GREENER UK

Report from the European Union Committee, The EU fisheries landing obligation: six months on

23 January 2020

Greener UK welcomed the excellent work of the Lords EU Energy & Environment Sub Committee in its inquiry into the implementation and enforcement of the landing obligation and in particular the recommendations that the government and devolved administrations should “urgently take steps to put robust mechanisms in place to monitor and enforce compliance” and “we remain of the view that REM is the only way to monitor compliance with the landing obligation and restate our disappointment that member states did not use the lengthy phasing in of the landing obligation to agree on its use across the EU”.

With UK waters amongst the most heavily exploited in the world there is a pressing need for urgent action by governments to ensure that we manage our fisheries sustainably with full accountability for what is caught and taking into account the wider ecological impacts of fishing. If we continue to overfish our waters, as well as the negative impacts on our marine environment, it will also lead to serious economic consequences for our fishing industry and coastal communities in the years ahead.

If governments fail to act now, there is a real risk that many fish stocks will be depleted beyond recovery in the not too distant future. Installing CCTV cameras on vessels could transform the way UK fisheries are managed, making use of new technology, which is decreasing in cost year on year, and providing valuable data for stock assessments. It has been shown to deliver compliance and can also provide transparency for the supply chain and comfort for consumers that the seafood they are buying has been sustainably sourced. **Greener UK is urging the government to lead the way and commit to installing CCTV cameras on all vessels fishing in UK waters.**

In recent months a number of key reports have highlighted the impacts that overfishing is having both on fish stocks and also on our precious marine environment. Some key facts include:

- The UN Intergovernmental report on biodiversity highlighted that overfishing is the biggest cause of marine biodiversity loss in the last 40 years and that 93% of fish stocks globally are fully exploited or overfished\(^1\)
- In the UK, just 59% of stocks were fished at or below sustainable levels in 2019 – down from 69% in 2018\(^2\)
- The government’s Marine Strategy review showed that 11 out of 15 indicators of marine health are failing (including commercial fish) and states that the 2020 target for Good Environmental Status “will not be achieved for many years unless there are further improvements to fisheries management measures”\(^3\)
- UK cod stocks have declined to critical levels due to overfishing and cod has lost its MSC certification and with it potentially valuable market access
In spite of the CFP deadline to end overfishing and to set all fishing quotas at sustainable levels by 2020 EU Council Ministers at the December Council meeting allowed overfishing of certain key stocks to continue by ignoring scientific advice and increasing the quota in spite of scientific advice to reduce it – including in the case of cod.

It is estimated that less than 1% of what fishers catch is currently monitored or verified and the Committee reports which are the subject of this debate highlight that it is likely there is widespread lack of compliance with the landing obligation but that “the UK Government and devolved administrations still do not have mechanisms in place to monitor compliance: coupled with a lack of historic data on catches this means there is no way of knowing the extent to which illegal discarding is taking place”.

Put simply, the result of oversetting quotas and failing to monitor discarding places fisheries in a situation of overfishing.

With the UK leaving the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) the Fisheries Bill -which we understand will be introduced to Parliament imminently- will define the UK’s approach to fisheries management after we leave the EU and become an independent coastal state.

The Fisheries Bill provides a unique opportunity to address some of the issues facing our fisheries and our marine environment and to press the government to introduce its promised “gold standard” for sustainable fisheries. Greener UK is concerned that if the bill is reintroduced in its previous form it will fall far short of this and we are pressing for the Fisheries Bill to include the following:

- **Binding legal commitments** not to fish above scientifically recommended sustainable levels on the face of the bill - as currently provided in the CFP
- **CCTV cameras on all vessels** fishing in UK waters to record what is being caught in our waters, improving data and ensuring full and verifiable documentation of catches as well as robust monitoring and enforcement
- A legal duty on public authorities to achieve the fisheries objectives (such as the sustainability, precautionary, ecosystems and scientific objectives in the previous version of the bill) and to be accountable by publishing updates every 3 years
- Setting out a **fairer and more sustainable approach to distributing fishing opportunities**. The majority of UK fishing boats (79%) are small scale but they only hold 6% of the quota with over a quarter (29%) of the UK’s fishing quota owned or controlled by just five families
- An approach to **ensure that shared stocks are managed sustainably** (to help avoid another “mackerel wars” scenario when negotiating quota with other countries).

It is also vital to consider the role that effective sustainable fisheries management can play in terms of **solutions to climate change** and how the Bill can make provisions for this. A healthy ocean with thriving fish populations can help to deliver the 2050 net zero target, by restoring key stocks and ecosystems and protecting carbon sinks and
reservoirs. Speaking at the recent COP 25 summit, UN Special Envoy for the Ocean Peter Thomson appealed to governments stating: “ending overfishing is essential to build ocean resilience and can mitigate the impacts of climate change”.

Government also needs to ensure adequate funding to underpin sustainable fisheries management including more funding for the Fisheries and Marine departments within Defra and devolved administrations to ensure closer working with climate change teams. With the announcement of a new £500million Blue Planet Fund to help protect our oceans from threats such as warming sea temperatures and overfishing we would like to see a significant sum allocated to fisheries. It could also support administrations, including IFCAs to help improve monitoring and enforcement capabilities and prevent illegal and unregulated fishing.

We would welcome contributions from peers in the debate to raise some of these important issues regarding the UK’s future fisheries management and to ask the Minister how the government proposes to address these in the Fisheries Bill.

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Endnotes

2 | Lord Boswell of Aynho, Chair of the Lords EU Committee letter to the Minister of State for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, March 2019
3 | Defra, Marine strategy part one: UK updated assessment and Good Environmental Status Consultation Document, May 2019

Greener UK is a coalition of 13 major environmental organisations united in the belief that leaving the EU is a pivotal moment to restore and enhance the UK’s environment. Together, Greener UK members have the support of over eight million people.