



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

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Rt Hon Sir George Howarth MP

Our ref: MC2020/25635/LAR

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3 December 2020

Dear Sir George,

Thank you for your email of 29 September on behalf of your constituents about banning the use of supertrawlers in UK Marine Protected Areas. I apologise for the delay in replying. Defra is currently dealing with high volumes of correspondence due to COVID-19. Thank you for your understanding during this challenging time.

The UK is a global leader in the fight to protect our seas, we have a 'Blue Belt' of protected waters nearly twice the size of England. In English waters we have established 177 Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), protecting 40% of our seas. The Government has now essentially completed building our comprehensive network of MPAs, and is focusing on making sure they are protected properly.

The Government has made good progress in implementing management measures within our inshore MPAs. Vulnerable species and habitats in over 90 MPAs are now protected from bottom towed fishing gear. However, the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) has restricted our ability to implement fisheries management measures within offshore MPAs. The Fisheries Act contains a new power to allow the introduction of measures for conservation purposes. The Government aims to make rapid progress, protecting more sites from damaging fishing once the transition period ends by using the new byelaw power in the Fisheries Act.

Additionally, after the transition period, all foreign-registered vessels operating in UK waters will require a licence. These licences have conditions attached which include the areas that can be fished, species that can be caught and the type of fishing gear that can be used. Where vessels do not comply with the conditions of their licences, action can be taken to restrict or prohibit their activities in future.

Not all fishing activities within MPAs will require management; only those activities likely to damage the designated features of a site, such as trawling on the seabed. The Marine Management Organisation (MMO) monitors activity to ensure fishing boats are complying with current rules, and will ensure compliance with new measures as they are introduced.

There is no formal definition of what a supertrawler is – but in the media it has come to be known as a vessel that is over 100 metres in length. Pelagic fishing is the main method used by vessels that are over 100 metres in length. That takes place within the water column, and so is unlikely to impact the seabed features, such as reefs and sediment habitats, which most MPAs are set up to protect. Prohibiting these vessels will not protect MPAs from the fishing activities known to be damaging to them, such as bottom trawling.

On 28 October, the MMO launched a call for evidence seeking views on the draft assessments on four offshore and one inshore MPA. This includes Dogger Bank Special Area of Conservation. The call for evidence is an early and informal stage of the marine planning process and aims to share MMO's draft MPA assessments and marine management options. The evidence provided during this process will help shape and inform the MMO's assessments and options ahead of formal stakeholder engagement. The Government is committed to making sure that our marine life can recover and thrive – and that is what is being done.

The Fisheries Act will also help to protect our marine resources and develop plans to restore our fish stocks back to more sustainable levels. This builds on a manifesto commitment which promised to introduce a legal commitment to fish sustainably as we become an independent coastal state once again.

The Government is working on a cross-departmental response to the Benyon Review into Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs). The Review recommended that the Government should introduce HPMAs, and that HPMAs should protect all habitats and species in their boundaries and be areas where marine extractive, destructive and depositional uses are prohibited, and only non-damaging levels of other activities are permitted.

There is wide interest from several sectors in the Government's response to the Review, and Defra is working with stakeholders to understand their views as the panel's recommendations are considered.

Defra will continue to work closely with all marine users to ensure the needs of all are effectively balanced whilst maintaining our aim of a healthy marine environment.



RT HON GEORGE EUSTICE MP