OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

Wednesday 4 September 2024

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 4 September 2024

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RURAL AFFAIRS AND ISLANDS COMMITTEE
20th Meeting 2024, Session 6

CONVENER

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

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
*Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
*Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
*Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)
*Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
*Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Dr Robin Cook (University of Strathclyde)
Alastair Hamilton (Regional Inshore Fisheries Groups Network)
Professor Michel Kaiser (Marine Alliance for Science and Technology for Scotland)
Elspeth Macdonald (Scottish Fishermen's Federation)
Charles Millar (Sustainable Inshore Fisheries Trust)
Professor Colin Moffat
Phil Taylor (Open Seas)
Dr Alan Wells (Fisheries Management Scotland)
Elaine Whyte (Clyde Fishermen's Association)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Emma Johnston

LOCATION

The May Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

Wednesday 4 September 2024

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Finlay Carson): Good morning, and welcome to the 20th meeting of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee in 2024. I hope that everybody had a relaxing and enjoyable summer recess. Just before we begin, I wish to ensure that all electronic devices are switched to silent—including my own.

Our first item of business is consideration of whether to take item 3 in private. Are we agreed to do so?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Pre-budget Scrutiny 2025-26

09:00

The Convener: Our next item of business is a round-table discussion as part of our pre-budget scrutiny of the upcoming Scottish budget for 2025-26. The committee has agreed to focus its attention on the marine directorate budget to identify whether the directorate has the resources required to fully undertake its functions. This morning, we are joined by a panel of marine stakeholders. I thank you all for joining us.

We have about two and a half hours for this evidence session. Given that we have quite a few participants, I ask everyone to be succinct in their questions and answers. I invite you to indicate by waving your hand or giving me a look if you wish to participate at any point. If you feel that your only contribution is to agree with what has already been said, just say that you agree, rather than repeating the points. That would be most helpful. Likewise, if you are asked to contribute to a part of the discussion that does not relate to your area of expertise, please do not feel that you need to contribute in response to every question.

Before we start, I will ask everyone to introduce themselves, starting on my right.

Dr Robin Cook (University of Strathclyde): I am currently working at the University of Strathclyde as a senior research fellow, but my background is as a fisheries scientist. Most of my career has been spent at the marine laboratory in Aberdeen. I worked mostly on demersal fish, but ultimately I was the director of what was then Fisheries Research Services for a number of years.

The Convener: I should say to all the witnesses that we have a gentleman here who works all your microphones, so you do not need to touch any buttons to speak.

Alastair Hamilton (Regional Inshore Fisheries Groups Network): Good morning. I am chair of the north-west regional inshore fisheries group. We represent skippers. I am a former skipper, and I have worked in fisheries management for many years.

Professor Michel Kaiser (Marine Alliance for Science and Technology for Scotland): I am currently the acting co-director of the Lyell Centre, based at Heriot-Watt University. Like Robin Cook, I am a fisheries scientist. I have worked in fisheries for more than 33 years. I started my career working at the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science—the equivalent of the marine lab, but south of the border. I have collaborated with the marine lab for

many years. Today, I am representing the Marine Alliance for Science and Technology for Scotland, which is a collaboration across all the universities in Scotland in the marine space.

Elspeth Macdonald (Scottish Fishermen's Federation): Good morning. I am the chief executive of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, or SFF, which represents eight fishermen's associations across different fleet sectors in Scotland and across different parts of the Scottish geography.

I have been in this role for around five years now, and I started my working life in the marine laboratory a very long time ago. I left the laboratory in 2001, and much will have changed since then.

Charles Millar (Sustainable Inshore Fisheries Trust): Good morning. I am the executive director of the Sustainable Inshore Fisheries Trust, which is a Scottish charity focusing on sustainable fisheries in the inshore waters.

Professor Colin Moffat: Good morning. I am currently a visiting professor at Robert Gordon University, and I hold an honorary position at Heriot-Watt. Until 2021, I was the chief scientific adviser for marine to the Scottish Government. Prior to that, I was head of science at Marine Scotland. My main research interests are in human activities and their consequences on marine systems, including climate change, pollution and fisheries.

Phil Taylor (Open Seas): I am the director of Open Seas. We are a campaigns organisation working for healthier seas, for more sustainable seafood and for public good from the public commons that is our seas. I thank the committee for taking evidence on this important issue at this time.

Dr Alan Wells (Fisheries Management Scotland): I am the chief executive of Fisheries Management Scotland, which is the representative body for Scotland's district salmon fishery boards and charitable rivers and fisheries trusts. I suspect that I am a bit of an outlier in today's session, because we cover things in freshwater and marine, and everything that happens on the land. Although salmon and recreational fisheries are part of the marine directorate budget, the issues that we need to address to protect and restore river catchments and fish species go a lot wider than that. In our written evidence, for example, we talk about the forestry grant scheme, agriculture and things like that. I will try to stick with marine today, but I cannot promise that I will not diverge at times.

Elaine Whyte (Clyde Fishermen's Association): I am the executive secretary of the Clyde Fishermen's Association, which is one of the oldest fishing associations in Scotland. I have been in the job for nearly 10 years.

The Convener: I thank you all very much. You are all most welcome to the committee—thank you for taking the time to come along.

We will cover a number of themes in our evidence session. We will kick off with the marine directorate budget overview. How have events such as European Union exit, the Covid-19 pandemic and climate and biodiversity change increased or changed the pressure on the marine directorate's budget and resources? What should be the directorate's key priorities in 2025-26 and beyond?

In addition, given that the budgets were increased as part of EU exit, can you say whether those budget increases actually managed to deal with the new challenges of managing fisheries post Brexit, and whether the CFP policies have indeed been successfully delivered?

We will kick off with Elaine Whyte.

Elaine Whyte: The past few years have been a challenging time for a lot of sectors, with Covid and so on, and leaving the EU has meant a bit of a change. Marine Scotland's actual core work is changing, as we see new sectors coming in and investment reducing—as you can see from the budget—in fisheries, which is our key area.

There is also a different culture now. Before I came to the committee, I was looking at information that said that there were 1,911 freedom of information requests under the Environmental Information (Scotland) Regulations 2004 between November 2022 and August 2024. That works out at 7.5 years full time of answering FOI requests in just over 18 months. I worry, therefore, that any increases to the budget are being pulled in different directions and are not related to the core work that we absolutely have to do.

In addition, there has been a very big increase in compliance in comparison with other sectors. The budget for science, which is the most important thing for us, has remained fairly static, at £14.7 million, whereas the actual spend on compliance is just under £29 million. It is worth talking about that with regard to how we legislate and gather evidence.

The Convener: Given your position, do you think that the marine directorate has managed to get through the challenges of EU exit? Have the new policies been successfully delivered, or are they in the course of being delivered?

Elaine Whyte: I feel that we are in a time of flux; that is certainly reflected in our experience. We feel that we have less contact with staff and that staff have more pressure on them. Going

back 10 years ago, I would make a phone call to a member of staff to sort an issue, but that is far more difficult now. Obviously, the advance of online meetings and so on means that people are less accessible at work in general, but I genuinely think that workload is going up, while productivity is probably going down.

Phil Taylor: I want to touch on the point about EU exit, which the convener mentioned. The common fisheries policy is no longer entirely competent in UK law—instead, there is the United Kingdom Fisheries Act 2020, which was brought into Scottish legislation via Fergus Ewing's legislative consent motion at the time.

That establishes a series of fisheries objectives that range from the national benefit objective, which is the core economic objective, to things such as the ecosystem objective, which is about achieving ecosystem health. It is a real place where we can balance out the different desires for our fisheries and for our seas. Of course, ours are quite focused on environment and sustainability, but that is where that balance happens.

The key vehicle for delivering those objectives is the fisheries management plans, which are per stock or per species. The Scottish Government's marine directorate set out in the joint fisheries statement, which you will remember was submitted to the committee for approval, 22 fisheries management plans that were to be delivered. That was part of the justification for the increase in funding—it was to do with the additional obligations that the cabinet secretary at the time indicated were being put on the directorate.

We have yet to see a draft of any of those plans, and the deadline for their delivery is the end of this year. That is in the joint fisheries statement, so it has a legal standing. If the marine directorate is not to meet that deadline, it has to take certain legal actions. There is a section in the UK Fisheries Act 2020 that it must comply with.

We have been involved in the process of drafting some of those plans and, sadly, I do not think that the draft proposals that we have seen would pass muster with the duties of the process. They certainly do not achieve the objective as a whole, but they also do not achieve the specifics of what is required.

You asked how the process of EU exit is going, convener, and how it is bringing back some power to UK fisheries administrations within what is a quite federal system. I do not think that it is going particularly well at this point. We are not seeing progress. This is not early days; we are four years in. You asked what should be the priority. I suggest that delivery of those duties is one of the significant priorities for the coming year.

The Convener: Is that because there is a lack of resources or budget to get the work done? Is that where the issue lies?

Phil Taylor: I am afraid that I find it difficult to engage with the budget, because it is too high level. I do not know how the allocations are breaking down within teams. I trust that the cabinet secretary and their team have evaluated that to a significant degree and come up with a proper resourcing regime; I am not here to second guess those judgments.

There is a lot of money in the system. We are talking about significant sums of money on the pieces of paper that are in front of us, but other issues are in the way. For example, Seafish was commissioned to draft a fisheries management plan, but I do not know in what capacity and whether it was a contractual commission. In my opinion, the plan that has come back is not in any real condition to take forward, so I question whether that resource, or the money that was used to commission Seafish—if indeed that is how it worked—has been used appropriately.

Professor Kaiser: I am going to bring my age to bear here, because Phil Taylor is a little younger than me. In answer to your question, convener, the first thing to remember is that post-Brexit, we are still required to contribute to the science in relation to the management of the stocks that are managed at an EU level because, of course, fish do not respect boundaries. We have to have our own scientific advice, so that workload still exists.

In addition, post-Brexit, obviously there has been an opportunity for the UK and the Scottish Government to be more ambitious in how we manage our inshore waters and fish stocks. That has, necessarily, and in a very timely way, created the need for an awful lot more work. There is the existing workload plus a whole raft of new work.

Phil Taylor rightly pointed out that the budget is very high level. If you look at it, you find that it extends back only to 2009. I was chatting with Robin Cook before the meeting. I started my career in 1991. At that time, everybody would have liked to have worked in the marine lab in Aberdeen. It was internationally renowned, it was a science leader, and it was innovating. To be quite frank, it is not somewhere that you would want to work these days, because, over three decades, it has been systematically hollowed out to a shell of what it was formerly.

So, there is a shifting baseline here. Phil Taylor's frustration is a result of three decades of attrition of what was an excellent scientific resource. We are now left with pressurised staff who are trying to deal with even more work than they had on their plate beforehand, and that is not

something that we are going to fix in the space of 12 months. The budget may have been increased, but cultural reform is required, and the science resource that existed in Marine Scotland needs to be rebuilt.

