

RURAL AFFAIRS AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

LETTER TO CABINET SECRETARY FOR RURAL AFFAIRS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

FISHING QUOTAS FOR 2010

Thank you for giving evidence to the Committee setting out the Scottish Government's position in relation to fishing quotas in the North-east Atlantic. After hearing from you, the Committee considered your evidence, together with that of Marine Scotland Scientists and the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, and agreed to write to you setting out our views on matters related to the determination of fishing opportunities for the Scottish fleet for 2010.

West of Scotland stocks

The Committee heard clear evidence that the 2009 regime for West of Scotland whitefish fisheries was unworkable. The Committee regrets the decision of the November Fisheries Council, against the wishes of the UK delegation and the Scottish Government, to prolong the emergency technical measures into 2010. The Committee considers that there may yet be scope to improve the situation, in particular to agree a long-term management plan for haddock, which would limit the annual fluctuation in fishing opportunities. The Committee also notes the Scottish Government's intention to seek an increase in quotas for monkfish and megrim on the West coast. The Committee notes that ICES advises that effort for these stocks should not be allowed to increase. The Committee considers that the TACs for these species could be increased, in so far as that can be done whilst respecting the scientific advice – e.g. if increasing the TAC would reduce discards, without increasing effort.

Nephrops

In the North Sea, it was suggested that the difference of opinion between the Scottish Government and the European Commission on the Nephrops TAC for 2010 arose from an administrative error on the part of the Commission, and that this was something that could be resolved (the Commission proposed a 7% reduction). The Committee would be extremely disappointed if this apparent error were not corrected, and the TAC for this valuable species were reduced unjustifiably.

Mackerel

Two difficulties regarding mackerel were raised – the Norwegians not having access to EU waters to take their full mackerel quota, and the unilateral declaration of a 112,000 tonne mackerel quota by Iceland for 2009.

The Committee notes that the EU Norway negotiations are underway, and that the coastal states negotiations on mackerel are ongoing.

The Committee accepts that there may be a case for Iceland to be a party to the coastal state negotiations on mackerel in future. However, the Committee considers that parties to coastal states negotiations must act in a credible and responsible manner, which Iceland has manifestly failed to do in its recent decisions to set a substantial mackerel quota unilaterally.

Conservation credits

The Committee heard clear evidence condemning the European Commission's apparent judgment that Conservation Credits was not working. This was seen as premature, as a scientific evaluation of the scheme has not been completed. In this regard, we would ask you to note comments in the Committee's recent report on CFP reform describing this as the Commission acting at its short-termist worst, and inviting the Scottish Government to make a robust rebuttal of the Commission's criticisms.

The Committee also heard that Scottish fishermen have to steam greater distances to avoid closed areas, at cost to them. We would strongly support recognition of this being expressly provided for in kilowatt day allocations.

Discards

There was agreement that fishermen should be allowed to land some of the fish they presently discard, by setting "catch quotas". The SFF expressed concerns about whether CCTV should be used to enforce this if it is allowed to go ahead.

The Committee notes that the inclusion of CCTV on boats in exchange for catch quota is considered controversial within the fishing industry, and would suggest that the matter be approached with caution. It is understandable that some skippers would be willing to participate in trials, given the benefit provided by setting catch quotas. However we should be wary of particular practices becoming institutionalised "by stealth" without proper and open debate as to the role and purpose of on-board monitoring, especially in the context of a reformed post 2012 CFP, in which, the Committee hopes and expects, the fishing industry would have an expanded role. This issue is discussed further in the Committee's recent report on CFP reform.

Dealing with fluctuating quotas

It is recognised that fish stocks fluctuate for biological and environmental reasons, and quotas will fluctuate accordingly. Fisheries managers and the fishing industry can deal with such fluctuations in a number of ways, and some of these were described in evidence. The management of quota can be improved, e.g. to ensure that any unused quota can be used by fishermen who need it (which also reduces discards). Long-term management plans have been developed for many stocks, and are being developed for others - such plans include limits on annual changes in quota, which avoid sudden decreases.

It was also suggested that Producer Organisations could develop fishery plans with their members which would seek to maximise the value of landings e.g. not flooding a falling market with product. Two of the four strands of the fisheries action plan the Scottish Government is developing with the Scottish fishing industry are also

relevant: managing fishing quota and effort allocations in a way that promotes sustainability and profitability; and working with the industry to help maximise the value of the catch.

The Committee supports the development of long-term management plans. The Committee also considers that the Producer Organisations should have an enhanced role in quota management. The Committee looks to the fisheries action plan as an opportunity to make further progress.

Outcome of negotiations

I hope that you find the points made in the letter helpful, and ask you to note that they represent the unanimous view of committee members from all four main parties. We would welcome a response to them in due course. We would also be grateful for information concerning the outcome of the EU-Norway discussions and of the December Council itself when you are in a position to provide it.

John Scott MSP
Deputy Convener

30 November 2009