



OFFICIAL REPORT  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee

Wednesday 15 September 2021

Session 6



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**RURAL AFFAIRS, ISLANDS AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2021, Session 6**

**CONVENER**

\*Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

\*Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

\*Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)

\*Rachael Hamilton (Etrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)

\*Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)

\*Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Jimmy Buchan (Scottish Seafood Association)

Calum Duncan (Marine Conservation Society)

Katie Gillham (NatureScot)

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

Elspeth Macdonald (Scottish Fishermen's Federation)

Charles Millar (Sustainable Inshore Fisheries Trust)

Tavish Scott (Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation)

Cathy Tilbrook (NatureScot)

Elaine Whyte (Clyde Fishermen's Association)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Emma Johnston

**LOCATION**

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)



## Scottish Parliament

### Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee

Wednesday 15 September 2021

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]*

#### Fisheries and Aquaculture

**The Convener (Finlay Carson):** Good morning, and welcome to the fourth meeting of the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee. Before we begin, I remind all committee members who are using electronic devices to switch them to silent.

We have received apologies from Jim Fairlie. I welcome Emma Harper, who is sitting in as his substitute. I invite you to declare any relevant interests or say that you have none to declare.

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** Good morning. I have no interests to declare.

**The Convener:** Thank you. Our first item of business is an introductory evidence session on fisheries and aquaculture. I welcome to the meeting our panel of industry stakeholders, who join us remotely: Elaine Whyte, who is the executive secretary of the Clyde Fishermen's Association; Elspeth Macdonald, who is the chief executive officer of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation; Tavish Scott, who is the chief executive of the Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation; and Jimmy Buchan, who is the chief executive officer of the Scottish Seafood Association.

Before we move to members' questions, I invite our witnesses to make brief opening remarks. I am afraid that we have only one hour for the session, so I politely request that you keep those remarks to no more than a few minutes. The advantage of your appearing remotely is that I can turn you off at will, so please keep your remarks to a minimum.

I invite Elaine Whyte to begin, and I will then move to Elspeth, Tavish and—last but not least—Jimmy Buchan.

**Elaine Whyte (Clyde Fishermen's Association):** Thank you for having us. The Clyde Fishermen's Association now has just under 50 boats. In the past few years, we have lost quite a number of boats, and that speaks to what we will be talking about today. I am also a member of the Communities Inshore Fisheries Alliance—CIFA—which is a national organisation of just over 400 boats.

I want to concentrate mainly on capacity, resilience and potential, because Brexit and Covid have thrown up issues for our market, processes, infrastructure and opportunity to fish. Those are the key issues that we want to focus on going forward.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much, Elaine. You have set the bar very high for the other witnesses.

**Elspeth Macdonald (Scottish Fishermen's Federation):** Good morning. I am afraid that I will not be able to match Elaine for brevity. Thank you for inviting us to take part in today's session. SFF very much welcomes the opportunity to engage with parliamentarians on behalf of our industry, and we hope that the committee finds the session useful.

I do not need to rehearse the turbulence that fishermen have faced in the past 18 months—that is summarised in the briefing that I submitted in advance of the session. Today, it is important that we look forward, not back, and that we focus on the future challenges and opportunities.

I say up front and clearly that the industry is about producing food—and not just any food, but healthy, nutritious food with an extremely low-carbon footprint. That food is produced from renewable and sustainable wild fish stocks, without the need for high inputs of such things as fertiliser or chemicals. Wild caught Scottish fish have a lower carbon footprint than all other sources of animal protein, and, indeed, it is lower than many plant-based sources of protein.

I am sure that we will speak today about how Scotland and the United Kingdom are rightly focused on transitioning our economies to net zero. Scotland is blessed with fishing grounds that are not just highly productive but well managed, which means that we have a great asset on our doorstep—our seas—to help us on the path to net zero. We must not lose sight of that.

We are concerned by some of the commitments in the co-operation agreement between the Scottish Government and the Scottish Greens that give the impression of prioritising conservation over climate-smart food production. At SFF, we are very proud of our track record in working with the Scottish Government over many years on the identification, designation and management of marine protected areas. So far, our focus has always been on achieving a balance, and we want to see that approach continue, based on good evidence, co-design and transparency.

I also want to highlight briefly to the committee the importance of our sector having space to operate in. Scotland's seas are becoming increasingly crowded as the blue economy expands; offshore renewables will clearly be a

major contributor to the energy transition that is needed to achieve net zero, but we must have equitable and effective marine planning to enable co-existence between our industries. If Scotland is to become a net zero country with a thriving society and economy in which all benefit, we need both sectors to succeed.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much. I will move on to Tavish Scott. I am sorry, Tavish, but we do not have any sound at the moment.

**Tavish Scott (Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation):** How is that? Is that any better?

**The Convener:** That is grand.

**Tavish Scott:** Good morning. I am sorry about that, convener—the idea that you had cut me off before I had even started was too much for me.

I welcome the chance to join Elspeth Macdonald in speaking to the committee this morning, and I offer an open invitation to you and all your colleagues to visit a sea farm to learn more about our industry. I would be very pleased to see parliamentarians of all political persuasions at any stage.

I just want to highlight three points. First, like many other sectors in the Scottish economy, our sector is facing labour challenges, and we would welcome a flexible United Kingdom-wide immigration policy in addition to measures that our sector would like to instigate with our education colleagues.

Secondly, as a member representing a rural constituency, Mr Carson, you will appreciate how acute the issue of housing is in rural areas. That issue is very acute for the people who work in our sector and for their employment in rural and island Scotland.

Finally, on the issue of transport, you will not be surprised to hear me highlight the export needs of our sector in, first of all, bringing our product into the central belt, and then exporting it out of Scotland and across the UK. The transport infrastructure is creaking, and we need Government assistance to make it better than it is at the moment in servicing the islands and in other ways.

I am happy to rest there, convener.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much. Finally, I call Jimmy Buchan.

**Jimmy Buchan (Scottish Seafood Association):** Good morning, convener and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you guys this morning.

The SSA's membership covers small, medium and large processors, as well as a range of

processing from shellfish and pelagic to white fish. In other words, we cover a lot of seafood.

It is fantastic to have this opportunity to engage with you guys. Tavish Scott and I called for a task force way back in January, and it just shows what happens when the industry, politicians of all persuasions and, indeed, Governments come together to work for the collective good. I just want to put on record and confirm that Victoria Prentis, David Duguid, Fergus Ewing and Mairi Gougeon have attended Scottish seafood exports task force meetings and have delivered well for the industry, which is great.

Exports are continuing to flow daily and demand is good from our European Union customers. The problem is the politics in between, and we need to get better and smarter at how we work with our EU counterparts. The demand is there, and we have the product, but we need to get it to our customers.

I also want to put on record that Food Standards Scotland, environmental health officers, Seafish and Seafood Scotland have done a sterling job. With all those stakeholders working collectively, we have managed to get through the huge block that we had back in January. However, there is still much work to be done.

That is enough from me for the moment, but I just want to say again that I am really happy to engage with the committee, because we need to work together. I know that we have a lot of ground to cover, so I will be quiet for the moment. I am sure that I will get another opportunity to speak.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much. I very much appreciate those brief introductions, and I am sure that you will have the opportunity to add a lot more to those comments during the questioning.

I will kick off with a question about the impact of Covid-19 and EU exit on the seafood trade. We have already heard about stakeholders' excellent engagement in the Scottish seafood exports task force, and I know that, as a result, it was able to solve issues that appeared to be very small but that had big repercussions for the industry, such as having a system that did not know the difference between monkfish cheeks and tails.

It is my understanding, Tavish, that you played a role in trying to digitise records so as to streamline the exporting system. The task force has now completed its work, and there is now a Scottish seafood industry action group. I will ask each member of the panel in turn how imports and exports are functioning nine months on. What are the on-going and unresolved issues that the new seafood industry action group is likely to have to address?

Let us start with Jimmy Buchan.

**Jimmy Buchan:** Thank you for asking me to come back in so quickly. Seafood is now flowing. There is still much work to be done, and the continuation of the task force's format in the new group is welcome. There are still issues that we need to address. We have just learned in the past 24 hours that the European Union will continue to have concessions for incoming goods but that we, as an industry, will have to continue to endure the imbalance of that on the outward trajectory.

I will offer you a simplification of the situation. We have a wagon and a tractor pulling fish. Everything in the wagon—the pallets and the fish—must be certified, approved and stamped going outwards. The wagon then reaches its destination in France. It unloads, everything is checked and all is good. The same wagon goes to the next pick-up station and picks up goods coming in. There are absolutely no checks and that wagon comes back into the UK seamlessly. That is how unbalanced the whole thing is; that is where things are. Until we get equality, we will find it hard to get our EU counterparts to come to the table to find a smoother, faster way of supplying our seafood. Seafood is getting to its destination, but we just have to overcome those problems.

I will highlight one more really important point, which I would like you to note down. The key is having vets at the hubs to certify the seafood. The private sector, on its trajectory coming out of lockdown, can and will pay more for vets if it needs to. We—and ministers and officials—must therefore ensure that we have something in place that helps us to retain vets in the hubs, which are critical areas. Without them, nothing flows. I cannot say it enough: without the vets, the seafood is going nowhere and the public sector is losing out to the private sector hand over fist.

**The Convener:** I will move on to Tavish Scott to give the view of the aquaculture industry, please.

**Tavish Scott:** I have a couple of points to add to Jimmy Buchan's very fair analysis of the situation. On the export system into Europe, we need the digital system to replace the paper-based system that we have at the moment. If the committee were minded to ask about the progress of that, we would be very grateful, not just in my sector but, I suspect, across the seafood sector more generally. That would be very helpful.

