



Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

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From the Chair of the Committee

Rt Hon Dr Thérèse Coffey MP

Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

By email

31 January 2023

Dear Secretary of State

Report of the independent Crustacean Mortality Expert Panel

Thank you for your letter of 20 January concerning the publication of the independent Crustacean Mortality Expert Panel's report.

You will recall that in our letter to you of 1 November 2022, the Committee called for an independent review to be conducted following its hearing on the matter on 25 October. We are therefore grateful to you for establishing the independent Panel, and we wish to note our thanks to the Panel for their expeditious and considered work on this matter.

As your letter highlighted, the independent Panel considered that a novel pathogen was the most likely reason for the crustacean mortality event that occurred from October 2021.

The Committee notes that the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, Rt Hon Mark Spencer MP, told the House on 26 January:

"I am considering carefully if further analysis by the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS) can ascertain conclusively the cause of this unusual mortality".

The Committee believes that further work should be undertaken to identify this novel pathogen, given the importance of determining its origin, its vectors of transmission, its transmissibility, its virulence and other factors related to it.

Indeed, as the independent Panel highlighted, a conclusive result from the broad diagnostic screening of samples would significantly affect the

level of confidence in the novel pathogen theory. We also noted the reported comments on this matter of the Minister for Biosecurity, Marine and Rural Affairs, Rt Hon Lord Benyon, that “undoubtedly we're going to need some additional research” which he made on 25 January at the Coastal Futures Conference.

Furthermore, the Committee notes that the independent Panel identified several viral and parasitic diseases that CEFAS may not have screened for during its investigation (see below). The independent Panel concluded:

“It would therefore be useful for archived samples to be retrospectively screened for a broader range of potential pathogens”.

We agree.

The Committee is of the opinion that CEFAS must undertake further analysis in regard to the novel pathogen theory given the importance of seeking as definitive an explanation as possible for this mass die-off event, and we recommend that you instruct CEFAS to conduct this study as a matter of urgency.

Key evidence in such a study will include histological analysis (i.e. via analysis of the structure of cells and tissue in affected crabs). CEFAS acknowledged that such analysis works best with fresh samples but, in this case, the independent Panel said that many samples were degraded so making some pathogens potentially been harder to discover.

The Committee would like to know how many crustaceans affected by the die off have been retained in cold storage for future sampling, when they were collected, and whether they are in a suitable condition for effective sampling.

The Committee also notes the independent Panel found that CEFAS’s method for screening crabs for known listed diseases was limited to only one disease (White Spot Syndrome Virus). This was because this is the only listed native crustacean disease that they are “statutorily obliged to screen”.

The independent Panel said that it would be useful to “collect appropriate samples in the future to be able to screen for all potential pathogens”.

We agree.

The independent panel identified several evidence gaps. It noted that there was no “dissolved oxygen data” to establish if anoxia – which is a state of total oxygen deprivation within tissues or organs – due to an algal bloom was possible.

While the independent Panel’s report considered the likelihood of pyridine (or another toxic pollutant) as having caused the mass die-off event to be “very unlikely”, particularly via dredging, it did not completely discount a pollutant as the reason.

The report stated that if a source of a sufficient level were found, a natural or man-made stressor of the neural system, such as a toxin, would be a “likely” cause that explains the pathology seen in affected crustaceans. More responsive and/or more regular sampling and testing could help discount or confirm such factors.

As the Chair of the North Eastern Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority, Dr Stephen Axford, told us in his written evidence, it does not appear that appropriate sampling of the prevailing conditions took place with sufficient urgency.

We recommend that all relevant Government agencies, including CEFAS and the Environment Agency, should carefully monitor the area and stand ready to respond quickly to a similar event in the future. They must be prepared to take rapid samples of the water, sediment and animals affected to understand prevailing conditions and determine the causes of another mass die-off. Sampling and testing practices – both routine and for emergencies - should take into account the findings of the independent Panel’s report: for instance, measuring dissolved oxygen levels in affected areas when appropriate and collecting tissue samples quickly enough to be able to screen for all potential pathogens. Measures should include thorough sampling and testing for chemical pollutants such as pyridine.

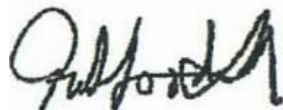
In our letter of 1 November, the Committee said that a dedicated, separate fund should be set up to support affected fishers and potters and the regeneration of crab and lobster stocks. It is also increasingly apparent that relations between the community, and Defra and the Government agencies involved have become strained.

In his reply of 15 November, the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries noted that Defra was continuing to assess the economic impacts of this incident.

We encourage Defra to swiftly complete its analysis of the economic impact of the incident and, pending its outcome, to provide initial financial support to those affected and for the regeneration of crab and lobster stocks. Steps to support the rebuilding of the local potting and fishing community would also help Defra to repair relations.

We would be grateful if you could reply within two weeks.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rt Hon Sir Robert Goodwill', is centered on the page.

Rt Hon Sir Robert Goodwill MP
Chair, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee