



EFRA Committee
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

27 January 2026

Dear Members of the EFRA Committee

Subject: Request for EFRA Committee scrutiny of Defra's approach to UK–EU fisheries negotiations and the need for industry-centred decision-making

I am writing to urge the EFRA Committee to scrutinise, challenge, and where possible correct Defra's current approach to fisheries negotiations with the EU. Over the past fishing year, Defra has taken decisions that have lacked transparency, meaningful consultation, and industry involvement. This approach has marginalised the very people whose livelihoods depend on these outcomes and is wholly inconsistent with what the fishing industry was promised following Brexit. As a result, decisions often fail to reflect operational realities and fail to deliver the benefits expected from the regulatory autonomy we thought the UK now had.

Key concerns requiring scrutiny

1. A systematic weakening of UK industry influence

There appears to be a clear pattern of decisions being taken without industry involvement:

- Negotiations on shared stocks and technical measures have taken place behind closed doors, with the industry learning of outcomes only after they have been agreed.
- EU "emergency" technical measures were unexpectedly included in last year's bilateral negotiations, leaving no time for meaningful consultation with those directly affected.
- Unilateral decisions - such as separating individual skate species from the group TAC - were made without consulting those who fish these stocks daily, despite clear operational implications.
- Vessels over 12m operating in EU waters were given only five days' notice to comply with new EU rules, leaving businesses unprepared and scrambling to adjust due to a "lack of UK internal process".
- Acceptance of the new EU Fish Export System (FES) without sufficient consideration of UK operability risks exposing the UK to potential EU infraction proceedings and could ultimately restrict future access to EU markets.

All these decisions were made without the operational insight and evidence that only the industry can provide. As a result, the outcomes have often been flawed, disruptive, and strategically damaging.

2. A politically driven negotiating stance that weakens the UK's position as an independent coastal state

Industry representatives have expressed deep concern about remarks from the UK negotiating team during last years negotiations suggesting that the priority is to “avoid walking away without a deal” with the EU - regardless of its quality. This raises serious questions:

- If the UK signals it will accept any deal with the EU, how can it secure a fair one for its own industry?
- How can industry trust that its interests are being defended if political expediency overrides operational sustainability?
- Why are technical conservation measures, intended to be delivered domestically through the UK's Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs), now being bargained away in bilateral negotiations with the EU?

This approach risks creating a post-Brexit settlement in which the UK retains nominal independence but significantly compromised autonomy, with key measures affecting UK waters shaped disproportionately by EU priorities.

3. Defra's actions failing to unlock opportunities

Defra's inward, top-down approach has not only contributed to poor outcomes in the most recent annual negotiations, it has also **undermined the substantial benefits that come from genuine, structured, and sustained industry participation**. Unless this approach changes, Defra now risks a serious withdrawal of industry engagement from the UK's ambitious FMP programme, jeopardising both the credibility of the process and the deliverability of its objectives. The benefits that come from genuine industry participation extend far beyond simply meeting Fisheries Act objectives and include:

a) More effective and operationally workable outcomes. Industry holds unmatched knowledge of gear selectivity, seasonal grounds, choke risks, and spatial interactions. Their insight reduces unintended consequences, improves compliance, and ensures management measures actually work on the water.

b) Stronger and more credible negotiating positions. A UK stance grounded in real-world data and operational feasibility is significantly harder for EU partners to dismiss and reduces the risk of UK negotiators being blindsided by practical constraints.

c) Greater legitimacy and public confidence. As highlighted in the recent Commons debate, policies imposed without the involvement of those affected generate backlash, non-compliance, and instability. Co-design avoids these risks and increases acceptance.

d) Higher compliance and lower enforcement costs. Regulation designed *with* industry, rather than *for* it, is more realistic, more workable, and less likely to require costly corrections or “emergency” interventions.

e) Stronger coastal communities and market resilience. Well-designed policy supports investment, export certainty, market access, and supply chain stability. When industry is treated as a partner, not a bystander, long-term growth becomes achievable.

These benefits are simply not attainable when industry is excluded from the room.

The EFRA Committee should require Defra to reset its approach

The industry is keen to redefine and strengthen its involvement in future negotiations. We therefore respectfully ask the EFRA Committee to press Defra to:

1. **Include industry experts directly in Specialised Committee on Fisheries (SCF) technical groups**, ensuring decisions reflect operational realities, not political calculations.
2. **Publish SCF agendas and negotiation priorities in advance**, giving industry time to prepare evidence-based positions for UK negotiating teams.
3. **Conduct transparent post-negotiation reviews**, assessing decision quality, trade-offs, and impacts on fleets and coastal communities.
4. **Establish a formal consultation framework** that prevents major regulatory or TAC-related decisions from being taken without industry involvement.
5. **Explain why post-Brexit autonomy has not yet translated into more independent, industry-driven policymaking**, and outline the reforms needed to achieve this.

The UK fishing industry has consistently demonstrated its willingness to engage constructively with government. What it now needs is a formal seat at the table - not as an afterthought, but as a central pillar of UK fisheries governance in line with the Fisheries Act and Joint Fisheries Statement.

I therefore ask the EFRA Committee to challenge Defra’s recent approach and to ensure the Department commits, in concrete terms, to a future in which UK fisheries policy is shaped by the expertise, insight, and lived experience of the people who work on the water every day and whose livelihoods depend on these decisions.

Yours sincerely



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