In addition, because the staff are so time pressured, they have been left with no headroom to draw on the excellent academic community that we have in Scotland and use that more effectively. We are just not getting the engagement. That is not because of a lack of desire; it is because of a lack of time for people to think and have free time to do that.

09:15

Elspeth Macdonald: The budget may, indeed, have been increased post leaving the EU but, of course, the Scottish Government now has many more policy and regulatory responsibilities. In SFF, we have the feeling that people are spinning an awful lot of plates across the policy machinery within the marine directorate and the scientific effort that underpins that.

Phil Taylor is right about the delay with the fisheries management plans. There is a legal obligation for those to be in place by the end of this year. We have seen little of them so far, but we do not feel that the directorate is not trying to do them; the issue is just that it is trying to juggle so many other priorities.

Not all of those priorities have come from EU exit. For example, the Government has decided to do a lot of work on building a new national marine plan. Also, a lot of effort in the marine directorate is going into dealing with the emerging landscape around offshore renewables and the environmental impacts of that. The Government has published a blue economy vision and strategy. We have all the policy priorities that came from the future fisheries management strategy, which was published back in 2020 or 2021.

It feels that the directorate is spinning many, many plates and it looks to us as if the resource that it has is being spread too thinly over too many things.

Alastair Hamilton: I will not echo points and will go with your request, convener, but I will take the question from a slightly different angle.

I am fairly new to the world that we are discussing. I came in from working abroad only a year ago, so I do not know what happened pre-Brexit and cannot really comment. However, I agree with what Elspeth Macdonald and others said about spinning plates and the jam being spread too thinly. That is certainly the case in science. The science facility seems to be shredded at the moment and hardly dealing with its statutory duties. That is less the case in compliance.

I will set out one of the management actions that I think is valid. You have all the right policies about holistic management, ecosystem management and biodiversity, but if you are to achieve those objectives, you would have a different structure from the one that we have at the moment. The structure seems to be lagging behind. You have an organisation with a structure that existed in the past 20 years trying to address new issues, but the budget could be better used if it was restructured somewhat.

Professor Moffat: Although we left the EU, we are still required to follow and determine good environmental status. Indeed, we are meant to report this year on whether we achieved good environmental status in 2020. Given the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic—OSPAR—quality status report that came out last year, I suspect that the answer will be that we did not. That is critical because, if we do not have good environmental status, it impacts on our fisheries and the whole environment, so we have a problem. However, that means that we are still following through. We also have all the OSPAR commitments, which have not changed either so, again, there is a lot of additional work.

One of my concerns relates to the three marine indicators under our national performance framework. One of those is on clean seas. Currently, the national performance framework website tells us that the facilities for chemical analysis were lost due to storm Arwen and there will be no further indicators until at least 2026. For our sustainable fish stocks, the most recent data that is highlighted is from 2020 and, for our biodiversity, it is for 2018. We have to work in real time, because the rate of change due to what is happening with greenhouse gas emissions and ocean acidification means that we cannot use data that is that old.

There is a lot of pressure on those people to deliver, but they are unable to do so because the facilities are not what they were. They have not done much chemical analysis for quite some time. Ocean acidification is a potential problem, especially for our shell fisheries, and there is minimal data for Scotland, yet some countries have significant time series.

I echo what Michel Kaiser said: we are a shadow of what we used to be. The critical aspect is that that means that there is not the evidence. Scotland's marine assessment for 2020 made significant recommendations, but I am not aware of any of those being enacted since that was published by the Scottish Government. We therefore have significant work to do, because the

rate of change is such that it will impact fisheries and every aspect of what we do in the marine environment and, if we adversely impact our marine environment, we impact our terrestrial environment as well.

Consequently, we need the evidence to ensure that we are making the right decisions about what human activities can take place where and when, but we do not have that.

Charles Millar: Professor Moffat has touched on the area I was going to go to. I totally agree with what has been said about spinning plates and about resources being spread thinly.

One important thing that has not been mentioned specifically is the issue of climate change and the responses that will be needed as fisheries and marine managers react to that. Some events, such as the Covid pandemic, will, I hope, be non-recurring. A significant amount of work must be done to react and respond to what has come in as a result of Brexit. The overarching change that is taking place is a key issue for resourcing in the future.

Alan Wells: As was said earlier, it is challenging to get a firm understanding of what the budget allocations actually mean sector by sector, particularly for salmon and recreational fisheries.

What is more important to us, as stakeholders, is that resources must be made available to deliver the commitments that have already been made, including the wild salmon strategy and the salmon interactions working group. As far as I am aware, there is no dedicated budget for those things.

We have worked hard and are grateful that we have managed to get funding from the marine fund Scotland to take some of those important things forward, but, at the same time, the staff complement within the wild salmon and recreational fisheries team has fallen from seven to three.

We have stepped up. We are progressing some of the recommendations from the wild salmon strategy, but that is really challenging without a dedicated budget to take those things forward. It is challenging for the staff in the marine directorate and for our sector.

You mentioned Brexit. I understand that the marine fund Scotland was a three-year commitment from the UK Government and that that commitment is now coming to an end, so it is imperative that we see money coming forward, because it is becoming increasingly important for progressing important work. There is probably an argument for ring fencing some of that money. From our perspective, that would be for conservation and addressing the biodiversity crisis and the wild salmon crisis that is a subset of that. As Colin Moffat said, those things are heading in one direction and we must take concerted action to address them.

Dr Cook: Like others, I find it difficult to understand how that level of budget translates into actual delivery.

The marine directorate science people face the problem that most of the research that they were previously engaged in has now finished and there is no more money to do research. As a result, there is an inability to build capacity to deliver for the future.

On one hand, although there are obviously pressing priorities to deliver on certain policies, the capacity to deliver in the future is being run down in order to address those things. It is extremely important to allocate an element of the budget to allow people to do research and to allow marine directorate science to benefit from funding that comes from elsewhere in order to support that research.

In the days of the agency, it was possible to bring in external income. That was additional money that expanded the capacity to do stuff. Nowadays, it is not possible to do that. If someone is engaged in a project with external money, that money is not actually beneficial in the sense that it is not additional to the budget. Consequently, there is no incentive to do research that benefits from external work. That cuts off networks of expertise in other institutions, and it means that the people involved are dependent on what they learned some years ago. It is of real concern that we no longer have a marine institute in Scotland with the capacity to deliver for the future. The directorate is dependent only on what it learned 10 years ago.

The Convener: That is really helpful. Thank you.

Professor Kaiser: Speaking as an academic at a university, I would say that it is essential that we have institutions such as Marine Scotland science, which is there for ever. Universities come and go, and academics such as me come and go, but institutions such as Marine Scotland science are permanent fixtures. If we are to build up long time series of data and datasets, they need to be curated, so we need that continuity.

You cannot expect delivery to come solely from the academic community. We can contribute at different times on different things, but we will never provide the service that society needs. We can provide some of it, but not all of it.

Robin Cook touched on this point. You need to understand what has happened to Marine Scotland science. Robin talked about the days of

the agency. South of the border, in England, a different approach was taken with CEFAS, which became an executive agency. In contrast with Marine Scotland science, CEFAS has grown enormously because it has been allowed to expand its income streams to do work overseas—and it has done so very successfully. It is using that additional income to subsidise the science and research that it does on behalf of the UK taxpayer.

We have made a mistake somewhere in the past, and I am afraid that we are left with the consequences of that mistake today. It will take some time to fix it.

Elspeth Macdonald: I said earlier that the Government has published a number of strategies. Indeed, it has published a marine science and information strategy—as I think it is called. Building on the points that Robin Cook made, I would say that there is a mismatch now between what the Government wants the marine directorate to be and what it can be. Many of the strategy documents talk about the marine directorate being world class and internationally recognised, but there is a real mismatch between the Government's ambition and what it says it wants the marine directorate to be and what the Government is actually enabling it to be through the way in which it is now working and how it is funded.

I would echo the points that have been made about the decline in the directorate's international reputation and visibility. To take one good example, mackerel is the most valuable stock for the Scottish fishing industry, accounting for more than a third of the value of total landings in Scotland. There used to be a really strong pelagic fisheries team in the marine laboratory. Now, however, the stock assessment work on mackerel—stock assessment being a statutory requirement—is led by the Dutch; it is no longer led by people from the marine laboratory, who have a huge vested interest in that fishery.

There has been an erosion or loss of international reputation. While the Government is projecting a desire to be an international leader, that is not being matched by the available resources.

The Convener: I am conscious that we are moving off the main topic as the conversation goes on. I will bring in Colin Moffat, and we will then have an additional question from Ariane Burgess—but you will all have an opportunity to contribute on other themes.

Professor Moffat: There is one ecosystem monitoring site for Scotland, which is off Stonehaven. It is run by the marine laboratory. Part of the challenge is that we need 15 to 20 years of data to differentiate between the natural fluctuations and the human forcing. As the work started in 1997, it has been only in the past five to 10 years that we have been able to use the data.

09:30

However, sampling and analysis are now slowing down or not happening, so the time series are not complete. Institutes such as the marine laboratory can keep those things going but universities do not have the capacity to do that, so vital information has gone.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): This has been a really interesting discussion so far. A number of you have said that the budget is at too high a level to be usefully understood or scrutinised. We are here to scrutinise the marine directorate, as the committee has chosen to do. I am also hearing that there is a need to incentivise change to achieve the national outcomes that you have mentioned and to ensure that we reach the objectives of the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010 and the Fisheries Act 2020.

Phil Taylor, you mentioned that first. How do you see public money being used to incentivise the change that we need and to achieve those outcomes?

Phil Taylor: There is a big issue with the grants. We have £14.5 million. Alan Wells mentioned the money that the marine fund Scotland has given out in the past, and there are serious questions about how that is being used to incentivise change. I did a quick bit of maths last night. Between 11 and 15 new bottom-trawl nets were bought in 2024, using about £75,000 of public money at a time when we are talking about the need to better manage that fishery and to mitigate some of its impacts. A new keel was bought for a boat and almost £7,000 was spent on changing the polarity on a winch on one of the biggest dredgers in Scotland. I do not see how those payments tally with public priorities.

There is a significant mismatch in the way that public money is being allocated for incentivisation. The committee is more aware than I am of how incentivisation works in agriculture. The money that is available here is a little more than a tenth of the greening budget that is available for agriculture. That money does a lot on our land, and members are well aware of how much is happening because of that budget, but we are not seeing a tenth of that drive to use public money in the sea.

To drive the point home, one of the boats for which a net was bought was impounded. The justification for buying the net was that it would reduce by-catch and help to resolve the issue of discard, but the boat was impounded in Ireland

because of illegal discarding and too much by-catch. Public money did not lead to a public benefit but actually drove things in the opposite direction. The committee should pay attention to how that money was spent in previous years, what the intended outcomes were and how those targets were achieved.

Thank you for that important question.

