



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

The Rt Hon George Eustice MP
Secretary of State for Environment,
Food and Rural Affairs

Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

T 03459 335577
defra.helpline@defra.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/defra

Rt Hon Sir George Howarth MP

Our ref: MC2020/31997/AK

george.howarth.mp@parliament.uk

14 January 2021

Dear Sir George,

Thank you for your email of 1 December on behalf of your constituents about stopping sea blasts. 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.

I am familiar with the environmental challenges posed by the expansion of offshore wind, including the impact that underwater noise from unexploded ordnance (UXO) clearance and other activities can have on vulnerable marine species.

The Government is exploring the potential for UXO disposal by deflagration, but it is not yet scientifically proven to be fully effective at removing UXOs. There are also health and safety concerns as this method may disturb the UXO but not fully detonate it. Controlled quarry testing, funded by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy indicates a positive reduction in noise using this technique. The conclusions of these tests were delayed slightly due to the onset of COVID-19, but have recently been published at:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0025326X20307645?dgcid=coauthor>.

This technique now requires testing in the marine offshore environment, to assess risk and success, before this method can be endorsed as a safe and viable option.

Whilst more research is needed to fully support this new method, there are already requirements in place to mitigate impact of underwater noise on all protected marine species. The Marine Management Organisation fully considers potential mitigation to effectively manage underwater noise before issuing a marine licence for UXO clearance under the Marine and Coastal Access Act (2009). Currently when removing UXOs in-situ, the requirement for other forms of mitigation, such as acoustic deterrent devices are still needed, due to the possible need to resort to a controlled explosion on health and safety grounds. UXO disposal is purposely not included as an activity within a Development Consent Order deemed marine licence so that it can be appropriately and individually assessed in accordance with Habitats Regulations requirements. A marine wildlife licence is also required if the activity is likely to affect a UK or European protected species, which includes all species of dolphins, porpoises and whales.

Defra is committed to establishing a comprehensive understanding of noise disturbance in the marine environment, to better understand impacts and support new mitigation methods to protect the marine environment. We have worked with the Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies to publish guidance for assessing the significance of noise disturbance against Conservation Objectives of Harbour Porpoise Special Areas of Conservation.

We are working with the Southern North Sea Regulators Working Group to set up a Strategic Advice Group consisting of policy officials, regulators and consenting authorities, industry, advisory bodies and environmental non-Governmental organisations which will identify evidence gaps, highlight key areas for research and facilitate the adaptation of existing guidance to further manage underwater noise.

Defra has recently secured £4.3 million from Her Majesty's Treasury for a cross-Government Offshore Wind Enabling Actions programme, and this will explore how to reduce underwater noise impacts and increase understanding of the environmental impacts of underwater noise. We want to ensure that while we actively seek to reduce the impacts of climate change and achieve Net Zero, we are increasing marine protection to ensure healthy, resilient and diverse marine ecosystems.



RT HON GEORGE EUSTICE MP