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Finlay Carson MSP
Convener
Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

17 January 2024

Dear Finlay,

Annual fisheries negotiations for 2024: update to Committee

I am writing to provide you with a report on the outcomes of the annual negotiations for fishing opportunities in 2024. This is the fourth year that the UK has participated in negotiations as an independent Coastal State. The setting of fishing opportunities, including quotas, management measures, and access agreements, is routine annual business for all fishing nations.

Scotland's approach to negotiations

Our approach to fisheries negotiations is underpinned by well-established principles, which reflect a number of national and international commitments, including the Fisheries Act 2020, the Joint Fisheries Statement, and Scotland's Fisheries Management Strategy. Throughout the negotiations, the Scottish Government has held a consistent policy to seek the best outcomes for Scottish interests by securing sustainable and evidence-based catching opportunities.

These negotiations are of key importance to Scotland's offshore and onshore fishing sectors, coastal communities, and marine environment. A wide range of stakeholders take a keen interest in the setting of fishing opportunities, and expect us to secure a good package, particularly as they continue to try to recover from the impacts of the pandemic and disruption caused by Brexit, in addition to the ongoing cost of living crisis.

As always, engagement with industry and environmental stakeholders has been key to the development of our positions and approaches, both in the lead-up to and during negotiations. Officials have worked closely with stakeholders to ensure that all views are heard, engaging throughout the summer with a wide range of stakeholders on the approach and identifying priorities, and then spending a lot of time speaking to stakeholders throughout the live talks. I

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would like to record my thanks to all stakeholders for their interest and contribution to our negotiators' work.

The UK negotiates in a number of fora with a range of Coastal States. These include multilateral negotiations on Coastal State pelagic stocks, trilateral negotiations on jointly managed stocks between the UK, EU, and Norway, and bilateral negotiations with each of the EU, Norway, and the Faroe Islands. In addition, the UK is a Contracting Party and active participant in meetings of a number of Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs), including the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC), where management measures in international waters are agreed.

In all fora where Scotland holds an interest, we have continued to participate fully, maintaining a key role within the UK delegation and actively engaging to influence positions and approaches. In-person negotiators are supported by a home team of policy, science, and technical experts from across the Marine Directorate.

The Scottish Government's approach to negotiations on Total Allowable Catch (TAC) limits is underpinned by the best available scientific information, as well as socioeconomic considerations, and the dynamics of fisheries. Scientific advice for the majority of stocks is received from the International Council for Exploration of the Sea (ICES), and we fully support following this advice and setting fishing opportunities that are consistent with the Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) approach, wherever appropriate. However, setting an MSY-based TAC is not always possible, and it is sometimes more appropriate, for the stock and for fishing industries, to set a TAC above or below the headline scientific advice.

This is consistent with the Fisheries Act 2020, which outlines that sustainable fishing means that environmental, economic, and social considerations are appropriately balanced, to benefit present and future generations. The Joint Fisheries Statement further outlines that we must consider both the short- and long-term impacts of decisions on fish stocks, the wider marine environment, and fishing industries before taking action. This aligns with the sustainability, precautionary, scientific evidence, and ecosystem objectives in the Act, as well as wider international treaties, such as UNCLOS.

For 2024, there has been no regression in the number of TACs set at levels which meet sustainability objectives, and a number of positive outcomes for Scotland have been secured, providing key opportunities to vessels and coastal communities, and building on the successes of last year's negotiations. For key stocks in Scottish sea basins which are subject to scientific advice from ICES, 80% of the TACs have been set in line with MSY or headline advice (compared to 78% in 2023).

Below is a summary of the key outcomes of each of the negotiating fora in which the Scottish Government played an active part.

Coastal States negotiations

Multilateral negotiations took place in October to agree TACs for three of our key pelagic stocks: mackerel, blue whiting, and Atlanto-Scandian herring. For all three stocks, the TACs were set at the level of the scientific advice from ICES; this represented a decrease of -5.46% for mackerel compared to the 2023 TAC, a decrease of -23.70% for Atlanto-Scandian herring, and an increase of +12.51% for blue whiting.

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In line with the UK and Scotland's overarching approach to this year's negotiations, the UK did not co-sign the same Atlanto-Scandian herring agreed record as the Russian Federation, who are a Coastal State for this stock, and instead signed a separate, identical version.

The Agreed Records underline the importance of agreeing new, comprehensive sharing arrangements for these stocks. Discussions on this are ongoing, and will continue in early 2024, with the next round of consultations scheduled for January.

These talks are a top priority for Scotland. It is imperative that everything is done to ensure the appropriate management of these important stocks, to protect the sustainability of ecosystems and fisheries in the long term. Scotland will continue to put our full energy behind the sharing consultations, driving for agreement on shares which are fair, and based on robust evidence, reflecting the distribution of the stocks.

North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission

The NEAFC annual meeting took place in November, and concluded with agreement on a number of proposals which aim to ensure the conservation and optimum utilisation of fishery resources in the NEAFC Regulatory Area – which are areas of international waters outside the fisheries jurisdiction of individual Contracting Parties.

The meeting was attended by all six Contracting Parties to the NEAFC Convention. Key outcomes of the annual meeting included a rollover of the existing closure of the Rockall haddock box, a measure which protects juvenile haddock in the area. Measures for mackerel and Atlanto-Scandian herring were adopted, which reflect the outcomes of Coastal States consultations, and prevent countries who are not Coastal States or Fishing Parties to these stocks from fishing. Discussions on a blue whiting measure are currently ongoing through written procedure.

UK/EU/Norway trilateral negotiations

Trilateral negotiations between the UK, EU and Norway on six jointly managed North Sea stocks concluded with the signing of an Agreed Record on 08 December. The agreement sets out TACs and management measures for North Sea cod, haddock, whiting, saithe, plaice, and herring. TAC increases were agreed for all six stocks; this reflects positive advice from ICES, with all TACs set at levels consistent with the MSY approach.

Establishing appropriate catch limits for North Sea and West of Scotland cod was Scotland's top priority in this year's negotiations, and the increases in these quotas for 2024 reflect an extremely positive picture of the health of the newly-defined north-western stock. It is clear that the narrative that West of Scotland and North Sea whitefish stocks are in a depleted state no longer holds, based on this year's advice.

This represents a step change away from the previous zero TAC advice for the West of Scotland, and is the first step in transforming the way in which we manage this iconic stock. Discussions to further develop the management of this stock in light of the latest scientific information will take place in 2024. Scotland's priority will be to ensure an appropriate and evidence-based approach to these management changes, as we move to a new set of area-based advice and subsequent sharing discussions with Norway.

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The trilateral Agreed Record also reflects a commitment by all Parties to progress work in 2024 on the development of Long Term Management Strategies for jointly managed stocks in the coming year.

UK/EU bilateral negotiations

Negotiations between the UK and the EU to set TACs for more than 70 stocks, including the North Sea and West of Scotland, concluded on 06 December. Among the stocks covered by this agreement are North Sea and West of Scotland Nephrops, hake, monkfish and ling, as well as Rockall haddock and cod, and West of Scotland whiting and cod.

TACs have been set at sustainable levels which take into account scientific advice from ICES, socioeconomic factors, and where appropriate, TAC constraints to mitigate the large increases and decreases found in the scientific advice.

For data-limited stocks that are not assessed under the MSY approach, we have viewed the precautionary approach as a viable path to sustainability. Looking forward to 2024, we will seek to progress discussions with our negotiating partners on the approach to stocks where decreases are routinely proposed simply because of the methodologies that are being used by ICES, rather than because of actual changes in stock dynamics. Scientific advice is critical to sustainable fisheries management and decision making, but we need to have confidence that we are working with and making decisions based on the best available evidence.

UK/Norway bilateral negotiations

Norway is one of the UK's closest fishing neighbours, and the exchanges of opportunities agreed in 2022 and 2023 have provided much-welcomed additional opportunities and flexibility for Scotland's fishing industry.

Negotiations on quota and access arrangements for 2024 concluded on 14 December. The agreement includes reciprocal access for demersal stocks, which will allow Scottish fishers to catch up to 30,000 tonnes of their North Sea quotas in Norwegian waters. Access has also been agreed for North Sea herring in UK waters, and Atlanto-Scandian herring in Norwegian waters, up to a cap of 20,000 tonnes. These are the same levels of access as were agreed last year.

Quota exchanges have also been agreed, including an inward transfer to the UK of monkfish, a key stock for many Scottish vessels.

UK/Faroe bilateral negotiations

Discussions with the Faroe Islands on quotas exchanges are also underway, and will continue over the coming weeks with the aim to conclude as soon as possible.

Stakeholders have been fully updated on the outcomes of the negotiations, and written or agreed records of each of the concluded negotiations are available on the Scottish Government website.

Allocations of quotas to individual Producer Organisations and vessels will be made in the coming weeks.

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I have attached a brief note summarising the main outcomes of TAC negotiations for the interest of the Committee.

I hope this information is helpful.

Yours sincerely,



MAIRI GOUGEON

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Negotiations for 2024 fishing opportunities: key outcomes

Forum	Stock	TAC % change	UK quota % change including annual TCA adjustment	
Coastal States	North-East Atlantic mackerel	-5.46%	-3.61%	
	Blue whiting	+12.51%	+13.33%	
	Atlanto-Scandian herring	-23.70%	-23.70%	
Trilateral	North Sea cod	+15.00%	+17.52%	
	North Sea haddock	+73.66%	+75.31%	
	North Sea whiting	+123.65%	+131.69%	
	North Sea saithe	+25.30%	+31.00%	
	North Sea plaice	+2.63%	+2.63%	
	North Sea herring (A fleet)	+28.69%	+33.22%	
	UK/EU bilateral	North Sea Anglerfish	0%	+1.1%
		Western Anglerfish	0%	+3.99%
North Sea Greater Silver Smelt		-7.54%	-7.69%	
Western Greater Silver Smelt		+3.37%	+3.30%	
North Sea Blue Ling		-18.52%	-14.29%	
Western Blue Ling		+0.18%	+3.14%	
Western Boarfish		+20.00%	+19.93%	
Western Black Scabbardfish		-24.43%	-24.27%	
West of Scotland Cod		+15.04%	+20.37%	
Rockall Cod		0%	+3.85%	
Western Spurdog		+2.89%	+2.88%	
North Sea Spurdog		+2.88%	+2.91%	
Rockall Haddock		0%	+0.64%	
West of Scotland Herring		+19.97%	+21.24%	
North Sea Hake		-12.38%	-4.33%	
Western Hake		-12.38%	-10.91%	
Western Horse Mackerel		-1.12%	-1.11%	
Lemon Sole and Witch		-19.14%	-18.41%	
North Sea Megrin		+9.66%	+9.65%	
West of Scotland Megrin		+9.64%	+13.72%	
North Sea Ling		-12.07%	-11.68%	
West of Scotland Ling		-11.83%	-10.64%	
North Sea Nephrops		-4.03%	-4.03%	
West of Scotland Nephrops		-1.28%	-1.28%	
West of Scotland Plaice		0%	0%	
West of Scotland Pollack		-25.60%	-26.09%	
Western Roundnose Grenadier		-28.40%	-28.57%	
North Sea Sole		-59.84%	-55.63%	

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	West of Scotland Sole	0%	0%
	North Sea Skates and Rays	+81.24%	+82.61%
	Western Skates and Rays	-0.42%	+1.63%
	Turbot and Brill	-3.76%	-0.98%
	North Sea Tusk	-8.77%	-8.7%
	Western Tusk	+61.62%	+62.89%
	West of Scotland Whiting	+19.99%	+21.93%

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