Charles Millar: Marine planning is one important priority that should be emphasised. It seems to me that that underpins the collaboration and cohesion of different sectors working together. Marine planning is clearly problematic. It is now 14 years since regional marine planning was first proposed in the 2010 act and nine years since the regions were defined, but we are still at the draft stage with one of those plans. That is an important component of driving change forward, but it is not happening. That must become a major priority.

Alan Wells: I absolutely agree with Charles Millar. It is ludicrous that it has taken so long to move those things forward.

As has been said, there is a growing consensus that subsidies for polluting and damaging industries distort both economic and environmental returns. If we are to address the biodiversity crisis, we must start redirecting public funding away from environmentally harmful activities and towards sustainable practices on both land and sea. Professor Sir Dieter Helm has consistently pointed out that such benefits would be expected to lead to net economic gain as well as to environmental benefits, so that is definitely the way to move forward.

Elaine Whyte: I agree with everyone that, although it is difficult to tell from the Scottish Parliament information centre briefing, the budget is different from the actual spend. In 2022-23, the budget was just over £72 million but the actual spend was just over £80 million. It is the same for compliance, where the figure goes from £26 million to just under £29 million. The spend is more than the budget.

We see a pattern of increasing spend in the areas of compliance, marine planning and environmental monitoring. The areas where we see a decrease in spend are science, sea fisheries and aquaculture. We have had a historic underspend on science.

I go back to Robin Cook's point that innovation is important but stability of science helps us to find out where we are in the ecosystem. It is not always about money; it is sometimes about trust and the ability to work in partnership to find out about the ecosystem and science.

We are also seeing a loss of boats. On the ability to work with the Government, I am finding that the Government wants to go out and observe trips and meet with fishermen but it is very difficult to get boats that are out in the water to take them, because they are reducing. There must be a way in which we can collaborate. It is about not money but perspective in some cases.

Elspeth Macdonald: On the question of whether public money is being used to incentivise change, many of us feel that there has been a serious lack of investment of public money in our inshore fisheries. We have many data gaps and poor information in relation to many of our inshore fisheries compared with some of the other fisheries.

The Government fairly recently brought in interim management measures for inshore waters, and there are on-going discussions with industry and other stakeholders about what those measures should be, but they are based on data that is at least five years old in some cases. It goes back to Colin Moffat's point that, without investing in the knowledge to understand the problems, issues or challenges that we are trying to manage, it is very difficult to match the management interventions to the reality on the ground. There is definitely room for improvement in that area.

There could also be much better collaboration between industry and Government. We collaborate in a number of areas, and there are industries that are ambitious and, in many cases, interested and keen to do more, but there often seem to be hurdles and barriers that make that harder rather than easier. We would like the Government to be a bit more open minded and ambitious about how it can engage in such collaborations.

The Convener: I will bring in Michel Kaiser very briefly.

Professor Kaiser: People affect change, and we are not investing enough in people. In relation to the focus on inshore fisheries, which will increase very much in the near future, although the Government has invested in the initiative of inshore fisheries groups—or IFGs—they are not adequately resourced and, to be frank, they are at the wrong scale.

We see from many other examples around the world and in the UK—in the Isle of Man, for example—that, where we bring ownership and responsibility back to community-based management, it leads to positive biodiversity outcomes, more profitable fisheries and better wellbeing for the people who are involved in them. We are simply not putting in place the right mechanisms and structures to support that.

Ariane Burgess: Thanks for all your responses. To clarify, should we, as a committee, ask the

Government to publish to a more detailed level so that we can see where the budgets are intended to go? Should we ask the Government to report on what was spent and how it was spent? For example, in 2022, we approved £25,000 for the marine directorate for additional duties resulting from the UK leaving the EU. Should that kind of thing cover reporting? I am looking for a yes-or-no answer.

Elspeth Macdonald: One of the challenges that I had in looking at the budget data, which is at a very high level, was in understanding whether it reflects what budget was allocated or how that budget was actually spent—what the budget outturn was. What is allocated at the start of the year is not necessarily where the money ends up going. It was very hard even to understand whether I was looking at what was spent or what was allocated.

Ariane Burgess: So, you are saying that there needs to be greater transparency. If the budget data is difficult for you to understand, in order for us, as a committee, to be able to scrutinise it, it needs to be in a much more accessible form, and it needs to give us the necessary level of detail.

Alastair Hamilton: My point is a very quick one. The publication of financial information is a matter of trust between the marine directorate and its key stakeholders. Even though the regional inshore fisheries groups network is probably one of the marine directorate's closest stakeholders, in the past year I have been told that I am not allowed to find out about RIFG budgets. We are recipients of money, as we claim it, but we do not have management control or any decision-making powers. The issue is one of transparency and governance. The Government needs to have the confidence to publish financial information for its stakeholders and to know that the provision of that information will not be abused.

Elaine Whyte: I agree, but I also think that some regional analysis needs to be done. Before today's committee meeting, I managed to get the budget headings, the spend and the actual budget. That is why I can say with confidence that spending on compliance, marine planning and environmental monitoring has gone up while spending on science, sea fisheries and aquaculture has gone down, and that we have had an underspend. However, I think that a regional analysis of those resources also needs to be carried out.

In the Clyde, which is one of the most controversial areas, we have a few boats left, but, in our members' opinion, we have a very heavy compliance programme. We must look at why we are undertaking that compliance work. Are we doing it because it is reactionary or because it is proportionate? Such internal analysis has to happen.

I also think that there needs to be an awareness of the amount of money that is out there that is not being connected properly. For example, what are NatureScot and the marine directorate doing on science, and how is what they are doing different? Obviously, NatureScot awards various grants to various bodies to do work, but fishermen never know about that. We have reached out to NatureScot, because it would be good to have better collaboration with it. We could be duplicating work or there might be better ways to do it.

I agree with Michel Kaiser. We must get back to some kind of regional management process, and we must involve good people who are trusted and who understand what is going on with the budgets regionally. I am very concerned that a lot more is being spent on compliance than is being spent on science. We need to redress that balance.

Professor Moffat: We face a challenge in relation to the question that we are asking. We are asking about resource, but the first thing that we have to establish is what Scotland wants as regards the state of its marine environment, its biodiversity and what it wants to get from it. Unfortunately, we have visions and documents coming out of our ears, but none of them seem to be delivering anything or resulting in any real change.

We need to ask what it is that we want, and, once we have decided that, we need to ask what the marine directorate is going to do to contribute to the delivery of that. The marine directorate cannot do everything; we need to look at what it can do, where its uniqueness lies and what it can deliver that universities and other places cannot.

The third point to make is that we are about to put the industry with the biggest footprint—the renewable energy industry—into our seas. How is that being funded? How is the research being funded? It is being funded by the Crown Estate and by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The Scottish Government is providing some funding, but the key thing is that multiple organisations are funding that work. Perhaps the Scottish Government needs to look at the components of that and the money that is coming in from Crown Estate Scotland. Can we make use of some of that money to fund the research?

Putting the renewable energy industry into the North Sea has the potential to change the ecology of the North Sea, which will have an impact on fisheries and everything that we do.

It is about deciding what we want, who is going to do it and what the marine directorate's

contribution is and making sure that it delivers on it. One thing that I noticed in the SPICe report is that we have had no report on science output from the marine directorate since 2018.

09:45

The Convener: I am aware that others want to come in, but I will keep things moving, given the time. I am sure that you will have the chance to put your points on record when we explore some of the other themes. We will now look specifically at marine science.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): There are many incredible academic voices in the room today, but I presume that, if research is not being resourced properly, that will be to the detriment of the long-term respect for scientists from Scotland and our international reputation.

We visited the marine directorate on Monday and we did, to be fair, have a fantastic visit. We could see what it was doing with the resources that it had. The staff were a very jolly bunch, but they were doing specific work, some of which was industry led. How is our international reputation being seen at the moment, given the reduction in the output of scientific papers? Internally, is the Government seeing an industry or sector match-funded approach being taken if the budget is being squeezed?

Professor Kaiser: At the moment, the UK fishing industry does contribute in so far as it pays a levy on landings of fish. That funds Seafish, which is a partner organisation that has been mentioned before and that we can use effectively. It is worth scrutinising that relationship. We need all our funded bodies to be pulling together. I am not saying that they are not, but we need things to be co-ordinated as well as clear roles and responsibilities, so that we have additive benefit and are not conflicting with one other.

I think that that is a positive. There is a money-raising mechanism there, so I do agree that industry pays or contributes to the science. However—and Colin Moffat really put his finger on this—the big money will come from the Crown Estate, which is a key player here. Previously, we saw with the collaborative offshore wind research into the environment electromagnetic field fund, when wind renewables originally came to the table in the early 2000s, the Crown Estate put together a central pot of funds that was used strategically to benefit all and was not specific to a particular business or wind farm development. Because the science all had to be generic, it benefited everybody, and I think that a similar model would be extremely beneficial in this particular circumstance.

Dr Cook: Were you asking specifically about international reputation?

Rachael Hamilton: Yes, and the number of peer-reviewed scientific papers that have been produced. Is that having a detrimental impact on our reputation in Scotland?

Dr Cook: Yes. It is difficult, though; there is hard evidence on the number of publications, and inevitably people see that and respond accordingly. However, it is quite difficult to produce hard evidence that our reputation has suffered, other than through anecdotal discussions with other people.

I will give you an anecdote. The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea is the body that does most of the international assessments of fisheries, and every now and then it does a benchmark assessment of certain fisheries in different areas. When it carried out such an assessment in 2020 for the west of Scotland stocks, two principal stocks were considered—west of Scotland cod and west of Scotland whiting—and the Marine Scotland science people were there to represent it, as they have most of the data and survey information and so on. However, the whiting lead assessor proved unable to do the assessment, so the Danish national institute of aquatic resources picked it up and did the assessment for Scotland. That seems to me to be a very serious problem, because it suggests that the expertise has been run down to such an extent that not only are you now reliant on institutes in other countries to do the assessment for you, but your ability to advise the division and the minister is compromised.

You find it in other ways, too. For example, the multi-institute partner research programmes for which people bid for money do not go to the marine lab any more, because it is not worth their while. I think that it is an extremely serious problem—I really do. I cannot see how the existing infrastructure and capacity are sustainable in the long run.

Professor Kaiser: That was a very powerful anecdote—that is humiliating. I was not aware that that was happening.

I can give you another concrete example. I am co-director of a centre for doctoral training, which is funded at the UK level; Heriot-Watt University is the only Scottish university that is involved in it. The funding funds 48 PhDs across the participating organisations, which are focused on the sustainable management of marine resources. They will be the next generation that, as Robin Cook said, we will need. Marine Scotland science promised to co-fund 20 of those PhDs, but a year after we were funded, it withdrew entirely.

That is a reputational issue, and Robin Cook touched on it. There is nothing more reputationally damaging than doing something like that after saying that you will commit to co-funding. We were talking about what was really a trivial sum of money—tens of thousands of pounds, not hundreds of thousands. It is reputationally damaging. Once people have been burned, they do not come back a second time.

Elspeth Macdonald: We, too, have been hearing anecdotes that suggest a feeling that Scotland has lost its place on the international stage. There is an element of being unable or unwilling to engage in international projects, as well as a lack of physical visibility. I think that people are no longer travelling to meetings, so they are not being seen as much internationally. That is what drives that whole perspective.

Robin Cook mentioned the West of Scotland cod and whiting benchmarks. We had, I suppose, a not dissimilar situation earlier this year with the monkfish benchmark. We had good engagement and input from the marine lab scientists to drive good outcomes from that benchmark, but the industry put a great deal of effort, resource and scientific analytical input into that exercise, too. Again, what Robin Cook said about the Danes undertaking the whiting assessment chimes with my earlier comment about our mackerel stock assessment now being led by the Danes, whose stake in the fishery is very small compared to the huge stake that Scotland has.

I also just want to touch on Mike Kaiser's point about money that will come from the offshore renewables industry. As Colin Moffat has said, it will have an enormous industrial footprint in our seas; it is likely to have impacts on the environment, fisheries, seabirds, cetaceans and physical ocean processes, and we have a poor understanding of what many of those impacts will be. Between the ScotWind leasing round and the innovation and targeted oil and gas leasing round, the revenues that will flow to the Scottish Government through the money that comes to the Crown Estate are in the region of about £1 billion. We heard yesterday, however, that some of that money will be used to address other black holes in the wider budget.

When we think about the challenges that we are facing and talking about today, such as the lack of resource for understanding our marine environment and having the necessary resources for our marine policy and regulation, one might think that the marine directorate should surely be able to access the revenues that will flow not just from the option fees but, in the longer term, from the sea bed leases. The Scottish marine energy research programme, which carries out marine environmental research into renewable energy, is woefully underfunded and is not moving at anything like the pace that will be necessary to understand the impacts of offshore renewable energy before those developments get built.

Dr Wells: I agree with those comments about ScotMER. An evidence map for diadromous fish that has been set out shows a series of evidence gaps, but it is not apparent how any of those gaps will be filled.

I just want to mention the freshwater side of the marine directorate, because, at the moment, some fantastic work of international renown is going on. Let me give you a couple of examples. The last time that I was in front of the committee, I mentioned the national electrofishing programme for Scotland, which gives us a good understanding of the juvenile densities of salmon and trout in our rivers. We also collect water samples in order to get a good understanding of the water quality at those sites and also genetic samples, so that we understand the genetic introgression from fish farming through that programme. As it stands, though, there are not sufficient resources to conduct the sampling and analysis of that work on an annual basis, which is a real disappointment. That is a really good example of work that is co-ordinated and funded centrally but delivered locally.

Another example is the Scotland river temperature monitoring network, which has given us fantastic information about the potential for our rivers to heat and become inhospitable to salmon. That allows us to direct resources to where we need to plant trees, shade rivers and take the appropriate care.

There is really good work going on. Many other countries are looking at our work in those areas, but there is an issue with resourcing to ensure that it is carried out consistently, because we need those long-term data sets.

Elaine Whyte: I completely agree with Elspeth Macdonald's point about inshore science. It has been a massive problem for us.

I will give you three examples, the first of which is the cod box. We started three-year trials with Marine Scotland and the University of St Andrews; they were going very well, but then they were stopped. They were of minimal cost, but, when they were stopped, we had an ideological debate about what should happen in that area. I would prefer to have worked down the line of collaboration and to have continued with that approach.

Recently, we have had the crab and lobster issue around the coast. We are using seven-year-old data as a minimum. A trial is under way on that at Solway, but there are other areas where people feel that it is not appropriate to use seven-year-old

data when it means that they might lose their livelihoods.

We also have a lack of pelagic data, which we have talked about already. We have not had our surveys on herring. Likewise, the Irish are offering to do things that we have offered and fully costed up. It might be very minimal, but we still cannot take it forward.

We really do not know what is happening. We, as a fishing association, are finding that we are spending our resources on fighting political decisions instead of working with people on the science. We need to turn that around.

This is not just about science stocks. We could be applying Anchor Lab solutions so that we are able to fish while protecting the features that are out there. Those are fairly simple things that we could engage in for science, and we really have to get round to doing them.

Elspeth Macdonald mentioned ScotMER. We hear a lot about modelling systems and precautionary approaches. Such approaches can have a massive effect on communities, and we have to be aware of that when it comes to the science. The modelling systems will only ever be as good as the sample data that is put into them, and if the sample data is based on compliance trips or observer data that is very limited, you will not get an accurate result. That sort of thing has its place, but it cannot replace actual science.

Professor Moffat: There are still some shining lights in the marine directorate. One area in which our reputation is still very strong is organic contaminants in marine systems. Indeed, the marine directorate led for the north-east Atlantic on the recent assessment of organic contaminants that came out in 2023.

Two issues have to be urgently addressed, the first of which is the fact that the marine laboratory has lost its ability to do the analysis for Scotland on contaminants, because of the lack of investment in the analytical laboratories. They have now been moved to the University of Aberdeen, but they are not yet functional and, indeed, have not been functional for some time now.

The other thing is that the two scientists who have been instrumental in delivering this over the past 15 years are, like me, ageing, and will retire. I am not aware of any good succession plan being in place to ensure that we maintain our credibility in this area. If this all comes down to our having to be dependent on certain individuals, the concern is that we have no staff coming in behind them to do that work when they go.

10:00

Charles Millar: There is a lot of consensus on the difficulty with the lack of resource that is directed towards gathering data. Clearly, that is an issue. Another thing that needs to be brought out of the discussion is that there is a problem with the amount of resource that is being dedicated to the analysis of the data, which I think is a distinct and important issue. Certainly, with some of the crab and lobster work, more recent data is available, but it has not yet been analysed. That is a separate, but important, component.

A third issue with regard to the whole science question is whether the data—whether or not it has been analysed—is actually being utilised. We have seen that with, for example, Clyde cod, about which we know that certain reports were not necessarily taken into account.

Each of those three components is important.

Elspeth Macdonald: I have a couple of practical examples that touch on Colin Moffat's and Charles Millar's points about having the necessary expertise and planning for the future so that we have both the people and the facilities to analyse and interpret samples that have been collected.

With many of our fish stocks, it is not always just about counting fish and noting their location; it is about being able to understand how different sub-stocks might be mixing. We will have to grapple with that issue for the management of the northern shelf cod stock. I do not know whether that will be an issue for next year or for a future year, but we will have to get to grips with it.

We are also aware that our pelagic self-sampling scheme has identified some herring that do not look like the herring that we would usually see in our North Sea fishery. That is interesting. Is there mixing between the Norway stock and what we have in the North Sea? Industry has collected samples, which have been sent to the marine laboratory, but the lab does not seem to have any ability or great ambition to do any analysis of them. It has not got the necessary equipment to perform modern genetic testing, yet that will be the technique and the tools that we will need for better management of fish stocks in the future. Industry is keen to do this; it collected the samples and sent them in, but they are sitting on a shelf and will be sent to Norway, where the analysis will be done for us.

Professor Kaiser: We have heard that we need more resource for analysis, which I agree with. For that, we must have highly qualified, motivated people who are interacting with other scientists so that they are aware of the latest techniques. The committee should think about the culture in Marine Scotland science as it exists today. We are not

seeing its scientists out and about in the international field, and their reputation is withering.

For the past two years, I have run a fisheries conservation conference at Heriot-Watt University, which has been open to everyone at no cost, and I have invited Marine Scotland science to it. The response said, "I need to seek permission to come to Edinburgh to attend a one-day conference." Permission was withheld. It seems to me as though there is a culture of micromanaging. Scientists are like plants: they need light and water. If you put them in a dark room, they will wither and die. I would take a close look at the culture of the organisation. Nothing will change if the culture is wrong, and you will never hire highly qualified people to do the data analysis, because it is an unattractive employer.

Dr Cook: To go back to the question of reputation, we have talked about capacity and international visibility, which are important. A more insidious problem undermines the credibility of Marine Scotland—marine directorate—science: the position within which science sits in relation to Government. In laboratories across Europe and, indeed, in North America, science is managed at arm's length from Government. The perception among other scientists is that those are more independent organisations.

There is a lack of trust among people outside Government in Government science, because of the fear that it is being manipulated or influenced unduly. Indeed, one gets a strong flavour of that in the discussions on issues in the Clyde.

Perhaps I can highlight something that happened more recently. When Marine Scotland was set up—in other words, when the agency, as it was, transitioned to what became Marine Scotland—we put in place a science advisory panel to ensure the objectivity and neutrality of the science. That has been done away with, with the transition to what is now the marine directorate. Again, that undermines the perception that science that is coming out of Marine Scotland is neutral and objective. It looks as though it is too influenced by Government.

The Convener: I am glad that you gave that answer before I asked the question, because it sounds better coming from you than coming from me as convener. Thank you.

Did you want to respond, Elspeth?

Elspeth Macdonald: No.

The Convener: Okay. We will move on to a question from Emma Harper.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Good morning, everybody.

Actually, I think that my question has been answered, but I am still trying to get my head round this pre-budget scrutiny. We have been talking about resourcing science and data collection and analysis, and everybody has been quite clear about that. There seem to be various ways of supporting and funding the marine directorate. For example, Alan Wells mentioned planting trees next to rivers, the money for which—I assume—would come from the Forestry and Land Scotland budget. It seems, therefore, as if there is a lot of potential for cross-portfolio working, but it is the collaboration that Elaine Whyte talked about that I am interested in exploring. How can we support better collaboration to ensure access to funding that can support data analysis and, obviously, data interpretation?

I am not sure whether that question is for Elaine Whyte to start off with. I see that Elspeth Macdonald has indicated that she, too, wants to respond. How do we support better collaboration? By that, I am thinking about finding pots of money to support the marine directorate.

Elaine Whyte: Robin Cook was correct in talking about the need for a neutral body and trust. We had always supported marine directorate science as a more neutral approach, and that is what we would like to see.

People are right to highlight the need for discussions with regard to NatureScot, the budget lines and the science that is happening there and in fisheries. I do not think that a lot of discussion is happening in that respect. I might as well just say it: there is a perception that certain parties have aligned with certain groups. As a result, we potentially do not have very good relationships with some groups, and we need to try to break that down. After all, there should never be any worry about speaking with local fishermen. That is something that we need to address, because when you speak to fishermen, most of them will tell you that they feel as if they are being slightly vilified—that is how strong the feeling is.

That has been borne out in the budget when you look at what has happened, with spending on compliance going up and the lack of science and so on. We need to find a way to get that dialogue going, take some of the politics out of all this and get back to the baseline science. There has to be a discussion with NatureScot and the marine directorate.

I should say that there are a lot of really good people in the marine directorate. It sounds as though we are continually attacking it, and I do not want to do that. However, I feel that they are very constrained. Indeed, I go back to the point about spending the equivalent of 7.5 years full time in answering FOI requests over 18 months. That is really significant. After all, how do you build good

relationships when there is a culture of people constantly asking questions? There have also been quite a few judicial reviews. There is an edginess, with people frightened to work together. They feel that something might become an issue or that they might be questioned on it.

We have to say that out loud, because it is preventing good work from being taken forward, partnerships and people working together.

The Convener: That suggests a complete lack of sufficient transparency in some of the policy decisions that the marine directorate has put to the Scottish Government. Indeed, we have seen that with the lobster and crab management measures, which have already been mentioned. A policy was brought in, it was challenged by fishermen, and there was a bit of political pressure. All of that has resulted in a one-year trial, and fishermen are now biting the hand off the marine directorate to get the equipment that will allow them to gather the evidence to support their argument. That has been seen as fantastic evidence of a good relationship between fishermen and the marine directorate, but it has happened as a result of a lack of transparency and proper engagement with the fishing industry in the first instance. Therefore, the main issue here is transparency.

Elaine Whyte: There is a culture of reactivity, too, and that brings us back to what Robin Cook said about the need for stable science. It is not always about innovation; it is about having stable science. Quite often, we are in key areas; indeed, the Clyde is one of them. We have a big say and are continually a key point of interest. However, if we had stable science, it would take away a lot of the reactive work. I feel for the marine directorate, because sometimes it gets pushed into a corner and, instead of just getting the data, we have this culture of campaign-led work.

Alastair Hamilton: We are seeing certain lines joining up. Somebody has talked about marine directorate staff not being able to travel, and now we are talking about the interim crab and lobster management measures. I had four meetings with crab and lobster fishermen in my area prior to the measures coming in, to engage with them and ask what would or would not be acceptable to them. After all, I was part of influencing of what those measures would be. For those four meetings, marine directorate staff said that they could not travel and, because they were in many cases in the north-west Highlands, they could not link in online. As a result, they were just seen as governing from afar, issuing decisions without directly hearing from the people affected by them.

Elspeth Macdonald: I can give you an example of good collaboration, although there is scope for more. Perhaps some of the culture issues that we have been discussing are getting in the way of that.

The Scottish Pelagic Fishermen's Association, which is one of the constituent members of the SFF, runs a pelagic self-sampling scheme. The industry collects the samples that are needed to feed into the international data framework for stock assessment, with the analysis carried out by the marine laboratory. The industry was able to drive that forward through its involvement in an EU-funded project called, I think, the paradigm for novel dynamic oceanic resource assessments—PANDORA—project.

It has not necessarily been easy to get the scheme to the stage that it is at now; however, it has worked and is working well, and the industry is quite keen to do more. At the moment, the focus is on fish sampling, but there is a real opportunity—again, through collaboration and EU-funded projects, which the UK still is able to access—to add in, say, environmental sampling, which would add data, information and, in time, knowledge. However, there does not seem to be any ambition or enthusiasm in the marine directorate to engage with that.

The Convener: There is a lack of trust.

Elspeth Macdonald: I do not know whether it is that. Elaine Whyte made an important point in that respect: this is not about being critical of individuals. However, it brings us back to Michel Kaiser's point about culture, ambition and, perhaps, ability. What are the barriers in the current structure that are preventing scientists from engaging in those quite big international collaborations that would bring real benefit to Scotland?

The Convener: I suppose that we have touched on this already. Up to now, the marine directorate has often used its own ships and boats to collect information, but it does not seem like rocket science to suggest that a way of improving coverage and reducing costs would be for the industry to provide the samples. When we were in the labs on Monday, we saw scallop shells that had been collected for ageing. Industry provided those shells instead of marine directorate scientists going out and collecting them themselves. That was a win-win. What, then, do you think the barriers are to asking industry to provide the samples?

Elspeth Macdonald: You have to be able to ensure that whatever is done is scientifically robust—that is important. However, we have run into certain procedural barriers. For the past few years, industry has carried out some of the monkfish surveys that are necessary to generate the data for the stock assessment, because the lab cannot carry out all of them itself. That went

better this year but, last year, the surveys almost did not happen, because of problems getting through the hurdles of procurement. Again, there are procedural barriers that prevent rather than enable better collaboration and better use of wider resources.

10:15

The Convener: Emma Roddick has a supplementary question, and then I will come back to Emma Harper.

Emma Harper: Actually, I am okay, convener.

The Convener: Okay. I will bring in Emma Roddick, but I know that one or two stakeholders still want to add to the previous responses, so I will bring them in after that.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am keen to know everyone's views on whether there are specific avenues for either raising revenue or for the marine directorate using less money to do what it already does.

Phil Taylor: I would like to add a supplementary comment, but I will answer that question first.

Several no-cost, no-regret options are available right now. We have talked about money from leasing the sea bed, which is a public asset that is owned by the King. Another option involves the fish—the seas and the fish in them are public assets; that is established in law and is not controversial. Quota is the way in which access to some of that is distributed—not for all species, but for some species. There is a kind of artificial categorisation of quota at the moment. I will not go into why it is artificial, but there is something called additional quota, which is the post-Brexit bonus quota, if you want to use that language. It is quota that was never allocated to a business—it is not tied to somebody and no one has built a business plan or business expectations around it. It is up to the Government to distribute that, and it must do so on the basis of section 25 of the UK Fisheries Act 2020, which says that it must be distributed on the basis of environmental, social and economic criteria—again, that involves a balance; this is not just me saying that we should do only the environmental side of things—and be used to incentivise forms selectivity, which involves reducing bycatch and forms of fishing that have a reduced impact on the marine environment. That is all in law.

At the moment, quota is distributed using something called quota management rules, which do not really have regard to the environment and certainly do not talk about enhancing selectivity or incentivising actions that have a reduced impact on the marine environment. That additional quota is like a cherry on the cake for those who already have slices.

However, as I said, there is a real no-cost, no-regret opportunity to use that to start to drive change. If we are saying that we are going to have to moderate behaviour or adopt a slightly different approach, we should acknowledge that there is an asset there that is in public ownership and that there are no issues around its being used—in fact, its current use is, in my view, unlawful and counter to section 25 of the 2020 act. That is one of the legislative failures that I referred to earlier. It can be used to start distributing in ways that will promote the activities that cause less bycatch and reduce harm on the sea bed. Further, that can be done in ways that create a race to the top, as you would be giving something to people who were doing best. Of course, you would not actually be taking anything away from those who were performing least well, because, in the first instance, you would just be creating an incentive mechanism. I keep coming back to the point that agriculture has shown how powerful incentive mechanisms can be with regard to creating change. As you all know, the fishing industry is extremely innovative and will very quickly start to address those issues. All of that is tied together.

The supplementary point that I was going to make in response to Emma Harper's question about crossover between different departments and sections of Government was that there are also problems with crossover within the marine directorate. For example, there is a group of people trying to figure out how to reduce bycatch; meanwhile, other people are issuing quota in a way that is not incentivising that change. That link-up is not happening, but there are those no-cost, no-regret options on the table that would enable the aims to be achieved.

Professor Kaiser: I am going to attempt to answer Emma Harper's question, because I do not think that anybody has done that, although Phil Taylor touched on it briefly. It is a very challenging question. One of the key problems, which Robin Cook touched on earlier, is the fact that Marine Scotland has come into the directorate, so it is now locked to the Government. That means that its freedom to seek additional income, which Emma Roddick's supplementary question was about, has been cut off.

Within Government agencies, a lot of different departments are creating a lot of work for Marine Scotland science, particularly in the compliance team, which is taking resource and focus away from other areas, including, as we have heard, science and research, so very little research is being done.

With regard to our investment in offshore renewable energy, it would be good to do an

analysis of the key points in the process where money could be taken out of the system. At the moment, there is a community fund to which the renewable energy sector has to contribute. Maybe we should be talking about a marine science strategic fund, which could become a pot of money that could be used to do the research that cannot be done at the moment. That would underpin the advice that informs the compliance teams. At the moment, we have heard over and over again that they are using out-of-date data and are relying on work that other people do, whereas a lot of that needs innovative work.

It is not just at that point that money could be generated. The issue about planting trees was rightly raised. I do not know what the UK-level department is called these days but, in the old days, it used to be the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. That department generates lots of business development, but it is right to ask whether funds should be drawn down to support the marine directorate. I think that the marine directorate is being sucked dry by other policy-driven areas within Government without that being realised.

The key point is that if you keep Marine Scotland within Government, it will be on a permanently declining budget. Public resources are not getting any bigger. That brings us back to the point that Robin Cook raised, which is that, without the freedom for the organisation to seek additional lines of funding—as, for example, CEFAS has done, by providing scientific advice to the Falklands, Kuwait and Saudi Governments and drawing in income that supports and subsidises the work that it does for the UK taxpayer—we will never get to a point where Marine Scotland can be strategic in the way that it develops science and invests in people in the future.

We need to look at two lines. We need to look not only at the structure of the entity, which potentially involves looking outside the UK, but at how we allocate money within Government. I hope that that answers the question to some extent.

Dr Wells: I will try to be quick. I want to reflect on some of the discussion around compliance. I am not talking specifically about Marine Scotland compliance; I am talking about compliance across the board in Scotland.

We are in the middle of a biodiversity crisis. A strong view of our members is that compliance is not sufficiently robust across a series of areas. I will give an example, which goes back to the issue of resourcing for the marine directorate. Fish poaching for salmon and sea trout is the highest volume wildlife crime in Scotland, but through our network of water bailiffs and through close working with Police Scotland and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, we have the highest rate of conviction of any class of wildlife crime. However, we also have the lowest fines. On average, the fines are under £250, which simply does not act as a disincentive for that sort of behaviour, despite the fact that salmon is an endangered species.

We have tabled proposals for changes to the offences in the legislation and the associated fines, but the marine directorate will require resources to deliver that. The issue is not necessarily about budgets; it is about prioritising that sort of work in the future.

With regard to where money might come from, the committee might want to consider whether the marine directorate is using its charging schemes to the extent that it could. That is another potential avenue for funding that is being used in other areas.

The Convener: Before we move on to the themes of compliance and enforcement and collaboration and co-management, I will bring in Elspeth Macdonald.

Elspeth Macdonald: Another area where the marine directorate could have a clearer strategy that might be beneficial is around its use of scientific quota. Scotland has 2 per cent of scientific quota above its national quota, which can be used for scientific purposes or monetised to be used for science. I do not think that we have a proper strategy for how that scientific quota is used or could be used in the future. We have raised that issue with the cabinet secretary, and she is willing to have further discussions about that. That area is worthy of further exploration.

Elaine Whyte: It is a really simple question. We should be looking at reference fleets and working with local boats to collect as much data as possible. I said in my response that even things such as temperature sensors on boats could be feeding through. That would help to address what is happening with stocks and climate in regional areas. That is a simple, easy win. Those are the kinds of things that we could be doing.

I was really struck by the fact that Michel Kaiser mentioned a fishery in the Isle of Man that is profitable because of regional management. That is something that we need, too. We need something that is sustainable in all senses—we need a sustainable fleet. We need to have a robust fleet as they have in Norway, where fishermen pay a levy of 3 per cent, which goes towards funding the science. I think that most of our fishermen are of a mind that they would be willing to do that, if it meant that they had the science that would mean that they were not closed down and that would allow them to direct the kind of fishing opportunities that are available.

That is difficult now because, in many areas, we do not have a robust or profitable fishing fleet. I certainly acknowledge, on the basis of the 10 years that I have been in this job, that we do not have that situation in our region any more. We are aware that we need to protect our futures, but we need to protect those communities and the funding that is in that business, and to develop it in a sustainable way and in such a way as to have good science.

Charles Millar: On the question about raising revenue, which Elaine Whyte has just touched on, in a sense, my organisation has looked at that issue, particularly with regard to extending the landings levy. As Mike Kaiser mentioned earlier, that is something that funds Seafish. In our opinion, it acts as an effective mechanism for what is, in essence, a resource rent. It is not without its problems and it needs to be defined with regard to what happens about bycatch, which is, in effect, an extraction of some of the resource that might not be included in a levy. However, the broad principle of raising the landings levy seems to us to be a sensible way to raise money—particularly for fisheries science, but it could apply across the board to other aspects of marine directorate activity.

The levy principle is already well established in relation to Seafish, but it is also used in other sectors in Scotland. We see it being used in relation to aggregates and water extraction, and even petroleum revenue tax. Those are all levies that are imposed specifically on an industry over and above the general taxation. The levy principle seems to be wholly appropriate for a public asset such as the fishery resource.

Professor Moffat: With regard to resource, we have to be conscious that we might fund a policy department and a science department quite differently. The policy department is working for today; the science department, to some extent, is working for tomorrow.

Robin Cook raised the point about the science advisory board. In addition to that board, two executives used to sit on the Marine Scotland board, which brought the view of some external people to the director of Marine Scotland. It is not just the scientists saying, "We need more, more, more—this is what we need to be doing," but some external people as well. Scientists respond very well to peer review—that is what we are trained to do. Therefore, if a science advisory board comes in and works with the scientists and, together, they put the case for certain funding to the body that is going to provide the money, there will be an opportunity to get that funding.

However, under the current model, we will continue to see attrition, because, as a number of people have articulated, you cannot get the resource in for tomorrow, given that, basically, the money is being looked at for today, and that is not how you fund science.

The Convener: Thank you. This is probably a good time to have a 10-minute comfort break.

10:28

Meeting suspended.

10:41

On resuming—

The Convener: We resume our session with marine stakeholders and move to our third theme, which is compliance and enforcement. The first questions will come from Beatrice Wishart.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): It has been a really interesting round-table discussion so far, and I am looking forward to hearing more views on issues that are so important to us all, given that we live on an island.

Compliance and enforcement accounts for the largest proportional share of the marine directorate's budget, as we heard from Elaine Whyte. From 2009-10 to 2022-23, compliance and enforcement accounted for an average of 37 per cent of the marine directorate's budget. In responding to a question during the committee's pre-budget scrutiny in October 2022, the cabinet secretary said:

"If I had an unlimited budget, it would be great to invest more money in more vessels for enforcement."—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee*, 5 October 2022; c 20.]

I would like to hear witnesses' views on the marine directorate's compliance and enforcement capabilities. Is the current approach to compliance and enforcement cost-effective?

Alastair Hamilton: I apologise again, because I have only recent experience to rely on here, although I used to run the compliance facility for the Isle of Man.

I will pick up on the last part of the question. It does not appear to me to be cost-effective, because of the very local delivery of compliance. There is a lack of consistency in the placing of the fisheries offices. While we were having our coffee, I give Phil Taylor the example of the Ayr office, which covers an area from Helensburgh to the border, while, in the north-west, I have four offices.

The Government should be harnessing some of the savings from the technology that is becoming available. The workload should be decreasing because we now have automated FISH1 forms, which is taking an administrative burden off the service. We also have much-enhanced capability

to see remotely what is happening at sea by using aeroplanes or drones, instead of sending out expensive ships.

Phil Taylor: I support Alastair Hamilton's point. Electrification and digitisation of enforcement and compliance capacity could offer significantly better value for money. We are looking at very large figures for compliance. The aircraft contract was reissued at a cost of £1.7 million for the use of two aircraft for a year, and running the boats is also very expensive, as are the fisheries offices that Alistair referred to.

Some manifestation of all those assets is needed. I have had fairly positive interaction with the compliance teams when I have been a witness in cases dealing with illegal fishing.

The committee previously took evidence on remote electronic monitoring. I have the numbers here. Between the first and the sixth year, an REM system would cost between £10,000 and £27,000. In terms of the trawl fleets that would potentially use the system, we are talking about some hundreds—not loads—of boats. After then, it would cost between £2,000 and £11,000 per boat. The cost of that is very significantly less than having to chase every boat or to witness every boat by using boats, aircraft and other mechanisms.

10:45

Of course, some iteration of those assets is still needed, to make sure that you are checking up on boats that have switched off or things like that. Sadly, we have had some reports of boats with the REM system on the dredge fleet doing just that—using loopholes—although that is unsubstantiated.

The other opportunity that it provides is to address the science issue, which we spoke about earlier. Marine Scotland's leading fisheries scientist wrote a paper—I think in 2014 or 2015—setting out how a remote electronic monitoring system could provide not only compliance benefits but the data that is needed by fisheries managers to better manage the stocks. That is a Marine Scotland science peer-reviewed paper, but, sadly, it is following the pattern that Charles Millar spoke about, where the science is not then enacted or followed through into policy.

In addition, such an approach could address some of the issues that Ms Harper mentioned, about bringing those two budget lines across. We would be looking at resolving the science issues and addressing some of the gaps in the science budget by using resources that are being allocated through the compliance budget. That has to be the way forward. If you order a pizza, you can track on your phone the journey of the pizza from dough to your door, yet we do not know where a very significant proportion of our fishery—boats of under 12m—is operating. We also do not know with any resolution the detail of what is being caught—actual volumes of catch, because there is significant bycatch—and where. That information is needed to inform those management decisions.

Elaine Whyte: I will give a quick example. One of my members phoned me yesterday to tell me that he has just spent £3,000 on fixing part of his vessel monitoring system. He has another two parts and he is not sure whether it will cost that for each of them. We know that fishermen have invested quite heavily—the ones who have VMS have invested quite heavily—and they have to take out annual subscriptions as well. Therefore, the cost to them of compliance is quite onerous. They also talk about how the margins in fishing are not what they used to be, and we must acknowledge that.

Compliance represents a large part of the budget. We had a good meeting with the compliance team on the Clyde not so long ago, but that was after operation Galene was published, and we did not know that that was happening. On how it feels on the ground, a lot of fishermen are very aware that there are quite a lot of calls in about potential activity, which can spark a boat coming out. That can make you feel as though you are being followed. We have brought that point up before in various forums.

That is why regional analysis is important. We need to be sure that we are carrying out proportionate compliance around all the areas, hitting the risk areas and not just responding to continual calls. That might be happening in regional areas—we do not know, because we do not have that data—but I would like to see that spend.

My other point is about Anchor Lab, which I keep bringing up. Anchor Lab is a really important tool. We trialled it first in the Clyde and the Western Isles. It is a sensor system and also a depth sensor system. It can show that you are not fishing on features, and so on. It is also good for compliance—it is quite innovative.

Regarding the costs of compliance, there is now talk of fleet replacement. A lot of the systems that are being used are quite old, so we must acknowledge that. However, I feel that compliance should be regionally assessed and should be proportionate to the fishery that is happening there. We need to have that breakdown to see what we are spending.

Elspeth Macdonald: I think that the question that was asked was whether the current approach is cost effective. I do not feel that I can answer that question, because I do not think that we have the information to be able to do so. That probably

comes back to the points that we have already discussed about how much information is available on what the budget is spent on and about drilling below the high-level figures, and it perhaps relates to the next theme that we will speak about, too.

Professor Kaiser: It would be helpful if people working in compliance and enforcement looked a little further outside the box. We must remember that, when fish landings are sold, they go to a processor. Processors act as a central point where all the product comes in. The much more sophisticated processing facilities that we have these days typically involve a barcoding product, so we know which vessel the bag of fish or scallops—or whatever it might be—has come from. By working with the processors, the compliance and enforcement teams could intercept product in a much more efficient and timely way.

In this whole space, we have not had a discussion with the processing industry. The processing industry representatives I talk to are engaged in responsible, sustainable activities and are more than happy to work with that. In a factory, there is the opportunity to use artificial intelligence.

Turning to another aspect of compliance and enforcement, we want to reduce the number of illegal acts. Unfortunately, our current system of fines in the UK is woefully inadequate. When I was working in Wales, there was illegal fishing activity in Cardigan Bay. One vessel made £450,000 and was fined the maximum amount of £50,000. That is just an overhead: it is a green light to indulge in illegal activity.

Another fundamental issue needs to be considered. First, should civil offences of that sort become criminal acts? We should be considering the fines, which should be in proportion to the offence. If we could remove the bad actors—who are a minority, as in any industry—the reputation and sustainability of the industry would greatly improve.

Professor Moffat: There are some problems with the lack of granularity on costs. If my recollection is right, the compliance budget also used to cover the two science ships. There are five ships running, of which two are science. It might well not be the case any more, but I think it certainly was the case that a proportion of the compliance budget would nominally be given over to science, because compliance was running both Alba na Mara and Scotia.

The Convener: That is an interesting point.

Phil Taylor: I will make two quick points. Looking at the numbers, 16 cases went to the Crown Office for prosecution last year, 13 of which—by my calculation—would have been identifiable using remote electronic monitoring. There would have been a very significant cost benefit against that.

Just to elaborate on Mike Kaiser's point about better sentencing—a point that Alan Wells also made earlier—one thing would be to change the legislation to increase what is defined as the maximum penalty. That is difficult—the committee has plenty of other work—but I would suggest that the committee could practically address the issue quickly by writing to the sentencing council for environmental law and environmental crimes. It is completely stretched, like everyone, and its remit is not heavily focused on this area at this point, but if the committee were minded to suggest that the issue deserves further attention, it could write to that sentencing council and recommend that it consider the matter with some priority. It would not need to recommend specific action, but it could recommend that the council look into the matter. That would move things forward, which would be very welcome.

Professor Kaiser: Going back to a point that we discussed earlier, if we moved to a system of more community-based management, ownership rights would, by definition, be associated with that. In other words, the local communities that are involved in the fishery model would have ownership of the resource—not the sea bed, but the actual resource. That would completely transform the nature of a crime. People who are fishing illegally are stealing from the local people who depend on fishing, so what they are doing suddenly becomes theft. It is not just a matter of adjusting legislation and fines; it is about creating the right systems whereby the legislation can be applied.

