



Environmental Audit Committee

Rt Hon. Emma Reynolds MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Nobel House of Parliament 17 Smith Square
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Sent by email only

Governing the Marine Environment: Government Response

Congratulations on your new brief as Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I and the other Members of the Committee look forward to working with you in your new role.

We welcome the Government's response to our *Governing the Marine Environment* report, which we received prior to your appointment. I am writing to follow up on a number of recommendations in our report. The Committee would welcome your consideration of the Committee's recommendations and if the Government position could be strengthened on two particular points.

Recommendation at paragraph 62: *We call on the Government to ban seabed damaging practices, such as bottom trawling, dredging and mining for aggregates, within offshore Marine Protected Area boundaries.*

The Committee welcomes the Government's decision to launch a consultation on proposals to ban the destructive activity of bottom trawling in a further 41 MPAs. During our inquiry, we heard compelling evidence of the damage that bottom towed fishing gear causes to the seabed and the wider disruption to the ecosystem, given the interconnected nature of the marine environment.

We note in the Government's response to our report that the Government's policy is not to introduce whole-site bans on bottom-towed fishing gear in MPAs, but to only restrict fishing which is assessed as damaging to the specific protected features in each MPA. Michelle Willis, CEO of the Marine Management Organisation (MMO), advised the Committee that Stage 3 of the fishing management measures, which covers the 41 areas in the consultation, "will rebalance" the feature specific approach of some MPAs as they revisit some MPAs to make them "less feature specific and more encompassing" based on the evidence collated and analysed by the MMO. We look forward to the

outcome of the consultation and the Government's subsequent decision. We reiterate our recommendation to completely ban bottom trawling within offshore MPA boundaries and ask the Government to clarify how it intends to ensure that a feature-specific approach does not undermine the integrity of MPAs.

We also urge the Government to address the impacts of fishing on MPAs designated for highly mobile species features, such as harbour porpoises and certain seabirds. We note that the MMO informed the Committee that their evidence and analysis relating to these 5 MPAs would soon be completed and submitted to the Government as part of Stage 4 of the fisheries management measures. Given the importance of protecting these species, we call for swift action to ensure they are protected from harmful practices and would welcome you setting how you intend to do this.

Recommendation at paragraph 34: *We urge Ministers to issue a revised Marine Policy Statement no later than January 2026. The updated statement should reflect the current and evolving pressures on the marine environment, clearly outline the Government's priorities for marine usage, and set out by which decisions on the balance between marine exploitation and marine protection will be made.*

The Committee was disappointed and surprised to read in the Government's response that despite aspects of the Marine Policy Statement (MPS) being outdated, such as maximising oil and gas resources, the Government believes that it should not be updated because these aspects no longer carry "any practical effect." The suggestion in the Government's response that the East Marine Plan and the six-yearly review of the UK Marine Strategy can override or substitute for outdated policies in the MPS further highlights the complexity and potential confusion surrounding the Government's approach to marine governance.

Whilst the Committee acknowledges the significant resource required to update the MPS, we re-emphasise the importance of the MPS as a vital document for ensuring clarity and coherence in the Government's marine priorities. The Committee remain of the view that the credibility of the MPS relies on it being an accurate description of current Government policy. Expecting stakeholders to make sense of conflicting policies appears to us to be an odd way to proceed. The Committee is concerned that the reliance on other plans and strategies, in the absence of a revised MPS, risks undermining transparency and consistency in decision-making. We urge the Government to reconsider.

We would appreciate a response by 29th September.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Toby Perkins'.

Mr Toby Perkins MP
Chair, Environmental Audit Committee