have not in the past really had a proper structure for resolving some of those trade-offs, and that is what we are now trying to put in place. So a very short answer to your question is, yes, that is what we are doing, essentially.

Q17 Chair: On the question of ICES advice again, how old is data by the time it comes out of the end of ICES and lands on the Minister's advice? What is that gap from data being taken to advice being given?

Daniel Zeichner: From data being given? Well, quite a lot of data comes my way, but the question—

Chair: The raw data going in to inform the advice that you get.

Daniel Zeichner: As always with data, you need to understand the context it is within.

Chair: Let me explain the reason why I am asking this. I hear real echoes in what Jayne is saying, from what we were told 20-plus years ago in relation to the cod recovery programme. The data was almost two years old by the time it informed a decision, and in the meantime progress, good or bad, within a species continued. That often accounts for this disparity between the advice that lands on your desk and what fishermen are finding in their nets. So I am keen to explore. If you cannot answer now, there could be a later coming.

Daniel Zeichner: I understand the point you are making, and I too see that discrepancy between the anecdotal accounts and what comes through in the scientific advice. Colin may be able to add a little more.

Colin Faulkner: Ultimately, it depends on which stock you are talking about. Using the example of Northern Shelf cod, there will have been surveys that have taken place in the first quarter of this year that will feed into the scientific advice that will be issued at the end of June, which we will then consider as part of the negotiations in the autumn this year to set the TAC for 2026. That is one example: there will be quarter 1 2025 information feeding into the 2026 advice.

Chair: Which is reasonably speedy.

Colin Faulkner: Granted, that is nine months difference. We can also take some of the quarter 2 surveys in 2025 into account in the negotiating process in the autumn, but there is still, certainly, a gap. That



gap will vary according to the stock and according to the seasonality of the stock.

Q18 **Chair:** And for Jayne's pollack?

Jayne Kirkham: Yes, what is the gap for pollack?

Colin Faulkner: I do not have that gap in front of me; I do not know if you know that, Mike? Otherwise, we can write to you with that detail.

Jayne Kirkham: Because the anecdotal evidence is very different: it is very clear, so that is causing the frustration really. If there is a big gap, could we know?

Chair: Unless you have an answer now, we will take a later on this.

Mike Dowell: I am happy to give a quick one, but I am also happy to follow up as well. Pollack is another example of where the category of advice for that is data-poor, effectively. That is one of the reasons why, a couple of years ago, the best available data was data-deficient, and now we have ended up on a zero catch advice. That was largely from beam trawl surveys that happened routinely in the Celtic sea. That data will get fed in annually, but what we have been working on—as I say, not just ourselves with our own industry, but with the European Union as well—is how we improve the data and get more data that can go into that assessment.

Q19 **Jayne Kirkham:** You are making big decisions, then, for fishers on not very much data, which does not seem particularly satisfactory, does it?

Mike Dowell: It is the best available advice, which we are bound to use in conjunction with the socioeconomic data that we have ourselves, but that is also provided by our local industry representatives. For instance, the Cornish Fish Producers Organisation will give us what is actually happening down at the quayside. We do take all that into account, which is why, going back to the point the Chair made, for the majority of these zero catch advice stocks, we never set the limit at zero. We do try to give as much of an opportunity as possible to allow other fisheries to continue while making sure we do not limit the future sustainability of the stock in question.

Chair: It is as much an art as a science, I think. Finally, it would be remiss if we did not touch on the TCA review coming up. Sarah, can I invite you to lead the questioning on this?

Q20 **Sarah Bool:** Thank you, Chair. With the potential reset that is coming up, there are obviously a lot of discussions about any proposals around fishery maybe being interdependent on defence, youth schemes or SPS arrangements—that is what I understand. What negotiations have you had already, and what is the state of the discussions?

Daniel Zeichner: Well, the first thing I would say is that I would not believe everything that is rumoured around an issue like this, because



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there is obviously lots and lots of speculation. Of course we have discussions, because the transitional period comes to an end in the middle of next year, but no decisions have been taken and there is no linkage. I am seeing it from the fisheries perspective and I am absolutely determined we get the best possible outcome we can for UK fishers, because they are a very important source of food supply.

- Q21 **Sarah Bool:** The European Relations Minister, Nick Thomas-Symonds, has basically said that he would like to see “something more stable” than annual negotiations and that that “would be in the UK’s interests, going forward”. What sort of stable fishery arrangement is the UK looking to negotiate?

Daniel Zeichner: Well, he probably would say that, but what we want to do is to secure the best possible outcome that we can for UK fisheries, and that will be a further discussion to be held in the months ahead.

- Q22 **Sarah Bool:** What does that look like? My concern is that the French will be very keen to have a bit more of a relaxed or different arrangement than they currently have. What sort of guarantees or reassurances can you give us, other than that you want to get the best deal, that you will actually get the best deal for our fisheries and we will not cave?

Daniel Zeichner: Well, the French will say what they will say, but we are aptly determined to stand up for the interests of the UK fishing industry.

- Q23 **Sarah Bool:** I am conscious, as you said, that it is coming to an end in June 2026. What sort of assurances can you give that all these discussions and arrangements with the EU will be finalised in time for setting the quotas for 2026?

Daniel Zeichner: It was a temporary arrangement, effectively, so if nothing changes, it will become an annual negotiation in the normal way.

- Q24 **Sarah Bool:** Just finally, as well as setting quota and arrangements for access to waters, the EU-UK agreement requires co-operation on all aspects of fishery management. What further improvements could be made to help UK fishers?

Daniel Zeichner: That was the agreement that was reached then, and we make sure that we co-operate and follow as effectively as we can any kind of discussions that are taking place. This, of course, is quite contested territory at the moment, but we are absolutely confident in our ability to protect the UK’s position, and that is what we shall do.

- Q25 **Chair:** I do not know if this is part of the speculation that you say we should not necessarily believe, but you will have seen the reports that the Macron Government want to see fisheries as something that is rolled up into wider security and defence co-operation. Fishermen would want to hear that their case will be prosecuted on its own merits and that it will not be conflated with other issues. To what extent can you give them that reassurance?



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Daniel Zeichner: As the Minister responsible, I am absolutely determined that we defend the UK fishing industry.

Q26 **Chair:** But you are not the Minister responsible for the TAC review; that is Nick Thomas-Symonds, is it not? TCA reviews, I beg your pardon; it is too many acronyms, too early in the morning.

Daniel Zeichner: What I can tell you is that we are absolutely determined to stand up for the UK fishing industry. The fishing industry has been let down before; we do not intend to let that happen again.

Q27 **Chair:** That is absolutely on the money, because fishermen felt that the deal that was done at the end of the Brexit negotiations was one that did not deliver what they had expected. Do you understand that anything that is a further backwards step will be viewed very bleakly by the industry, and that even modest progress will still leave them quite a way short of where they wanted to be?

Daniel Zeichner: I very much understand that, and I am very aware of it on a daily basis, I can tell you.

Chair: In which case, I anticipate that we may have the joy of returning to this at some future occasion. But for the moment, Minister, Mike and Colin, thank you very much indeed for your attendance. Thank you to colleagues for their attendance. We have covered a quite remarkable amount of work in just over two hours. We are grateful to you for your attendance and for your ongoing engagement with the Committee, but for the moment we will call it a day for today.