The Convener: Might that be a role for the regional inshore fisheries groups? I know that they will undertake a review in the future. There is a different model south of the border where those groups are well funded, but it is a completely different picture up here. Do you see a role for the regional inshore fisheries groups in doing some of that work or collaboration?

Professor Kaiser: Absolutely. They would be the right model. They might not be structured correctly, because they are probably a bit too big—their geographic scale might not be right, although what the right scale would be is not a discussion for here but for outside—but, yes, that would be the role. It would be local management informed by science, but also by the stakeholders that are involved in the actual system.

Alastair Hamilton: As the chair of a regional inshore fisheries group, I note that there is a strong demand for more control at a local level, whatever that is. I hear what Michel Kaiser has

said about boundaries. We already have plenty of boundaries in the sea and we can choose which ones we want to use. More local control would get community buy-in and increase compliance, because what is happening would be known, as opposed to what we have at the moment with the remote service.

Beatrice Wishart: One of the things that we heard about during the discussion about remote electronic monitoring was how the marine directorate would ensure compliance by non-Scottish vessels. It was highlighted that approximately 150 non-UK vessels are fishing for pelagic species in Scottish waters throughout the year. Does anybody have a comment on that?

Phil Taylor: If you are referring to non-UK vessels, it is, of course, perfectly within Scottish Government ministers' powers to licence that activity in whichever way they feel is appropriate. They could easily put the same REM duty on any boat that comes from international waters into Scotland to fish. If you are talking about vessels from other parts of the UK, such as boats coming into Scottish waters that are flagged to England, it is just an internal Government process of making a request. My view is that it is not a massive barrier, just an administrative one.

Elspeth Macdonald: The REM legal requirements will, of course, apply to those pelagic vessels that are non-UK flagged and operating in Scottish waters. Anecdotally, I hear from associations that our members feel that the current model, whereby compliance and enforcement is more about physical inspections and the boarding of vessels and so on, focuses more on the indigenous Scottish fleet than on other fleets that fish in our waters. However, with the information that we have about activities, I do not know that it is easy to really ascertain what the actual case is.

Touching again on REM and circling back a bit to some of the things that we spoke about earlier—the committee has heard a lot about REM in the past while—my understanding is that the marine directorate was involved in some earlier EU-funded projects on how REM can be used with artificial intelligence and investment in other ways of carrying out functions, but its involvement in the next phase of the project has not continued. It is being left behind in developing the use of technology to do things differently. Again, that perhaps comes back to the earlier points that we spoke about on engaging in international projects and looking beyond our immediate horizons.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): On the same theme, local management would give local fishers ownership of their area and create better compliance. I am not trying to pitch one sector against another, but how do you then involve in that process those fishers on boats that are not locally based? Since a lot of the fishing community move quite a lot and are not locally based, if local compliance is set up in a community, how do those fishers have a voice, and how is compliance encouraged? I am sorry—I am not putting that very clearly.

The Convener: That might be one for Alastair Hamilton and then Michel Kaiser.

11:00

Alastair Hamilton: I have not checked the current legislation on that. However, I am aware that, if I drive my car in France, I have to drive on the far side of the road. When you go somewhere, you comply with the local rules.

At the moment, I am not absolutely sure whether legislation is needed. However, making it incumbent on visiting vessels to comply with our rules here is necessary because, otherwise, there would be a sloping pitch whereby they had either an advantage or a disadvantage.

Rhoda Grant: I guess that what I am asking is whether there is an easy way of doing that. How do you make those rules available so that people who come into the area quickly get them and comply with them?

Professor Kaiser: I speak from experience south of the border, where the inshore fisheries and conservation authorities—the IFCAs—have jurisdiction out to 6 nautical miles. Most of what we are talking about would probably be in what we define as inshore waters. You will need different management systems for offshore waters, where the fleets and the species are more nomadic.

IFCAs have byelaw-making powers, so, for example, your IFGs could have such powers. Byelaws are consulted on and made publicly available, but they are a bit more fleet of foot, because they do not require all the processes of formalised legislation. They can be made very quickly.

Vessels from outside an area that have traditionally fished in it can be part of a community-based system. There might be a membership fee, for example, that helps to underpin the funding and the running of that IFG or whatever. Those vessels can buy into that and would be a part of the consultative process.

The Shetland Islands Regulated Fishery (Scotland) Order 2012 works very effectively. Admittedly, very few—if any—outside vessels are involved, but the model functions with lots of different sectors, which work in collaboration with each other. The key thing that the fishermen in Shetland say about that system is that, because the communication is good, everybody

understands what is going on and everybody has a voice—they might not get their way, but their voice has been heard.

Again, it comes down to culture and structures. Bringing things down to a more regional level is much more appropriate and effective.

Elaine Whyte: We have been able to push voluntary closures through the IFGs. For instance, they might impact some nomadic Isle of Man fishermen, who will be alerted by the fisheries officer, who will usually just send them out, saying, "Look, this is a temporary closure," or whatever. We have not had many instances of that being broken. However, some fishermen, in some instances, would like to things to be not just voluntary, particularly when it comes to pot limits and so on for regional areas. However, displacement is also an issue, so that is for consideration.

Phil Taylor: The community-based decision-making framework that is available is the regional marine planning framework, which the committee has considered in the past. There is a duty in the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010 to develop regional marine plans. That gives the local community, including the fishing community, a significant opportunity to have a say.

In last year's Scottish Government budget, £12 million—I think—was spent on planning. That is £1 million a month. I am not clear that that has progressed marine planning very far. Any regional plan that was developed using that would dictate how any licensed fishing activity took place within the area. That has been established by our judicial review. There is a very strong power, therefore, to use the mechanisms that the committee has asked the Government to prioritise to deliver Ms Grant's proposal for localised decision-making that establishes a rule that anybody who comes into that area must comply with.

As Alastair Hamilton said, anyone who comes in has a licence. It is not a free activity. They are licensed to undertake commercial fishing, and the licence will dictate that they must comply with that regional marine plan when they are there.

Dr Wells: From certain examples that have come up in the discussion, I can see how a community-based model would be a good way of managing a shared resource, but there is a degree of ignorance on my part, so I am less clear about how well those models would work for protecting marine features or non-target species.

Michel Kaiser mentioned IFCAs. I am aware of some work that has been done in the south of England on the acoustic tracking of salmon and sea trout that has demonstrated quite significant bycatch in some of the gill net fisheries. Because salmon and sea trout are not really considered to be marine species south of the border, the IFCAs do not appear to be particularly well placed to address that issue.

I am not hugely close to that issue so, as I said, I am talking from a degree of ignorance. However, it does not strike me that the IFCAs are necessarily always well placed to deal with the wide range of issues that need to be addressed.

Elspeth Macdonald: I have a point on IFCAs. There has been quite a lot of conversation about how that model is different to the regional IFGs in Scotland. Certainly, having spoken to colleagues south of the border, I do not think that we should leave the meeting with the notion that IFCAs are a perfect solution. They are a mixed bag. There are some good IFCAs and some bad ones, and some of them work much better than others. It is not just a matter of switching one thing off and another on. It is more nuanced than that.

Alastair Hamilton: During the past year, the idea that regional management of fisheries is coming on to the horizon has crept into Government documents and the RIFGs are being quoted as the most appropriate bodies to pursue that. However, we need a more open and wider discussion than we are having this morning because my colleagues and I are not clear about what that means. Does it mean that we will follow the IFCA model or that we are expected to revise our model? Although regional management of fisheries appears in a number of plans and a number of statements have been made about it, we need to bring it into the light, examine the models that we can use and determine which one would work best for Scotland. I am not sure that just assuming an expensive model—the IFCA model—is affordable or appropriate.

Elaine Whyte: I will pick up on Phil Taylor's point. A concern of mine is that we are touching a lot on fisheries management through marine planning, which is not its specific function. IFGs filter up into marine plans. That is how I see that working.

Michel Kaiser talked about how the system works really well in Shetland. Shetland has a regulating order that is run by the fishermen. An attempt was made to impose a regulating order on us. The balance of who is around whatever table will be really important. The fishermen need to have a say in that. The IFG and local fishermen have other voices, but I would not see regional marine planning bodies as the ones that decide on the fisheries licence by themselves.

Professor Kaiser: It comes back to structures and culture. I am certainly not advocating an IFCA model. Scotland's regions are hugely diverse. Inevitably, if you were to go for a community-based management system it would look different

for each part of Scotland's coast because the fisheries are different, the actors involved are different and different areas will have different problems—some will have problems with sea trout, for example. However, as soon as you move to a model in which people are truly involved in co-management and feel that they are in control of their destinies, they are much more likely to address and focus on solving a problem, such as a marine feature that needs protection or a particular species for which we have a bycatch issue, because they are in control of their future and there is a benefit to them from investing in that.

Co-management systems exist around the world. They run effectively. We will not decide at this meeting which model is the right one, but there are plenty of models, they work and people would find the right way in the end.

The Convener: Does a cost benefit analysis need to be done on whether the compliance and enforcement function is effective and delivers what it says on the tin? There is little point in the police trying to enforce a 30mph limit in some parts of Dumfries and Galloway where there are no cars on the road and there is no benefit to it because there is no evidence of accidents. That is an analogy. If there is to be a cost benefit analysis, who should carry it out?

Professor Kaiser: I would have it carried out by an independent body that is external to Government, with suitable scrutiny. A panel of experts should input to it, preferably from outside the UK, to make it completely clean and without any potential for bias.

Dr Cook: On the point about who should do the cost benefit analysis, I note that one was done some years ago by Professor John Beddington, who was then the chief scientific adviser to the Government, so it was done at a very senior level. A similar model would probably be satisfactory.

I have a smaller point to make about the cost benefit analysis. Running the vessels accounts for a high proportion of the costs of compliance. Currently, they are run in-house. Before Fisheries Research Services, as it was, became the marine directorate, the vessels were operated by a commercial company. Their operation was outsourced. At the time of the creation of the marine directorate, the research vessels were incorporated into the protection fleet, essentially, and the cost of running the vessels increased. Something that you could consider, which is of course a politically sensitive issue, is whether we would get more out of the protection vessels if the operations—not the policing, but the operation of the vessels—were outsourced to a commercial company.

Phil Taylor: I think that a cost benefit analysis was done more recently. We were certainly promised that one would be done in-house in 2018-19. I endorse Professor Kaiser's idea of external consultants from outside the UK being involved. That sounds like a very good idea.

The Convener: We move on to our fourth theme, which is collaboration and co-management. We will start with questions from Elena Whitham.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I have tried to reformulate my questions in my head, because a lot of them have been answered, as is always the case in round-table discussions. There is such rich, in-depth discussion going on round the table.

It is absolutely right that we are looking at the topic in the space of collaboration and co-management. Indeed, the draft "Joint Fisheries Statement" said:

> "Our future vision is that industry should take a greater, shared responsibility for sustainably managing fisheries, while making a greater contribution towards the costs. This can include, for example, work to develop new management practices and contributing to fisheries science, being more actively engaged in fisheries management decisions, and co-designing future policy."