Aside from that, as the number 1 food export business for Scotland, we depend on long-haul flights out of Heathrow. That market out of Scotland might start to emerge again to some extent, and, broadly speaking, Heathrow is the hub for that. For the far-east and for the west coast of North America, not much long haul has been going on through the Covid period, as you

will well appreciate. We will probably see that coming back over the next couple of years, but I think that all of us who export seafood using long haul into what are very important and bigger markets have seen that market close down. I think that your question about the Covid recovery relates directly to that. We have seen more products going into Europe, including salmon—France is the biggest market for salmon that we have—than we have seen going into the long-haul markets.

My final point that might be of interest to the committee concerns Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. Its export stats have been inaccurate on salmon over the first nine months from 1 January. If the committee were minded at some stage to look into that, we would be very grateful. Those stats are very important for both Scottish and UK Government purposes, and even more so for our sectors. Now that we are no longer in the European Union, it is really important that those export stats are accurate and on time. That has not quite been the case over this period.

**The Convener:** Elspeth, could you give the perspective of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation?

10:15

**Elspeth Macdonald:** Jimmy and Tavish have given a clear and concise account of the situation that we have seen this year. I will turn back the clock to last year and reflect on the disruption that the industry suffered as a consequence of Covid. Although the situation is clearly much better in the UK and elsewhere in relation to our marketplaces, if last year has taught us anything it is that it is hard to predict what might happen in the future and whether there will be further Covid disruption.

Last year showed the industry's high reliance on the hospitality sector and on our very valuable export markets, which has been mentioned. Perhaps we need to think about how we can encourage greater domestic consumption of our product and not be so reliant on the hospitality sector, which, as we have seen over the past 18 months, has been subject to significant disruption.

**The Convener:** Elaine, could you give us an idea of how the past nine months have been for fishermen at the coalface? That is not a good analogy. How has it been for those going out on boats, day to day? How do you see things going forward?

**Elaine Whyte:** I will go back further than that and say that we always saw the problems in the market coming. That is not a constitutional stance—we are neutral on that issue—but, when everyone else was talking about access to stocks, we always saw the market as a major issue,

because 86 per cent of our stocks go to the EU. It does us no good to have been right on that or that we were a Cassandra; we were just pointing out that we needed better planning.

It has been absolutely awful for fishermen. Things are picking up slightly, but I have fishermen who are still being paid the same price for their prawns as they were paid at the height of the pandemic. The issue that a lot of our members are concerned about is buying back into the EU market. As things improve, we are buying our way back into markets that we may have lost to Norway or Ireland, for example, and, by doing that, we are still keeping prices extremely low for the smaller fleets.

In relation to the money in the fisherman's pocket, he might be getting a slightly better price, but it is still not where it has to be for fleets to be resilient.

The other thing that I am concerned about is what happens with Northern Ireland, which is linked to our infrastructure. A lot of our prawns, for example, go to Northern Ireland to be fully processed into scampi, which is a massive part of some of our fleet's processes. If we continue to have issues—if they are moved down the line—I can see us having problems. I would like us to have more infrastructure on this side of the water to make sure that our fleet is secure in relation to processing.

However, things are very much improved. Like everybody, I thank all our politicians for coming together in the cross-party group to work through the implementation issues, but we must be aware that the resilience of the fishermen at the coalface is very low and that their prices are not what we hoped they would be. I caveat that by saying that there is the potential for improvement.

I will also caveat my point on prices and capacity. In relation to sending away produce for processing, we must be cognisant of the fact that the price of the increased paperwork and the time that that takes can be very difficult for small rural communities.

**The Convener:** Let us move on to questions on labour.

**Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** I am glad to hear that there has been some forward movement, however tentative. We are all aware of the news reports about fresh seafood rotting in the back of lorries, empty fish markets and boats tied up in harbour. That was upsetting for many people, so it is nice to hear some positivity.

Jimmy Buchan, I know that you have, rightly, been vocal about the issue of labour shortages, which is a massive problem here, on the north-

east coast. However, what I really want to get to the bottom of and ask the panel about is the double whammy—it is something that we often hear about and I have used the phrase myself—of Brexit and Covid. For the benefit of the committee, can you clarify exactly what the Brexit issues are and what the Covid issues are? I think that knowing that is essential to enabling us to come up with targeted solutions. What should be prioritised that is within our gift with regard to labour shortages and haulage problems?

**Jimmy Buchan:** Thank you for that question, Karen. The two issues are linked, but they are separate issues. On Covid, we are returning to some sort of new normal, we might say—it is not normal, but it will be a new normal—which, in itself, creates problems in the workplace. People will be absent from work, either because they have the illness or because they have been in close contact with someone who has it. The industry will continue to limp through the situation one way or another, until the vaccine overcomes the problem or we find other solutions in the workplace.

That aside, Brexit is creating problems—I would not say all the problems, because this labour shortage was coming long before Covid or Brexit, as I know, because I have been raising the issue with the Government and ministers generally for more than four years. Covid and Brexit have possibly exaggerated the situation and made it a much more front-line problem. However, I would rather look at how we solve the problem, and the problem can be solved. The Government can change the shortage occupation list, which was compiled on the advice of the Migration Advisory Committee. It can give concessions to industry. The industry is calling out for labour. It is becoming apparent that the labour shortage is not just in the UK—there are shortages of lorry drivers across Europe. It appears that people no longer find the sector to be an attractive place to work. There are now other job opportunities, especially with hospitality opening up with better working hours and better working conditions, so perhaps that is where people are seeking work. Therefore, we will continue to have that labour shortage. We need to either open up the jobs to a more global workforce or find other solutions within the UK workforce or with people who are available for work in the areas where the work is. That might be a problem.

In north-east Scotland, we work and live in an area with a buoyant oil and gas industry and relatively low unemployment, and we do not have the amount of people—the bodies—to recruit from. We need to get people into the area or move the factories to where the people are, or we need to find an alternative solution. As I have said, we need to sit down with both Governments and with industry stakeholders and work through these



problems to come up with action plans and solutions that can help the industry.

**Tavish Scott:** I support Jimmy Buchan's point about the need for a flexible UK immigration policy, because the issue that we have had in the processing sector of the salmon industry relates particularly to processing, whether it is in Fort William or in Rosyth, where there is a large Mowi processing business. That is simply about the lack of labour. In many parts of Scotland, as Jimmy Buchan rightly says, there simply are not the people to attract. As companies, we have done everything that we can to provide better terms and conditions and to improve everything about working in a processing plant, but the labour force just is not there.

We would strongly support any work that could be done with the United Kingdom Government on a more flexible approach to immigration, because there are no two ways about it: many people who previously worked in our processing sector came from eastern Europe. They were very valued members of our businesses but also of our communities, and we would welcome the return of that. We would be very grateful for anything that the committee might wish to do on that.

**Elaine Whyte:** I back up what everyone else has said. However, a lot of the areas where we work are very rural, and the issue is not paying more in wages but getting skilled people to come in and do the job.

On labour policy, I agree that we have to do something. Speaking of the catching sector, if we cannot catch wild fish, there will be no processing or anything else onwards from that. We need to consider what we can do to support those people and boats that are left and to support rural areas that do not have access to a sufficient workforce.

**Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab):** Good morning. My question relates to labour, particularly off the back of what Jimmy Buchan said about the need for a global workforce. Constituents in my north-east region have raised concerns about the living and working conditions of some workers in the industry, particularly those who come from international areas, such as the Philippines. What more do panel members think can be done to protect the rights and wellbeing of workers locally, whether they are from Scotland, Europe or somewhere else? What can be done to create decent jobs in local communities, as well?

**The Convener:** That is probably one for you again, Jimmy.

**Jimmy Buchan:** I am alarmed to hear that there might be such issues. If there are, I am happy to take that up with you separately, Ms Villalba, on a case-by-case basis. I am not aware of any issues

of misuse of the good fellowship that we have with our international communities. I am happy to take that up offline.

However, I would like to raise the point that we need inward investment from the Governments, as grant assistance, and we need to have the vision to make our workplaces attractive. We will become less dependent on the use of global workers if our local people see joining the sector as a good career move. Some of the older fish units that we are operating in were built 30 or 40 years ago. They are very outdated for what would be expected in a modern workplace, so we need that inward investment.

We need the innovation. In my short time in this job, one thing that I have learned is that, where innovation comes in, it does not push jobs out, as I had thought it would. It allows people in existing jobs to be upskilled, so they become the operators of the innovation. However, getting to that point requires high investment. We need the policies, the enthusiasm and the vision of stakeholders and Governments to drive that forward, so that we have a trailblazing processing industry that people want to work in rather than shy away from.

**Elsbeth Macdonald:** Certainly, some of the fleet in the north-east is quite reliant on international crew. The UK-wide immigration system has fairly stringent visa conditions that constrain and control how that works. In relation to Ms Villalba's question, if there are particular issues that she wishes to take up separately, I am happy to do that with her, as Jimmy Buchan also suggested.

A lot of work is going on in the industry to make sure that, wherever you are from, if you are working in the fishing industry, your rights are protected. The Fishermen's Welfare Alliance is a network of industry bodies that tries to ensure that we have the right measures in place and that the industry is compliant with the International Labour Organisation requirements on fishing crew.

Certain visa conditions limit what international crew are able to do when they are working in the UK, but, if there are particular cases that Ms Villalba would like to talk about, I would ask her to get in touch with us.

**Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** Notwithstanding everything that people have said about the need to invest in the future and a homegrown workforce, I take it that the panel would agree that there is an urgent situation that requires the availability of visas on an emergency basis. I am keen to know whether Tavish or Elaine or the other witnesses would support the UK Government taking such a measure.

10:30

In relation to that, the panel will know that, in many areas, especially island ones, some sectors are struggling to find a workforce at all, which has implications for how we work together on issues such as housing. We will not have a workforce, wherever they come from, if there is nowhere for them to live.

**Tavish Scott:** I agree with Dr Allan's assessment of the situation. I am in Lerwick today and we were discussing those issues just an hour ago. I endorse his point about any measure that the UK Government could take regarding immigration policy. We have all argued that we need flexibility. We would be supportive of any work by the Parliament to seek a system that would give us a little more flexibility.

I also endorse Dr Allan's point about housing. That is a significant issue for the salmon farming sector in every part of Scotland, and it is particularly acute in the islands. It is another consequence of Covid. There has been increasing pressure on housing in Shetland because people have sought to leave the United Kingdom mainland to find property and housing in our part of the world. That has increased the pressure on housing. Less is available for young people and families and for working folk who are employed in the salmon farming sector. You might say that one of the downsides of Covid and of the difficult period that we have been through as a country and as an economy has been the increased pressure on house prices in rural areas. That has been difficult for all of us, and that would certainly be the case for those of us in the salmon farming sector.

We have worked hard to put money into development trusts and housing initiatives in the areas in which we farm. We will do more of that in the future, in the islands and on the west coast of Scotland. I am keen to work with housing associations and other providers on any solutions that could assist us in providing more housing for Dr Allan's constituents and for people living in the rural Highlands and Islands.

**Elaine Whyte:** I agree with the point that Tavish Scott made. I always favour the Danish system, which looks to repopulate from the domestic population. There is also the Norwegian system, in which the north of the country takes on more than 60 per cent of the Russian and eastern European workers who come to the country, although that is not a national policy.

We must look at depopulation in certain areas, particularly in the west of Scotland. I am worried that work is being conducted in silos. We must marry that up with how we make marine policy. If depopulation is one of several issues in different

policy areas, we must balance them against each other. I agree that we need a resilient visa system that works with local areas.

**The Convener:** Beatrice Wishart has some questions about landings and vessel tracking.

**Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** My first question is about the interaction between the future fisheries management strategy, which was published at the end of last year, and the commitment in the programme for government to deliver a step change in marine protection. What are the potential trade-offs between the two?

**Elsbeth Macdonald:** That will be a key challenge during this session of Parliament. "Scotland's Fisheries Management Strategy 2020-2030" was published by the Scottish Government towards the end of 2020, after quite detailed consultation during 2019. The strategy set out the Government's direction, but the co-operation agreement between the Scottish Greens and the Government has put, if you like, a rather different complexion on things with a step change in marine conservation. Indeed, there are a lot of additional things in the agreement that were not envisaged in the future fisheries management strategy. There is still a lot to be discussed between the Government, the industry and stakeholders with regard to what the priorities will be and how the respective programmes of work will move forward.

From our sector's perspective, the key element is ensuring that the right balance is struck. As I said in my opening remarks, we have a successful industry that produces a climate-smart foodstuff, and, if we are to be constrained in that respect, we will have to consider not just the implications for the fleet but questions such as whether that protein gap will be filled with food from other sources that might be worse for the environment because of, for example, higher emissions.

As I said in my opening comments, our industry has a really good track record of working with the Government on marine conservation. For example, we have been very involved in the identification, designation and development of marine protected areas in what has been a really co-operative and constructive process, and a lot of trust has built up between the Government and the industry. That approach has been very effective, with a focus on achieving the right balance between conservation and economic objectives, and the Government and industry will need to work very closely together in the same transparent, trusting, collaborative way in the next stage of work on the marine protected areas, which relates to the management measures, and in the new work on developing the highly protected marine areas, which are to cover at least 10 per cent of Scotland's seas. It is important that an evidence-based approach is taken to that, too.

We will have a lot to do to work through with the Government how all these priorities are going to play out, given the priorities that were set out in the future fisheries management strategy and the new priorities in the programme for government. There is only so much resource for taking these priorities forward, so we will have much to do to understand how they should be prioritised. There will also be a great deal to do in the consultative and collaborative approach that I referred to as we move forward, because it would be a great tragedy if we lost the trust, confidence and collaboration that we have built up thus far.

**Beatrice Wishart:** Do you have any comments on that, Mr Buchan?

**Jimmy Buchan:** I can only support what Elspeth Macdonald has said. Although we are not directly involved in catching the fish, we have a duty to market it, and we support fish that comes from sustainable sources and that has been harvested responsibly. It is important that our industry's marketing arm is aligned with that, even though our direct involvement is limited.

I think that our marketing arm needs to do more with regard to these fisheries. We have to get people eating more seafood, and their having the confidence to do so comes from the issue of how the fish are harvested and managed. In short, we support what is going on but we are not directly involved in it.

**Beatrice Wishart:** Can I ask one more question, convener?

**The Convener:** Yes, as long as it is brief.

**Beatrice Wishart:** With regard to our future catching policy, I note the reference in Elspeth Macdonald's submission to the advice from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea—ICES—particularly with regard to North Sea cod. We hear locally that there is plenty of cod in the sea, but the scientific evidence does not seem to agree with that. Could you expand on the point that you made in your submission?

**Elspeth Macdonald:** It might be helpful for the committee to understand, for context, that, over the past two years, the ICES catch advice on North Sea cod has been a reduction of about 80 per cent. That is massive and has had a huge impact on the white-fish fleet in Scotland. Another important point for the committee to understand is that the scientific modelling work that underpins the advice that comes from ICES is based on a model of the whole of the North Sea. It has become evident over the past 20 years or so that species are on the move, probably as a result of climate change. There is a very noticeable northward movement of many species as land and sea temperatures rise. The North Sea cod population is migrating north, which is why we still

see a lot of cod in Scottish waters. However, the model that underpins the ICES advice for North Sea cod is based on the whole of the North Sea. We find ourselves in a situation in which we have a model that is recommending significant cuts to North Sea cod yet, in Scotland, we have an abundance of North Sea cod in our waters.

We are keen to push both Governments on that. We have been discussing with both Governments the need to have an independent sense check of the ICES advice—that advice comes from one source and is not subject to independent challenge. We have also been in many discussions with both Governments about how we can work with ICES to change that North Sea cod model to reflect the fact that there is a northward migration of fish stocks. However, that will take some time. In the meantime, it is important that we have some independent challenge and sense check of the ICES advice to ask whether it looks right and whether it reflects what fishermen are seeing at sea every day. At the moment, it does not do that.

**The Convener:** I am conscious of the time limitations today, so we will move on to questions on regulation and salmon farming.

**Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** The panel will be aware that, in the previous parliamentary session, we had inquiries on salmon farming. There was also a report from the salmon interactions working group, which highlighted the challenges in the sector and the need to bring about regulatory change to improve efficiency and meet the environmental objectives that have been highlighted. How will you move beyond the status quo to ensure that the current regulatory framework is as efficient and as effective as it can be? I assume that Tavish Scott will want to start off on that question.

**Tavish Scott:** There are two obvious points to make about that. First, as we said in our submission to the committee, we have responded fully to all the committee reports that were produced in the previous session of Parliament. There is considerable weight of evidence in those submissions, and I am sure that members will have an opportunity to peruse those. They illustrate all the progress that we have made across all the recommendations that previous parliamentary committees made.

Secondly, Professor Russel Griggs has been appointed to review the regulatory system in Scotland—I notice that the committee asked the cabinet secretary about that last week. We strongly support and endorse that appointment, as well as the work that he is doing with individual companies and other interests across the salmon farming sector. Having asked him about it, I know that he plans to speak to a great variety of people

in drawing together his recommendations. I understand that he plans to publish those later in the year. The Government will then consider the report and decide how to take the recommendations forward.

Our principle is very simple: we do not want less regulation; rather, we want better and more streamlined regulation. That is in the interests of both the marine environment and a sustainable agricultural industry for the future. I am pleased to say that the current Government entirely supports that. That point was made in answer to one of the parliamentary questions recently put by Rachael Hamilton.

10:45

We are very comfortable with that territory, and we believe that it is moving in a positive direction for all those who work in our sector—3,000 people across the member companies—as well as another 10,000 people in our supply chain.

The salmon interactions working group report noted that there are 12 pressures on wild fish, so we have asked the Government, when it publishes its response—which is due in the next month or so—to make clear what progress has been made on all those pressures on the wild fish. I share that agenda with Alan Wells, at Fisheries Management Scotland, and many other people who work in the wild fish sector. That is an agreed piece of work, and we want to see and understand the science and the evidence behind that. I hope that Rachael Hamilton will endorse that approach, which is based on science and understanding rather than on the rhetoric that floats around in that particular area.

**Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP):** I thank the witnesses for coming along. Scotland and salmon farming are synonymous—I believe that about 75 per cent of supply chain is in Scotland. I am interested in hearing more about the innovative work that is happening, as well as how that work impacts on the environmental side of things, such as how you are reducing the environmental impact of salmon fishing.

**Tavish Scott:** That is a great question. Jenni Minto is very knowledgeable about the sector and we appreciate her interest. There is no parliamentary constituency that does not have part of the salmon supply chain in it, and, with regard to innovation, what is fascinating about our supply chain and its weight and range across Scotland is that it is driving innovation and new ways of adapting to the circumstances that we are in while looking for sustainable solutions. That is reflected in the headline document that we produced last year, which is a sustainability charter that aims to make our sector net zero in greenhouse gas

emissions, in line with the Government and United Nations requirements that are placed on all of us as citizens and companies. We will play a very active role in driving that work forward, and that is where the market will come up with solutions. Many members of our supply chain work not just in Scotland but as Scottish companies in international places, so they are building on expertise and learning from, for example, Norway and Faroe in order to provide more environmentally appropriate solutions for Scotland.

It is an exciting world, and we are very pleased that it is developing at such a rate. It is helpful for industrial sectors when politicians at the Government level set big targets around, for example, greenhouse gas emissions targets, because they make us focus on what we have to do. I will give you a practical example of that. Yesterday, I was up in Uyeasound, in the very north of Shetland, to look at the vessels that take crews out to salmon farms, at the generators that are on our barges and at how our fish are fed. All those issues are now being looked at in the context of renewable sources, battery power and other ways in which we produce power, so as to reduce our emissions. That will happen right across the sector, from the far south of Scotland right up to Unst, in the north.

Those kinds of innovations are happening at pace. I believe that, when our sector publishes a very transparent annual report on our sustainability charter, we will be able to provide Jenni Minto and colleagues with lots of evidence as to what we are doing and how much more we want to do in the future in order to be a truly sustainable industry going forward into the next decade.

**The Convener:** Emma Harper has a very short supplementary question.

**Emma Harper:** My question is not for right now, convener; I was just going to say that I can come in after Alasdair Allan.

**The Convener:** That is grand. Ariane Burgess has questions on the climate and ecological crisis.

**Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green):** I thank the witnesses for coming today. It is good to hear about the challenges that you face, and I am interested in hearing about your approach to the climate and ecological crisis.

As we know, Scotland's seas play a key role in the climate by storing carbon, but they are susceptible to a number of threats through our activity. That activity includes bottom-contact and mid-water fishing, which is the most geographically widespread and direct pressure on our marine environment. Commercial fishing also contributes to greenhouse gas emissions,

although I heard in introductions from some of the witnesses that that is perhaps less the case.

We are considering the impacts of ocean acidification, sea level rise and the changing ecology, about which we heard from Elspeth Macdonald when she spoke about the fish moving further north. I want to say from the outset that I am looking for a long-term future for fishing. How do we move from what we are doing right now—overfishing—to a more sustainable practice? I would love to hear the witnesses' views on what a just transition would mean for the fishing industry and coastal communities.

**Elaine Whyte:** That is, of course, a concern. More than anything else, we must be responsive to the change. My first thought is that we need to look at the science. We need to do more scientific research, particularly on the inshore fisheries—not only the sea bed, the sediment and various similar things, but the stocks. We talked about cod moving north, but species such as skate and spurdog are moving into areas in greater numbers as well. We must have responsive science. We need to get our Government working in a reference-style fleet with our fishing industry so that we can see where there might be problems and where there might be opportunities to have a sustainable fishing fleet.

Several fishermen have spoken to me about a just transition. It feels as though we are on the periphery of that and need to be a bit more engaged in it, because, if something is done to people, they tend not to like it—they like to be involved. I agree with it, but, with the climate situation and everything else that we are talking about, we cannot make decisions in silos. We need to think about what is happening with local communities, how sustainable they are and how sustainable the environment is—everything as a whole.

Elspeth Macdonald mentioned the MPA process and the priority marine features process. Those probably keep us awake more than anything else, not because we do not want to protect the features concerned—we absolutely do—but because it is necessary to get the balance and the science right to know that we are doing something that will not harm communities but will allow sustainable development to continue. I went through the MPA process. We did not have as good an experience as Elspeth Macdonald—I can recall that because I was there—and, in our region, it lost the trust of fishermen. Whatever we do, we have to take the fishermen with us. Any good fisherman should be an environmentalist—that is the key point.

We also have to consider licensing. The marine space is becoming multi-use. It is used not just for fishing but for various other things. We put quite a focus on the impacts of fishing but we are not

talking about renewables or other types of marine activity, such as cable laying. We have to look at licensing as a whole going forward to ensure that we do the right things for the environment.

**Elspeth Macdonald:** I was delighted to hear Ariane Burgess say that she was looking for a long-term future for fishing, because that is absolutely what we are looking for, too. I have been in my role for just over two years. One thing that struck me early on in this job was how many family businesses—how many generations of families—are in the fishing industry. It is not an industry that people go into for the short term; it is an industry that people and families have been invested in for generations. Nobody has a greater need for the industry to have a sustainable future than the industry itself.

I will respond to the point about overfishing. The University of the Highlands and Islands in Shetland published some interesting statistics recently, which showed that white-fish biomass in Scottish waters is at a record high in modern times. It is important to recognise that, although there has certainly been overfishing in our waters historically, the situation has improved significantly. That comes down to good management and good collaboration between Government and industry.

That said, I echo Elaine Whyte's point about the need for robust and better science. Given that so much of what we do is underpinned by science, we have to ensure that that science is good, up to date, absolutely robust and subject to challenge.

As for the fishing fleet's contribution to greenhouse gas emissions, I note that the figure for the UK fleet is in the region of 0.17 per cent of the UK total, which is really very small when compared with other sectors such as farming, at 11 per cent, and transport, at 25 per cent. However, even though we are in a fairly good place, we are not complacent. There are more things that we can do and will be doing.

Perhaps the industry's biggest contribution to emissions is the use of fuel, because, after all, our vessels have to be powered to go and catch fish. The most fuel-efficient way of fishing is to fish for healthy and abundant stocks, which we have in most cases. Clearly, that is better for emissions, too. However, we are always looking at how we can reduce our fuel costs and, therefore, our emissions. Indeed, the industry has been doing work on the issue for many years, as can be seen in how the shape and dynamics of fishing vessels have changed to make them more fuel efficient. Moreover, a lot of work has been done, and will continue to be done, on the design of fishing gear to minimise its impact on the sea bed and, again, to make vessels more fuel efficient.

We have to look at innovation. It is promising that the UK Government's recent announcement on the hydrogen strategy includes marine and that fishing vessels will be part of that, because we need to look at such innovative ways of moving forward. We must also think about investment. Tavish Scott has just talked about what the fish farming industry can do about generators, and we face exactly the same challenge in our industry. If we had investment in port facilities so that, for example, shore-based power from renewable sources could be used, that would reduce vessels' reliance on using generators when in port.

There is much to do, and the industry is by no means complacent. However, it is starting from a good place, and we will continue to move forward in that manner.

**The Convener:** Mercedes Villalba has some questions on this topic.

**Mercedes Villalba:** As has been said, we are facing a climate and ecological emergency. We have also heard about the importance of blue carbon as well as the damage that is being done to our marine environment by some parts of the fishing industry. Are any sections of the fishing industry incompatible with Scotland's ambitious targets?

**The Convener:** I will start with Jimmy Buchan and the processing side of things, and I will then move on to Elspeth Macdonald.

**Jimmy Buchan:** As a representative of the processing sector, I find that question difficult to answer, because we are not directly involved in fishing. All that I can say from my 40-plus years' experience of being a fisherman and my 30-plus years as a skipper is that I could not keep going back to the same areas year after year and make a fishing vessel profitable if I was not fishing in a sustainable and responsible manner. That is what all my colleagues are doing. Perhaps it is better for Elspeth Macdonald to respond to that question, but that is my observation and I stand by it.

**Elspeth Macdonald:** Jimmy Buchan makes a really important point. Again, it is important to understand the context. Fishing vessels do not fish everywhere; they fish in areas that are known to be productive and that, as Jimmy Buchan said, have continued to be productive over many years. That is indicative of effective management.

11:00

For example, there has been a great deal of criticism of the scallop sector for its impact on the sea bed. Most means of producing food have some sort of environmental impact—there is an impact from our farmers ploughing fields. I believe that Marine Scotland's figures show that around

15 per cent of Scotland's inshore waters are subject to scallop fishing, which suggests that 85 per cent of them are not. In the co-operation agreement between the Scottish Greens and the Scottish National Party, we see the potential for the proposal of some draconian measures for our inshore waters. A challenge to that agreement is, where is the evidence that we need such an approach? In fairness, the document recognises that further measures would be taken only should evidence come to light that they were necessary.

However, as I said earlier, we already have a robust, constructive process around marine protected areas and priority marine features, which has been effective at identifying the right things and the right places to protect and then taking the measures to do that. A blanket provision for protection, when there is not the evidence that that is necessary, is not the right way to go. Let us go forward on the basis of evidence and constructive, collaborative discussion. Let us recognise that all means of producing food have some impact on the environment.

**Elaine Whyte:** That is one of the issues that most concerns us. It goes back to process and science. There is not one good way of fishing and one bad way of fishing, necessarily—it is about good management. I represent keelmen, mobile fishermen and line and dive fishermen, and they all work together through CFA, our national body. They all appreciate that, if we do too much of any one of those things, we will have a problem.

We must concentrate more on the science of inshore intensive practices, looking at the stocks, the sea bed and what is out there. We must not make policy in silos separate from what is going on socioeconomically. That is really important. I am concerned that we are not going to follow process. For instance, at the moment, we have a lot of great wild oyster projects happening, whereby wild oysters are being placed all over Scotland. That would seem to be a fantastic thing to do, but I worry very much that that is being used as a way to close off an area—because it then becomes a PMF—to fishermen who are fishing sustainably in a different area. We must be aware of such things. We must make decisions on the basis of what we need for the environment. We also need to make decisions on process, so that nothing is coming in through the back door or being used as a secret fisheries management tool. We must all sit down and discuss things fairly.

I would far rather that we talk and work through the process and frameworks than manage things through campaigns, because, in all honestly, there is not one good way of fishing and one bad way. It comes down to the management and what is appropriate for each area. That is why blanket

policies do not work and can be quite harmful to the environment and communities.

**Jenni Minto:** I will keep my question short in order that we hear more from the witnesses. What are your priorities for post-EU-exit fisheries policy, specifically around the national benefit objective and the climate change objective set out in the Fisheries Act 2020? What are your priorities for the development of joint fisheries statements and fisheries management plans?

**Elsbeth Macdonald:** There is quite a lot in that short question. It is good that the committee has a focus on the Fisheries Act 2020, which is the overarching piece of fisheries legislation in the UK now that the UK has left the European Union. As we set out in our submission, the SFF sees the need to look at the scope that we now have to develop our own fisheries management regulations as a priority for the new fisheries regime in the UK.

As, I am sure, you will all know, the fishing industry was hugely disappointed by the details of the Brexit deal and the settlement. We certainly want to see what scope there is to leverage a better settlement, to be used and developed in the future. One of the few advantages under the fisheries heading is that we now have regulatory autonomy and the ability to determine our own rules in our own waters. That is a real opportunity not only for the UK but for Scotland, given that fishing is devolved territory, to look at the right types of fisheries management in our waters. That touches on Elaine Whyte's point that, if we have good management, we will have good fisheries.

A priority for the SFF with regard to the fisheries management plans and the joint fisheries statement will be how the Administrations work to develop effective fisheries management for Scotland and for other parts of the UK and how those will contribute to the overarching objectives in the 2020 act. As you identified in your question, that relates to how we meet the climate change objectives and some of the other things that have been mentioned this morning.

There are some real opportunities through the fisheries statement and the fisheries management plans, and we look forward to engaging with the Scottish and UK Governments to ensure that we maximise the advantages that they bring and that they give us sustainable fisheries.

**Jenni Minto:** I believe that, under the new legislation, the funding package runs for between two and three years, whereas the European funding package ran for up to seven years. Will that have an impact on the industry?

**Elsbeth Macdonald:** We currently have a commitment from the UK Government for a £100 million fund, and some of the details of that have

started to emerge fairly recently. Some of it relates to innovation and science, and there is more detail to come.

The marine fund Scotland was initially launched for only one year, which reflects where both Governments are in terms of spending reviews, with single-year settlements. That position makes it difficult for Governments and for businesses that might want to apply for the funds, because they cannot look at long-term investments in projects on an annual cycle.

The sooner the UK and Scotland can get back to multiyear funding settlements, the more helpful it will be. I have heard quite a lot of people say that they felt that they could not take advantage of the marine fund Scotland this year because it required expenditure to be made before the end of the financial year. For longer-term investment and planning, we certainly need some longer-term funding programmes.

**The Convener:** Will we move on to questions from Emma Harper, or does Jimmy Buchan want to come in? I cannot tell whether he is indicating to me or whether he just has an itchy ear. Go for it, Jimmy.

**Jimmy Buchan:** I want to add an onshore point of view. Good management in fisheries leads to good marketing, which will, we hope, drive profitability back into the sector. It is really good if the management, the science and everything else ties up at the catching end, because we can then replicate that in the marketing of the seafood, which is important.

Funding will drive profitability back into all businesses. I will give the committee a classic example. I had a trawler that was old and inefficient, and I was able to attract and draw down funding to reinvest in that trawler and reduce its carbon footprint by more than 33 per cent.

One of the things that I would like the committee to take away from this discussion is that investment will pay back, not only by driving profitability into businesses but by helping us to achieve our carbon reduction targets in the long term. That sort of up-front investment is a long-term investment for the greater good of the environment.

**The Convener:** Emma Harper has some questions on inshore fisheries.

**Emma Harper:** I realise that we are challenged for time, so your responses can perhaps be given down the line, either in written form or at future sessions.

My question, which is for Elaine Whyte, is about the local management and governance of inshore fisheries. There are a lot of smaller boats on the west coast. People need to be more connected

with communities. As you mentioned, in the south-west—in the Irish Sea—there are Isle of Man waters, English waters, the Solway Firth and Irish Sea waters. All of that is in the mix, and it must be quite challenging to manage inshore fishery aspects of those waters. We now have a border in the Irish Sea. It would be interesting to hear about what should and could be done and about what items we should be thinking about in the future.

**Elaine Whyte:** I keep going back to management. Our inshore fisheries groups provide a strong way of bringing local fishers together to come up with plans that suit them. They do not work in silos; they will be working for colleagues in various other Scottish IFGs. Someone working on the west coast will be talking to people on the east coast. A policy that is made in one place could displace things somewhere else.

We have to be more reflexive. People in the Isle of Man make their own policies, and that works very well, but they do not have reciprocal ones for Scotland, and that can mean that our fishers are quite disadvantaged. That has also happened between Northern Ireland and Scotland. I agree that we have to get that right.

Capacity is a major issue for a couple of reasons. We are being pulled in so many directions at the moment. You will have seen what happened with the parliamentary review on marine planning. We have a lot of work to do, and we need transparency of process around a lot of those issues. We need to know what we are trying to do, as opposed to overshooting into other areas.

The joint fisheries statement should go quite a way towards working with our neighbours, as should future fisheries management in outlining our intentions. I am concerned about some additional things that we are probably not thinking about, such as how cumulative impacts can cause displacement. If we are going to have renewables on the west coast, for instance, how will that affect our fisheries? I do not think that we are quite there yet when it comes to those kinds of local issues. We need the strength of IFGs, we need resource for that, and we need the capacity of our fishermen to engage. There is quite a lot coming at us at the moment. I genuinely think that we need to engage our fishermen a lot more.

Going back to joint fisheries management, we need to be aware that many of our fishermen are coming to the table for the first time. The CFA is coming to the table for strategic meetings for the first time. When it comes to granular negotiations, quota or space sharing and those types of things, we are the smaller guys, and we are new—although there is no reason why we always have to stay that way. We are fully supportive of the

north-east industry and the bigger fleets doing well, but we really need a little bit more attention on the smaller guys for their first engagement in strategic issues.

**The Convener:** I regret to say that we have to bring this evidence session to a close. There is much more to cover, and there are a lot more questions that we would like to ask, but I thank you very much for your involvement in the panel today. It has certainly set the scene for the work that we will have to do in the future.

We will now take a five-minute break. For our second panel, we will go straight to questioning rather than have opening statements.

11:14

*Meeting suspended.*

11:20

*On resuming—*

**The Convener:** I welcome our second panel. We have Katie Gillham, head of marine ecosystems, and Cathy Tilbrook, head of sustainable coasts and seas, NatureScot; Calum Duncan, head of conservation Scotland, Marine Conservation Society; and Charles Millar, executive director, Sustainable Inshore Fisheries Trust. I will not ask the witnesses to make introductory remarks; we will go straight to questions that will give them the opportunity to put across their views.

My question is on the scientific evidence about the health of and the main pressures on our marine environment. We heard from the previous panel about the apparent increase in white-fish biomass and about significantly improved collaboration that has led to greater health for our seas. We were told that the scallop industry fishes only 15 per cent of our waters. However, we need more scientific evidence. Can we have your comments?

**Calum Duncan (Marine Conservation Society):** The evidence shows that we failed on a range of metrics to ensure our seas were in “good environmental status” by 2020. The global context for that is the 2019 report by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. It talked about the “unprecedented” global decline in nature and said that nothing short of transformative change in how we operate as a society was needed if we are to halt and reverse the decline in nature. That report highlighted fishing, along with climate change, as a principal driver in the decline of nature at sea.



To bring that closer to home, the collective evidence base of all the UK Administrations through the marine strategy process concluded that 11 out of 15 indicators of good environmental status had been failed by 2020. Those included sea floor condition and many commercial fish stocks, including most shellfish stocks, and also included declines in, or concerns about, seabirds and seals. “Scotland’s Marine Assessment 2020: Headlines and Next Steps” again highlighted concern about the widespread pressure that is caused by the impact of fishing, which is present in all Scottish marine regions and offshore marine regions.

None of that means that fishing should not be happening. What matters is managing it sustainably and taking an ecosystem-based approach to managing fishing. There is a false dichotomy. It is often suggested that we can have either conservation or fishing. We need good conservation and a step change in the recovery of the health of our ocean as the prerequisite for a healthy and sustainable fishing industry.

Some of the comments that were made by members of the first panel show that we really must get on to the same page. What is our evidence base? It was said that 15 per cent of the sea is scallop dredged, but the important question is how much of the sea bed is ground that scallops live on. We are talking about a percentage of that figure.

A report by Marine Scotland science showed that less than 1 per cent of the historically trawled inshore sea bed of Scotland was actually protected within marine protected areas. The evidence shows that there is a lot of cause for concern. We need a step change in conservation and ocean recovery, and we must all take that journey together. We absolutely need to have a conversation about the just transition for the fishing industry and for all other industries, as all industries have their part to play in securing a net zero future. It is not a matter of singling out fishing; fishing is one among many industries, but it just so happens that it has a widespread impact on the health of our seas.

**Charles Millar (Sustainable Inshore Fisheries Trust):** Thank you for inviting me to this session.

I would go along with a lot of what Calum Duncan has just said. There was another interesting detail in what we heard earlier about biomass being large. Actually, when we dig down a bit further, it becomes apparent that the make-up of that biomass is different from what used to be the case. Recent studies in the west have shown that, although biomass may be at an all-time high in some areas, it has completely different constituent elements. There is a very large number of very small fish, but we are not seeing

the large fish. That is a problem for the ecosystem, and it is a problem for the fishery. The large, fecund fish such as cod are in extremely low numbers, while there are huge numbers of very small whiting. The evidence needs to be drilled down into. Some headline statements can look and sound good but, when we crunch the numbers, we get a slightly different picture.

I totally concur with the concern about the sea bed. It is the foundation for a sustainable ecosystem, which is obviously the foundation for a sustainable fishery in turn. When benthic indicators are failing to meet a good environmental status, that is a fundamental problem for the recovery of stocks and for the resilience of the fishery itself, which is what is driving SIFT.

There is evidence, but we need to look at it in close detail instead of looking at some of the banner headlines, which might not portray the full picture.

**The Convener:** That certainly hits on a point. The headlines do not always give the full picture.

How do Katie Gillham or Cathy Tilbrook of NatureScot see inshore fisheries groups and non-governmental organisations working together to ensure that we get the right picture of what is happening in our seas?

**Katie Gillham (NatureScot):** Thank you for inviting us to speak today—it is good to have the opportunity. NatureScot has been working with inshore fisheries groups since they were set up, and it continues to be involved through the regional inshore fisheries groups. There has been a gradual development in that as a stakeholder engagement mechanism, and we support developing it further into the future. We do not have a fixed view about how that development should happen, but the key thing for us is that, whatever mechanism is used, it should provide a meaningful mechanism for having a good exchange of ideas and opinions while supporting future management, so that we can get the full range of stakeholders involved.

You did not mention local communities, but they represent an important part of what will happen at a regional or local scale in fisheries management in the future.

**The Convener:** I will stick with this topic of climate and ecological crisis.

**Dr Allan:** Much of what has been talked about so far, especially by the previous panel, has involved the necessary trade-off between the future of the environment and the future of what are sometimes fragile rural economies. This is possibly a question for Charles Millar—I am not sure. We have discussed how the areas that are currently actively fished comprise a minority of

Scotland's seas. What kind of change should communities in those areas expect in the coming years?

**Charles Millar:** As a preamble to my answer, I note that, in relation to the statements about what areas are currently actively fished, one of our concerns is that there is very little comprehensive data on that, because there is not comprehensive coverage of the fleet via remote electronic monitoring of vessels. It is not entirely clear which areas are fished, which presents the first problem in answering Dr Allan's question.

11:30

To turn to the trade-offs that have been referred to, my organisation's concern is that there are not necessarily trade-offs in all situations, although we can have an ecosystem-based management approach, which will involve the use of spatial management. As the fisheries management strategy document that was published last year noted, MPAs can support fish stock recovery. We are saying that ecosystem recovery should be compatible, in many cases, with fishery recovery and the long-term sustainability of the fishery. My concern is that a siloisation is going on, with the ecosystem on one side and the fishery on the other. We have said that the two are intimately linked and that, if we can get past that view, we might be looking at a better route to communities being able to work more effectively together.

**The Convener:** I ask Cathy Tilbrook to address that, followed by Calum Duncan.

**Cathy Tilbrook (NatureScot):** Thank you for the opportunity to speak. To build on what Charles Millar said, we support those comments about the need to avoid saying that it is an either/or situation because, as has been said earlier, recovering the health of the seas also offers huge benefits to the long-term sustainability of the sector.

It is perhaps worth bringing in at this point the need for robust marine planning to help with the management of trade-offs. We need marine plans in order to prioritise and steer the use of marine space. As was said in the earlier session, our seas are getting much busier, and we need a revision of our national marine plan to manage those growing pressures and reflect the new priorities for climate and nature. Part of that is about better integrating fisheries management into those plans, at national and regional levels, so that we can achieve an appropriate balance. That is part of it, and allowing communities to have an input into the vision for their local seas will be an important part of that process.

**Calum Duncan:** Thank you, convener. I support what Charles Millar and Cathy Tilbrook have said, because using the term "trade-off" implies winners

and losers. As we go forward, there are decisions to make, and it is not fair to suggest that nothing can change and that everybody can continue as they are. Changes have to happen, but we need a process that brings everybody along with it, and marine planning is a very important part of that. Integrating fisheries management with marine planning is important, because all coastal communities and stakeholders have a stake in the health of the marine space. It is a public good.

It is also important for the committee to understand that fishing is a complex and diverse sector, and there are parts of the sector that, for example, do not think that some of the proposals in the programme for government go far enough. There is a huge range of views, and it is important to have that open, forward-looking, inclusive dialogue with a shared evidence base and a path and a vision of where we want to get to.

**Dr Allan:** If members of the panel do not like the term "trade-off", I am happy to use another such as "interface" or "co-operation". You can see what I am driving at, which is how we manage that relationship. Incidentally, I absolutely accept what has been said about the need for change and what Charles Millar said about the need for winch monitors to provide data.

Elsbeth Macdonald touched on this issue in the first panel—do you feel that there might be a better way of managing the process of designation in order to avoid confrontation, as has happened in some places, and is there more that we can do to move forward the process of community involvement in the management of designations? I am not making a case against designation per se, but are there better ways of doing it?

**The Convener:** That may be one for Katie Gillham.

**Katie Gillham:** I was encouraged to hear what Elspeth Macdonald said in the first session about the experience of working on the previous process of designating the nature conservation marine protected areas. Elspeth mentioned the need to have transparency, to make sure that we work from a good evidence base and to collaborate, or whatever phrase you want to use to describe that. Whether it is co-production or full stakeholder engagement, there needs to be a clearly established process.

One of the benefits of the nature conservation MPA work was that it set out a clear process. We need to take stock of the commitments that have come through from the co-operation agreement and the programme for government and we need to clearly articulate things such as what the highly protected marine areas might mean in Scotland, what the definition is and how they might work in practice, so that we can engage with stakeholders

and set out a clear process for how they will be selected and what it will look like when they are put in place.

I agree with a lot of what has been said, and core to a lot of that is allowing the time and space in the process to enable all the key stakeholders to have a role and have their views heard. I hope that there will be opportunities—this was mentioned in the previous evidence session—in relation to the future fisheries management strategy and how that relates to the marine protection commitments. There are some obvious things that you might be able to pull out from those about the need to protect spawning grounds and nursery habitats. It would be good as we go through the process to hear from the fisheries and aquaculture industries about what they think the key opportunities are from implementing those commitments, so that we are responding to the need to restore and allow marine ecosystems to recover but doing it in a way that achieves that balance and supports the longer-term sustainability of their industries.

**Calum Duncan:** I support everything that Katie Gillham said there. To come back on the point about possible concerns about designations, the Scottish MPA process was deemed to be an excellent process, and, although nothing is perfect, the Scottish Government, NatureScot, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee and all the stakeholders involved are to be commended on that.

The issue is that that process was happening in a silo, because there was neither a fisheries strategy that it was integrated or interrelating with nor a planning system in which it was sitting. A lot of the management workshops that I was involved in became proxy discussions about what should be happening in the wider sea in relation to the use of that sea space and the sea bed, and how any displacement of gear might impact on other areas or other growing sectors and so on. It is almost as though we are waiting for the wider fisheries management and planning processes to catch up.

I want to take the opportunity to respond to people's thinking about MPAs as a means of protecting the remnants of fragile bits of sea bed. That is not how we should think about them. If the features that the MPAs protect are allowed to recover, they interact and provide ecosystem services, whether that is locking up carbon, providing important habitat for commercial fish and shellfish or providing resilient biodiverse systems themselves, which are almost like a bank from which we can replenish the wider sea. The discussion about using closures or—for want of a better term—curtailments of certain types of gear for the wider benefit of fisheries is quite polarised

because there has not been a proper framework or space in which to have that discussion.

Members will not be surprised to hear that we welcomed the commitment to highly protected marine areas, because we think that, if they are planned right, they can deliver benefit for biodiversity, food provision and blue carbon. We think that it was right to commit to capping effort and looking at how to reduce effort, on an evidence basis. Obviously, there is a lot to do, but a lot of the polarity and tension arises as a result of siloed and non-integrated processes.

To finish, I support what Cathy Tilbrook said about the importance of a renewed national marine plan that does not pretend that everything can grow and that things will not interact or conflict. For us, it is key that the baseline for the marine system is quite low and diminished. We will not get the benefits for other parts of society—*[Inaudible.]*

**The Convener:** I do not know whether Calum has stopped or whether his video connection has cut out.

Before I move on to questions from Mercedes Villalba, I have a question for Katie Gillham or Cathy Tilbrook. In the previous parliamentary session, the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee heard about the good work that was done in Shetland between fishermen, NGOs, environmental groups and Heriot-Watt University. A fantastic level of trust was built up, so the fishermen were happy to share their data. Are there other similar examples of good collaborative working that NatureScot and Marine Scotland can build on to ensure that that approach is replicated across our coasts?

**Katie Gillham:** Cathy Tilbrook might want to come in after me. There are lots of good examples. There is maybe an assumption that there has not been lots of good collaborative working to date, but there are lots of good examples of collaboration, whether that is between NatureScot and industry or between various NGO groups and industry. I will mention a couple of examples, but we are happy to provide more information after the meeting if that would be helpful.

One example that springs to mind, in relation to the regional approach to fisheries management, is the Shetland Shellfish Management Organisation which, compared with the approach that has been used in other parts of Scotland, has had a very different way of managing shellfish fisheries. That is one example of where a range of interests have been brought together through a statutory mechanism to have that regional tier of management in Scotland, which has been really useful.

Another completely different and recent example is the Scottish Entanglement Alliance, which was a collaboration between industry, NatureScot, NGOs and others, to look at potential issues and see whether there are issues around the entanglement of large marine animals with static fishing gear, and then to identify the next steps and what can be done.

Collaborative projects are definitely the way forward, and we would welcome ideas and suggestions from others, particularly from industry members, about how we should do that in the future.

**The Convener:** Cathy, do you want to comment?

**Cathy Tilbrook:** No. I think that Katie has covered it, so let us move on, in the interests of time.

11:45

**Mercedes Villalba:** My questions are about fishing management. The marine protected areas were designated in 2014. I believe that NatureScot gave advice on fishing management in 2013, which stated that dredging and trawling ought to be banned in a number of MPAs. However, there are still many MPAs where those activities continue unrestricted. Are the NatureScot representatives concerned that their advice has not been heeded? What do all the witnesses think that we can do to ensure that similar mistakes are not made in the creation of the new future fisheries management strategy?

**Katie Gillham:** You are right in saying that we provided advice on the management of fishing activity in MPAs. To give some background, we are not fisheries managers. We leave that work to others to implement. Our role is to provide advice about the sensitivity of habitats and species and therefore to help fisheries managers to identify where the risks might be and where management measures should be put in place.

The work on the management of fishing activity in MPAs has, so far, focused on the first phase, which dealt with the most sensitive habitats and species. Those have been more in the press recently and include things such as seagrass beds and maerl beds. The measures to protect those were put in place a number of years ago.

You are also right in saying that we provided further advice on other habitats where management would be required. Those were mostly habitats and species that were considered to be of moderate sensitivity. The question of whether there should be fishing activity was not so straightforward. If fishing activity happens across a horse mussel bed or a seagrass bed, the impact is

seen immediately. The habitats where fisheries measures are still to be put in place are of a more moderate sensitivity. They are important habitats such as burrowed mud. What matters is the amount of fishing effort and reducing that amount to a level that will allow the habitat to be in a good condition rather than saying that there should be no fishing activity there. We are aware that that advice has been carefully considered by Marine Scotland. We welcome the commitment in the co-operation agreement to establish clear timescales.

We know that a number of other pieces of work are happening alongside that. NatureScot, Marine Scotland science and others have continued developing the evidence base that will support the management measures when the proposals come through. There is also work responding to stakeholder comments about how to develop better methods to assess the impacts and benefits of any proposed measures. Stakeholders previously told us that the methods that were being used did not really capture that.

That is my answer to the first part of the question. We feel that our advice has been listened to and that the co-operation agreement reinforces the commitment to act on that.

The second question was about ensuring that similar mistakes are not made in the implementation of the future fisheries management strategy. We are in the early days, as the strategy was published in 2020. My understanding is that planning for how the strategy will be implemented is well under way. My team and I will interact with that work. We can look at the commitments in the programme for government and at the future fisheries management strategy and see where the opportunities are. There is a read-across between the two.

To go back to what Calum Duncan said, it would be really nice to work out how we join all of that together into a bigger picture, so that we are not just going to stakeholders and talking about highly protected marine areas one day, a cap on inshore fishing effort another day and how we protect spawning areas another time. We should present a picture in the round, and people should be able to see that we are working towards something slightly bigger.

**Charles Millar:** On the point about ensuring that mistakes are not repeated, there is a fundamental issue here—this touches on what we discussed a moment earlier—about the whole question of engagement among different stakeholders. The real issue here is around the transparency of governance and structures, so that different stakeholders can engage with one another. We need a more transparent and equitable system of engagement between different parties—the fishing

industry, clearly, but also the many other parties who have a right to make use of the public asset that is our seas—and considerable thought needs to be given to how those governance structures work.

The fisheries management strategy mentions

“strengthening the role of the Regional Inshore Fisheries Groups (RIFGs)”.

For some stakeholders, that is a cause for concern. The RIFGs are exclusively for the fishing industry. It is fine to have a fishing industry body, but the strategy seems to suggest that the RIFGs will take a more dominant role. It seems that, rather than broadening out the decision-making process to all stakeholders, which would presumably improve transparency and hence decision making, Marine Scotland’s policy is slightly pushing in the opposite direction. That is a cause for concern, and it would be valuable to consider that.

**The Convener:** If nobody else wishes to continue on that topic, we will move on to Beatrice Wishart’s questions.

**Beatrice Wishart:** I was pleased to hear Katie Gillham reference the Shetland Shellfish Management Organisation as a good example of collaborative working and local management. I think it was Calum Duncan who referred to the sea birds and seals that can get caught up in fishing gear. We will all have seen pictures on social media of sea birds getting caught in gillnets.

I asked the previous panel about the scientific evidence from ICES on North Sea cod. What are your views on how to reduce unnecessary discards and bycatch? There is a scenario whereby small whiting are being taken out of the mouths of cod and are gutted while the cod are thrown over the side. I would like to hear a little bit about our witnesses’ views on future catching policy.

**Charles Millar:** I should preface this by saying that North Sea catches are, of course, outwith the remit of the Sustainable Inshore Fisheries Trust.

I would make a broader general point here. Much of the policy says the right things. My concern is not so much about whether the policy, strategy, frameworks or statements are saying the right thing; it is more a question of how the implementation goes ahead. I am sorry to answer that question in a broader way, but this is a critical point to make. Again, it is about drilling down into the detail. Something might sound quite encouraging, and the UK Fisheries Act 2020 has important objectives on climate change and so on, but the issue is how that policy will be dealt with in practice. That is perhaps a broader point for the

time available, but it is something that I need to get across at this stage, if that helps.

**Calum Duncan:** Thank you for the question. There are lots of big topics and not a lot of time. It is a good question, and it comes down to information, sound science, evidence and confidence—and I know that we heard earlier about the differing perspectives on quantities and so on.

Our perspective is that we want to see remote electronic monitoring, as a cost-effective means of getting as much information as possible about what is being caught where, whether it is cod or anything else. That is done through a combination of cameras—suitably positioned so that they monitor only what comes on to the boat and not the boat as a place of living—geographic information system mapping and other information. In that way, we build up a much better picture of the state of the stocks to inform future catching policy. I have provided a report on REM to predecessor committees and I can do that again if need be.

My next point is on cod, but it relates to the point about ecosystem-based management as well. Although the cod recovery plan was not much loved, it seemed successful, and part of that was the closure of the windsock area west of Shetland and Orkney. Scientific surveys in the closure found that cod catch was 78 per cent higher than outside. The site is coterminous with a marine protected area, which has now been designated. However, the sunset clause on the closure came into effect and a new voluntary arrangement was put in place that allowed more of the area to be trawled. Obviously, I welcome the fact that a voluntary arrangement was put in place to leave some alone, to have some for trawling and to have some for static gear. That is an interesting example of a situation whereby the ecosystem benefit of the closure of an area, which also happened to be made into an MPA, was not recognised. The fishing effort there is higher now that it is an MPA than it was when it was part of a fisheries management measure.

We need to look at temporal and permanent closures that can help stocks to recover. The windsock closure provided evidence that larger and wide-ranging commercial species can still benefit from fixed closed areas, although higher numbers of very fragile slow-growing long-lived species such as elasmobranchs were also found in that closure. We need evidence, and we need ecosystem-based management.

**Cathy Tilbrook:** I will add briefly to what has been said. A great deal of that is related to the management of the fishery and the interaction between different stocks. We want to broaden the discussion out to, for example, the catching policy

for populations of forage fish, which are important in natural food chains. We need to think about the importance of those elements and how we set sustainable levels to ensure that those issues are part of the picture.

In addition to considering bycatch of fish, we need to look at reducing unintended wildlife bycatch in fishing gear. The work on entanglement, which Katie Gillham mentioned, is part of that. We need to consider those wider wildlife interactions in discussions on the catching policy.

**The Convener:** Thank you. We will move on to the environmental impact of aquaculture and further regulation.

12:00

**Karen Adam:** There has been much research into the potential, particularly on the north-east coast, for seaweed farming—it is a tremendous opportunity for coastal communities to diversify into a new sector. That is just one example of diversification, but seaweed production has grown across the world. Seaweed is being used in an extensive range of products, including eco-products. It also absorbs a significant amount of CO<sub>2</sub>, so it can contribute to our net zero target.

On the regulation of newly expanding areas, what is being asked of the fishing community in relation to that diversification in the context of a sustainable marine environment? What other possible diversification is coming to the fore that is not just eco-friendly but economically positive for struggling coastal communities?

**The Convener:** Would Katie Gillham like to address that in the first instance?

**Katie Gillham:** I will leave that one to Cathy Tilbrook.

**Cathy Tilbrook:** Karen Adam asks a good question—there is a lot in it. There is a lot of potential in new industries such as seaweed cultivation, but we need to make sure that the regulatory framework and the evidence base are available so that we make good decisions on locations for new activities to ensure that they do not damage existing natural features and so that we understand how to harvest sustainably. For example, the harvesting of wild seaweed has been discussed in the past. Seaweed, particularly kelp beds, plays a really important role in the functioning of ecosystems, including through the provision of coastal defences for coastal communities. It is important that we do not embark on new developments and exploitation without understanding the sustainability of the practice.

With regard to cultivation, we need to consider lots of factors, including getting the locations and

management right, and it is also important to think about matters such as biosecurity.

I am not sure whether the fishing sector wants to diversify into seaweed harvesting, but that is certainly worth looking at. A report on wild harvesting and diversification for the fishing sector identified some opportunities for small-scale seaweed harvesting, which might be worth investigating. There are other potential opportunities along the lines of wildlife tourism, which can be sustainably developed in coastal economies. There is more work to do on that. In our consideration of a just transition, we need to think about what the opportunities might be as we grow more diverse and sustainable coastal economies.

**Charles Millar:** I endorse a lot of what Cathy Tilbrook has just said. The seaweed industry presents an excellent opportunity for coastal economy diversification, but it needs a regulatory framework. Cathy referred to biosecurity policies, and guidance on the siting of farms is very important. Other issues, such as the use of pesticides or the prohibition of artificial enrichment, need to be looked at to ensure that farming can coexist with the fishing industry and other stakeholders.

We are concerned about the scale of potential seaweed farms. Until now, the farms that have been applied for and have begun to be developed have all been relatively small—up to 50 hectares is about the largest at the moment. However, there is talk of much larger farms, and farms elsewhere in the world are very large-scale, multihundred hectare sites. The issue is potentially important for the inshore economy, so it needs to be managed properly.

There are potential CO<sub>2</sub> benefits. Of course, what happens to the CO<sub>2</sub> that is sequestered by kelp, albeit cultivated kelp, depends on what happens to the kelp after it has been harvested, so there are issues with that, too. The development is welcome but it must be managed. We do not want large seaweed farms in small sea lochs.

There are other activities that could provide opportunities for diversification. We discussed shellfish farming earlier. The mussel farming industry is small scale at the moment. There are issues with getting adequate scale from individual sites to enable competition in large markets, so assistance is perhaps needed with that. Another example is oyster reintroduction on a commercial level as well as for carbon sequestration reasons. There are a number of opportunities that need to be considered.

As those different activities emerge, it is becoming all the more apparent that a marine planning regime is needed to identify how such

activities can coexist with, and do not displace, fishing or other activities.

Those issues are all extremely important and need to be considered. I would definitely include shellfish in that list.

**Ariane Burgess:** I am curious to hear the witnesses' thoughts on other stakeholders, such as community groups and tourism businesses—people whose livelihoods depend on marine biodiversity—joining the regional inshore fisheries group meetings. Charles Millar touched on the groups' limited membership earlier. I am curious to hear about opening that up.

On the environmental impact of salmon farming, I am also curious to hear the witnesses' views on further regulation of that sector of aquaculture.

**The Convener:** Perhaps Katie Gillham or Cathy Tilbrook could kick off on adding other bodies to the inshore fisheries groups.

**Katie Gillham:** I will take the question about the inshore fisheries groups and pass over to Cathy Tilbrook on the environmental impact of aquaculture.

We have touched on the role that local communities and other bodies might play in the RIFGs. Perhaps this is a slightly disappointing answer, but we do not have a fixed view on what the mechanism should be, although our strong view is that it is necessary to be clear about the identity of all the stakeholders that we want to have a voice in fisheries management.

Many stakeholders are well engaged with fisheries management processes but we are aware that others feel that they have not had that opportunity. Discussing who should be involved in those discussions, being clear about that and agreeing it will help the regional inshore fisheries groups—or whatever other mechanism is used—to take the next steps and develop into the future.

There is a related question about the extent to which that is a stakeholder engagement facilitation mechanism or a mechanism that provides for co-design and co-management approaches. We need to think through the governance to support that.

**Cathy Tilbrook:** We welcome the commitment in the programme for government to a new vision and strategy for aquaculture. We are also already engaged in Professor Griggs's regulatory review, which has been mentioned. One of the key points that we have been feeding into that review is that, at the moment, Scotland has a tangled system of different consenting regimes. In particular, there is the interface between planning consent and licensing under the Scottish Environment Protection Agency's licensing process and marine licensing.

Aquaculture is not well suited to a one-off planning consent arrangement. It is an on-going process—it is a management system within the marine environment—and, therefore, is better suited to a licensing regime, which can be more easily adapted as things happen and change and which enables monitoring to feed back into changes to the way that the licence operates. That is an important aspect that needs to be considered. At the moment, we are trying to shoehorn things into the planning framework, even though it is not suited to that. I hope that that point can be considered.

There is a further point about alignment of the different regulatory regimes and environmental impact assessments and bringing those things together a bit more successfully. I am trying to link up how all the different regulators feed into the early discussions with developers about new sites, ensuring that we influence siting and location in the best way and avoid big challenges further down the line. Part of that involves the spatial planning framework for aquaculture and ensuring that we have good maps that show more suitable locations, which will steer developers towards them.

There is a lot going on elsewhere in relation to work on the interaction with wild salmonids, for instance. There is work on the sea lice risk framework and on acoustic deterrent devices. We are also talking to the industry about seabed impacts, sensitive features and priority marine features, which we discussed earlier, and the entanglement of sea birds in nets. Those are all really important strands of work. It is critical that, when we design a better regulatory framework, we ensure that the new approaches to tackling some of those environmental challenges are properly embedded within the regulatory framework, so that we are not complicating it with additional requirements and it is all integrated into one system.

There is a lot going on, and I hope that we will have a much stronger and better system of regulation at the end of the process. As Tavish Scott mentioned, it is not about changing things completely; it is about having better regulation that does the job more effectively.

**The Convener:** Rachael Hamilton will ask a short supplementary question, and we will then move to Emma Harper.

**Rachael Hamilton:** This is a question for Cathy Tilbrook. On licensing and planning, you mentioned the environmental impact that you will take into account, but will jobs and the local economy also be considered in relation to potential locations?

**Cathy Tilbrook:** When a new development comes in, some form of one-off, new-development planning process will always be needed to cover those aspects along with the wider impacts of how it fits into a coastal community.

I am not suggesting that we do not have some form of spatial linkage through, for example, the planning system to allow social licence and the community's views to be taken into account and to work out how the development fits with other infrastructure. It is more about the other parts of managing an aquaculture operation, which are currently being shoehorned into planning through the use of environmental management plans, although they probably sit much better with an on-going licensing process. That all needs to be worked through in the regulatory review. You are right, however: there are some elements that probably still need input from local communities and other stakeholders.

**Emma Harper:** I have a quick question for Calum Duncan about marine litter. You made a presentation to the cross-party group on recreational boating and marine tourism, of which I am a member, towards the end of the previous parliamentary session, when you spoke about work that was being done to deal with marine litter. Is work being done to connect and collaborate with inshore fishermen on how to deal with marine litter? One fisherman in Kirkcudbright, for example, has been doing a good job of securing what needs to be secured on his boat so that things do not fly over the side. I am just seeking a wee update on that.

**Calum Duncan:** We have been happy to collaborate. We did a big clean-up at Cairnbulg, I think it was, with KIMO and the SFF. More widely and more strategically, the work of the fishing for litter team continues and is expanding, and we are obviously supportive of that.

The marine litter strategy steering group has the issue on its agenda, and Marine Scotland has commissioned Resource Futures to take a close look at litter that derives from the fishing industry. Participating skippers in fishing for litter are helpfully bringing back ashore what they bring up in their nets, some of which might be direct litter from the industry, although much of it might not be. There is also a need to deal better with the waste that is generated on vessels.

12:15

I can provide the committee with the report that Resource Futures did for Marine Scotland, which made a number of recommendations. Chiefly, it is about making it easier for vessels of all kinds, including fishing vessels, to get their rubbish ashore and properly dealt with. That depends on

the scale of facility that they are returning to—port, quayside or what have you—so it will not be one size fits all. Sorry—that is a bit general. I do not have specifics, but I can get that report for you after the meeting.

**Rachael Hamilton:** NatureScot's website states that the Scottish marine environmental enhancement fund will be launched imminently. Do the witnesses from NatureScot have a date for that? Can you outline where that money is coming from, how the fund will operate and whether funding will be conditional in the way that funds in the programme for government are?

**Cathy Tilbrook:** The aim of the Scottish marine environmental enhancement fund is to encourage all those who use our marine environment to invest in its long-term health and sustainability. The fund will be primarily made up of voluntary contributions from different sectors and users and anyone else who wants to make a contribution. Using a set of criteria, it will then award grants to projects that intend to promote enhancement or do targeted research to enhance the evidence base for things such as restoration of the marine environment.

The plan is not that that will be Government funding necessarily, although things such as the nature restoration fund might be a part of the money that is disbursed through the fund. We hope that the bigger pot of money will come from users of the marine environment. That has already happened, with the offshore wind sector being an early contributor. That has helped to get the fund started and off the ground, but we are now talking to a much wider range of sectors, which are all interested in contributing and getting involved.

We are about to launch the fundraising element of SMEEF. The fund is driven by the Marine Scotland directorate in the Scottish Government, Crown Estate Scotland and us. We have had strong ministerial support for setting up the fund and it will be hosted initially within NatureScot. I cannot give you an actual date for the launch, but in the next month or two we will launch a fundraising drive for SMEEF, which will put it on a more official basis. We hope that the fund will open to applications in spring next year.

I hope that that answers all the elements of your question, but come back to me if it did not.

**Rachael Hamilton:** I will open up the discussion to the rest of the panel. Might future funding gaps appear as we move towards a just transition? How will the fishing and aquaculture industries play a part in shaping the fund?

**The Convener:** We are running out of time, so I ask Charles Millar to comment briefly on that.



**Charles Millar:** My apologies, but I feel that it is slightly beyond my remit to comment. We are a modestly funded and modestly sized non-governmental body, and I do not feel that I can adequately comment on that issue.

**Rachael Hamilton:** Can I open the question up to the rest of the witnesses, please?

**The Convener:** On the basis of that comment, I am not sure that the question is one for either Charles Millar or Calum Duncan.

**Cathy Tilbrook:** I can come back in again, if you like. On the involvement of the fishing and aquaculture sectors in the discussions about SMEEF, we have reached out to those sectors, but we recognise that they have had a lot of issues to deal with, with regard to Covid and EU exit, so no pressure has been put on them to engage formally. However, as things get easier, we hope that they will be able to engage more with the process and be part of the growing movement in relation to SMEEF.

With regard to wider funding, we mentioned the nature restoration fund, which is a programme for government commitment that will be carried forward. Earlier, a point was made about the one-year funding issue. Moving beyond that to multiyear project funding would mean that we could plan ahead. Some projects take much longer than one year to develop and bring to fruition. Funds are needed to support project development and staffing costs, as well as the capital costs of carrying out the work. We can look at the ways in which the marine fund Scotland evolves to support some of the priorities that lie alongside the just transition and supporting climate and nature priorities.

There is also a point to be made about ensuring that we are properly joined up, particularly in relation to the fishing and aquaculture sectors, to fund the research and innovation that we need to overcome the on-going environmental challenges as well as the new challenges that are coming up. We have some good mechanisms through Fisheries Innovation Scotland and the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre, but we could be more strategic in how we identify the priority gaps and the innovation needs and develop joint projects with industry to address those.

**The Convener:** Jenni Minto has a question on post-EU-exit fisheries governance to close the session.

**Jenni Minto:** My question is for Katie Gillham. I asked the previous panel of witnesses about the legislation that was brought in as a result of our leaving the EU. I am interested in your views on the objectives in the Fisheries Act 2020 and the priorities in the development of the joint fisheries

statement and fishery management plans under the act.

**Katie Gillham:** Given the time, I will be brief, but we can provide follow-up information after the meeting. Broadly speaking, we welcome the objectives in the 2020 act and the definitions that have been published alongside those, which are helpful in relation to implementation.

On future fisheries management, our priorities to ensure that we have an ecosystem-based approach, which others have mentioned. The objectives in the 2020 act speak to that, and we welcome the elements of an ecosystem-based approach that have been brought into the future fisheries management strategy, such as in relation to nursery and spawning grounds, which I have mentioned. In the earlier discussion, Elspeth Macdonald mentioned that it will be really useful to think about how we link up through the marine protection policies in the future fisheries management strategy to streamline the whole process.

The only thing that I will say on the joint fisheries statement just now is that we recognise that that is a really useful part of providing the overall context, so that we understand the processes that will be used for joining up on fisheries management.

On the fisheries management plans, if that is the route that Scotland goes down, we see such plans as having a lot of potential for implementing the objectives in a very structured way. Regardless of whether fisheries management plans are used, we must ensure that we have a mechanism that facilitates an objective assessment of where particular fisheries are against an agreed set of criteria. That will help us to identify the strengths and weaknesses in management, which in turn will help us to identify future priorities and actions.

**The Convener:** Thank you. I thank the witnesses for their patience with the fact that we started late and ran over time. Thank you all for your evidence. I have no doubt that we will come back to you later in the parliamentary session.

12:24

*Meeting continued in private until 12:40.*



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