

Scottish Government submission of 4 August 2022

PE1951/A: Reinstate inshore coastal limit on the use of dredge and trawl fishing gears

The Scottish Government have engaged in extensive discussions on this matter with the Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation (SCFF), and have no plans to introduce a three-mile limit restricting mobile gear activity in our inshore waters.

While we have concluded that a blanket approach like a three-mile limit is not appropriate for the diverse nature of our inshore fisheries, we acknowledge the need to develop policy that delivers appropriate management of our shared marine resource.

There are already a range of measures in place to protect fish stocks, which alongside our ambitious Programme for Government and the marine elements of the Bute House agreement will help deliver a step change in management of our inshore waters. Our vision has sustainable fisheries management at its very core.

A broad-brush national blanket closure, as promoted by the SCFF, is not appropriate. It ignores complex habitats as well as the distributions and behaviours of marine species within Scotland's inshore area. It also ignores the different types of fishing that takes place in Scottish waters, and how these interact with the marine environment.

Both national fishing bodies - the Community Inshore Fisheries Alliance (CIFA), and Scottish Fishermen's Federation (SFF), with over 800 vessel members between them strongly oppose such a policy. The SCFF membership is unknown.

Scotland's inshore fisheries are a most valued asset, making a significant contribution to the economic and cultural fabric of our coastal communities. The Scottish Government is fully committed to the sustainable and responsible development of the fishing industry and wider seafood sector; recognising, as the fishing industry do, that a balance needs to be struck with fulfilling our commitments to protect our shared marine environment. We have engaged in an open dialogue on the matter of a three-mile limit over a period of years, and these

continued calls are an unhelpful distraction from delivering on these commitments.

The Scottish Government is making a step change in marine protection and delivering on the shared commitment to achieve and maintain good environmental status for all of Scotland's seas. The Bute House Agreement sets out commitments to achieve that, including the designation of Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs) covering at least 10% of Scotland's inshore and offshore waters by 2026 - this is a world leading commitment. Scotland's Marine Protected Area (MPA) network already covers in excess of 37% of our sea area, exceeding the proposed new global target of 30% coverage by 2030, with management for Marine Licensable activities in place for all. Furthermore tailored fisheries management measures are designed to protect the specific features of each site and vary between MPAs. We are committed to completing management measures for our extensive MPA network by 2024, as outlined in the Bute House Agreement.

This Agreement aims to deliver a step change in marine environment protection, compliments and builds on the direction of travel already set out in our 2020-2030 Fisheries Management Strategy. Scotland's Fisheries Management Strategy sets out our approach to managing sea fisheries in Scotland in partnership with our stakeholders through 'co-management', and in a way that balances environmental, social and economic interests. This strategy forms one of the cornerstones of the Blue Economy approach and sets out a vision for Scotland to be a world class fishing nation delivering responsible and sustainable fisheries management which provides access to a high protein, low carbon food.

Sustainability, support for biodiversity and consideration of the wider ecosystem is at the heart of how we manage Scotland's fisheries and protect our marine environment. This is reflected in the 12-point action plan contained within the Strategy that includes actions such as the introduction of a new catching policy, adopting the principles of ecosystem-based management and enhancing vessel tracking and monitoring to help gather scientific data and improve management in our waters. These measures illustrate how we have struck a balance between the aspirations of our various marine users, and why an old-fashioned blunt management tool such as a blanket national spatial restriction on the use of mobile fishing gears is not consistent with our

evidence based approach and existing Scottish Government marine and fisheries policy.

Below are some further comments on the points made by the Scottish Creel Fisherman's Federation in the petition, which we hope are helpful.

The Scottish Government is committed to achieving Good Environmental Status (GES) under the UK Marine Strategy. This is about protecting the marine environment, preventing its deterioration and restoring it where practical, while allowing sustainable use of marine resources. Overall, progress has been made towards achieving GES, but it is recognised that further effort is still required. Action is already being taken to address the outcomes such as outlined in the Bute House Agreement. It is however important to note that there will be a time lag between implementation of measures and positive impacts being measurable.

Fisheries management decisions need to be based on robust science. The suite of measures outlined within the Bute House Agreement will provide additional evidence-based protection for our inshore environment. We also wish to build on the work undertaken under our Inshore Pilots Initiative - learning from these pilots is already helping inform delivery of our national strategy.

As noted above, protection to our marine environmental will be delivered through a more nuanced approach. We will:

- deliver fisheries management measures for existing Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) where these are not already in place, as well as key coastal biodiversity locations outside of these sites;
- add to the existing MPA network by designating a world-leading suite of Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs) covering at least 10% of our seas, providing additional environmental protection over and above the existing MPA network by establishing sites which will provide protection from all extractive, destructive or depositional activities while allowing other activities at nondamaging levels;
- take specific, evidence-based measures to protect the inshore seabed in areas outwith MPAs and HPMAs;
- consult on applying a cap to fishing activity in inshore waters that will limit activity to current levels and set a ceiling from which activities

that disrupt the seabed can be reduced in the light of evidence as it becomes available; and

- consider additional protections for spawning and juvenile fish congregation areas, delivering national stock conservation benefits and contributing to more sustainable, profitable and well-managed fisheries.

References to the decimation of inshore ecosystems and fish populations are not accurate. While it is fair to say the Clyde ecosystem has changed since the start of more intensive fishing, it is not the ecological desert some portray it to be. The size distribution of the main commercial fish species has certainly altered, with a decline in the larger individuals that once would have made up a significant part of biomass. In addition, the species composition has also changed, with a focus now on whiting rather than cod or haddock. However, overall the biomass of fish in the Clyde is very similar, or for some species even more, than when intensive fishing started. Additionally, a large and healthy population of shellfish (including *Nephrops*) living on the seabed of the Clyde is still present.

Reference to economic studies by the SCFF is also made. What is not mentioned however is the extensive discussions and feedback Marine Scotland economists provided to the SCFF over a period of time, or indeed other relevant reports produced at this time. Fishing policy is not decided in an 'economic evidence' vacuum nor does finding the right economic solution dictate what a policy should do. While the SCFF may make fair arguments in terms of the economics, feedback on the ability for the market to absorb an increase in supply, for example, can't be ignored. Just because theoretically there is a more optimum scenario, that doesn't mean that is what the policy should be - there are distributional, transitional, political, social and economic impacts for example to consider in addition to any environmental impacts. We have previously noted this research, and will be guided by the objectives set out in our Fisheries Management Strategy.

Scotland's seas support vital jobs across our economy, especially in coastal and island communities providing many goods and services as well as contributing to our overall wellbeing. There is potential for an ambitious and inclusive blue recovery for people and nature and the blue economy vision, published earlier this year starts us on that journey,

setting out six key outcomes for Scotland's seas and waters through to 2045. These aims include ensuring Scotland's marine ecosystems are healthy and functioning; making Scotland's blue economy resilient to climate change and contributory to climate mitigation and adaptation'; ensuring established and emerging marine sectors are innovative, productive and internationally competitive; more equal access to the benefits of oceans resources for communities, and making sure Scotland is an ocean literate and aware nation.

The Scottish Government has been consistent in resisting calls for arbitrary blanket restrictions, and instead pursuing a more tailored approach to the separation of mobile and static fishing gear, within our existing strategies and commitments noted above.

We welcome the opportunity for constructive engagement that takes account of the points outlined above. We again encourage the Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation to actively support us on this journey, helping improve management of our marine space, and working in partnership through established groups to deliver a step change in protection of the marine environment, and a prosperous and sustainable fishing industry.