We have just heard about joint endeavour. If we get to a space where we are doing things with people and not doing things to them, we will take all the communities with us. We have just discussed the FMAC, the regional groups and the regional marine planning partnerships. I had some questions about their effectiveness and whether the model is the right one and the one that we should be using. We have already strayed into some of that, but does anybody want to put a little more meat on the bones of that? I am not looking to hear what the future model should be; my question is whether we are, right now, realising the intention that was set out when the local partnerships were set up to feed into the wider system. What could change now, and rapidly, while we are looking forward?

I do not know who wants to answer that first. I would like to hear the views of Elaine Whyte from the Clyde Fishermen's Association, and also the views of Alastair Hamilton, because he sits on one of the groups and is in charge of leading that. I will then open it up more widely.

Elaine Whyte: The Clyde has been a pilot for a lot of things, including marine planning, but we do not have a plan yet. I have been a member of the board since about 2017 and I think that we really need to have clarity about why we are all round the table. I never go to a regional marine planning meeting thinking that I want to double the fleet. That is not what I do, and that is not why we are there. We are there to think about how we can co-

operate and collaborate, and I think that other people have to understand that, too—that we are not there just to push our own objectives. It is not a lobbying body.

We have to find a way to make the best and most responsible decisions, and in order to do that we need clarity. This morning, we are talking about fisheries management and how that relates to marine planning, which is a bit jumbled. We really have to get that tight so that everybody understands why we are round the table. That is one of the key things.

11:15

Do the IFGs work? They have worked quite well in the recent past, but there is a need for more resource, and there has been an issue—which I think has had a lot to do with Covid—with people not meeting in person. There is also a trust issue. If people feel that there has not been an ability to change policy decisions at a higher level or to influence their local management, that stops them engaging. We need to build up trust again.

There has been a capacity issue, too. We have a lot coming at us in relation to renewables, aquaculture and so on. We must understand that there is a capacity issue in the fishing sector. My association has almost halved in seven years, and I think that that is happening all round the coast. We have more to deal with, less capacity and less trust. If we can restore trust and get away from the feeling that things are happening to us all the time, we might get fishermen back.

In the past while, fishermen have been a little reluctant to engage. They will say things such as, “Our ideas for conservation are never taken forward.” That is really disheartening. At times, I cannot convince them that it is worth while for them to be involved. We need to address that.

The fisheries management and conservation group is important. Everyone can have a voice there, but fishermen must have a voice, too. That is where the IFGs come in, but the FMAC now has wider stakeholders. That is under review.

We need to have more structure and more guidance. People need to be honest about why they are attending things and to understand the remit of the body in question. Rather than pushing certain agendas, we need to do the best for the remit that we are there for.

Rachael Hamilton: To whom does the group report and how often?

Elaine Whyte: Which one?

Rachael Hamilton: The inshore fisheries groups.

Elaine Whyte: We have different regional areas, but our south-west inshore fisheries group last met in November 2023. Previously, we would have met quarterly, at least, and we would have had some sub-regional groups. Covid impacted that, and it would be good to get back to a structure whereby we meet more often and get everyone around the table.

Rachael Hamilton: Who do the inshore fisheries groups report to?

Elaine Whyte: They report to Marine Scotland—sorry, the marine directorate.

The Convener: I will ask Alastair Hamilton to come in at this point, because he will probably be able to answer the questions that have been asked.

Alastair Hamilton: The RIFGs are funded by the marine directorate. It is in our contracts that we are independent. How independent we can be might be limited by the fact that we are funded by the marine directorate. We engage very closely with fishermen. We have just done our first six-month report for this year, which covers January to June. The six regional groups have held 20 formal meetings with groups of fishermen. Many of those are not big meetings—the average attendance is about 10—but we engage with the fleet on a very regular basis. We have also had around 250 meetings on pierheads—that involves grabbing fishermen as they come ashore and listening to their views.

I have another point to make while we are on the subject of collaboration and co-management. I think that everybody around this table largely accepts that co-management of the fishery is the future, but a significant minority of fishermen in the fleet do not accept that. They are a minority, but they are fishermen who want to fish—they do not want to manage. They are not there to write the rules; they are there to fish. That is how they make money. They do not make money by taking part in meetings such as this one. We must engage with them as well, because many of them are not represented here. They are not members of associations; they are very independent people. We are trying to access that difficult constituency, which is not a sexy job. It is not easy to stand on the shores of Loch Duart, waiting for a guy with a creel boat to come in so that we can talk to him, because he has not spoken to anybody for about six months.

We need to be aware that not everybody is whole-heartedly going down the route of collaborating and co-managing. Many people see the risks of poachers being gamekeepers.

The Convener: Thank you—that was helpful.

Charles Millar: To respond to the question about how the current mechanisms for co-management are functioning, I think that, ostensibly, the structures are quite sensible. The RIFGs are clearly made up of members of the fishing industry itself; they do not include wider stakeholders, which is an important thing to bear in mind. The FMAC group and sub-groups are obviously much more multi-stakeholder entities.

From my experience of sitting on the climate change sub-group of FMAC, I note that there are significant problems associated with it functioning. We have had one meeting to date, which was about a year ago. To be fair, there were no outcomes coming out of it, and I am not blaming the individuals involved from the marine directorate. It has been clear, anecdotally, from a lot of conversations that we have had, that the lack of progress comes down to resources. That gets mentioned quite often as the opening gambit in these sorts of conversations.

There are problems associated with the functioning of the current set-up, and I do not think that that is exclusive to that specific FMAC sub-group; there are issues with some of the other ones, too, such as problems associated with the direction and speed at which things move forward—that has been an issue with fisheries management plans, for example.

There are problems and, in terms of budget scrutiny, a lot of that comes down to resource, although it is perhaps worth asking whether it is wholly about resource. A key point is that there might also be some strategic decisions to be taken as to the most effective mechanism within the FMAC to take forward.

Elspeth Macdonald: There are a number of different ways to look at the issue. I hope that I have given some examples this morning of how we have achieved fairly good collaboration on the scientific front. We would like more, and we have been engaging with the marine directorate on ideas that we have had not just recently but over a number of years on how to improve collaboration and build on it. I have spoken about the pelagic self-sampling scheme. We also have the SFF observer scheme, which we run because the marine directorate currently cannot; we deliver all the data for that.

There is probably collaboration on the scientific front, but in the policy space it is a different discussion, which is about co-management. We hear lots of words, but I do not think that it really feels like co-management to many folk.

There is a review of the FMAC model under way at the moment. FMAC is the fisheries management and conservation group and, as Charles Millar alluded to, a number of sub-groups sit underneath that, some of which probably work a bit better than others and some of which meet more frequently than others. Our view is certainly that the FMAC model does not work particularly well when it comes to co-management, which has become the case since it was reinvigorated a bit after Covid. It went into a bit of a vacuum during Covid times.

It is also important to remember that there are certain functions that the marine directorate must discharge; it has certain functions that others do not have. We have to be mindful of that in thinking about co-management and where responsibilities sit for carrying out particular functions.

It feels like a mixed bag at the moment. As I have said, there is good collaboration in some areas. We are certainly keen for there to be more, and we think that there is scope and ambition for more. However, the co-management piece needs to be rethought quite significantly.

Professor Kaiser: Colleagues have been right to mention that there are different groups of stakeholders, some of whom are very engaged and some of whom are not at all engaged.

At the moment, there is a basis for developing co-management, but I would not say that it is co-management. Basically, it is people who have a vested interest for the right reasons sitting together in the room. To be quite frank, they are not empowered to do very much and they are not resourced to be able to innovate or solve problems together effectively. However, there is a basis for taking that forward.

The other thing to appreciate is that it takes time. When I was providing science advice to the Isle of Man Government, we moved into a co-management system. It took five years before the fishermen saw what the benefit was. They put up a huge amount of resistance and they were dragged into it, kicking and screaming, by their producer organisation. The system relied on one person showing real leadership. Five years later, though, all the fishermen could see the benefit. They were all financially profiting from it, and the marine environment was also profiting as a result. Therefore it is a long-term investment.

The other key factor that no one has mentioned is that we need to invest in our fishing industry. When I say “invest”, I do not mean that we should build new boats; we need to get people involved in education programmes. I am a trustee of Fishing into the Future, which will shortly be working with members of Elaine Whyte’s association. There is a huge amount of misunderstanding. When I say “education”, I do not mean that in a patronising way; the problem comes from people misunderstanding the English words that we all use. For example, “sustainable” means a different

thing to a fisherman compared with how I, as a scientist, would translate it. Therefore we need to invest in people so that they are empowered to engage in co-management. At the moment, they are not, because we tend to use language that they do not understand. That is an essential part of the process that we have neglected thus far. Were you to go to America, you would see a very educated fishing industry in which fishermen are fully engaged in fisheries management. They are not afraid of the terminology, as it is now mandatory for them to attend training courses, because the US Government feels that it is essential that they understand the process that they are part of.

Professor Moffat: Another challenge is that we are managing not only the fisheries themselves but all the other human impacts that are involved in changing our marine environment. We have a significant aquaculture industry around Scotland, and we are about to put a massive renewables industry into our seas. We must also factor in tourism and the changing climate.

One of my concerns is that the Scotland's marine assessment 2020 portal was put in place to provide evidence for the national marine plan revision, and here we are now in 2024. It is true that there have been some developments as far as consultation is concerned, but we are well down the road from the 2015 implementation of national marine plan 1. We have seen massive change. In that time, the level of atmospheric carbon dioxide has gone up significantly, which means that there are other impacts on our seas. Therefore we must look seriously not only at the fisheries aspects but at all aspects. None of them is independent of the others; they are all intertwined.

We have spoken about ecosystem assessments and reports for long enough, but we still do not do them. We still tend to be very sectoral in how we manage things. Therefore, there has to be regime shift in how the science is obtained and then used. Collaboration among all the industries that are involved in exploitation of the seas is essential, including tourism, which also has an impact.

Elena Whitham: I will briefly follow up Professor Kaiser's point about the engaged and knowledgeable fisheries sector that exists in the States. I want to come back to Elaine Whyte and ask her to touch on engagement among her association's membership. We have been driving a huge amount of data gathering for a long time, and we are actively considering how we manage our stocks of cod in the Clyde. How do we use our existing structures, such as the groups that have been set up, to re-engage with those fishers, who could potentially be the ones who help us to collect temperatures and other data and to feed those into the science? It is easy for them to become disengaged and to become one of the individuals that Alastair Hamilton was talking about, who are no longer—or never have been—interested in the issue. How do we address that?

Elaine Whyte: That is the difficulty that I am finding. As I said, we have always had an active fishing association. It saddens me to hear fishermen now saying, "Well, it won't make a difference what we say."

There are ways to engage people. If we started to include them in the reference fleet work, that could be important, because then they would start to see the practical benefits. As you said, it takes a while to see such benefits, but it is important that fishermen feel that they are playing an active part.

11:30

We are also training a lot of new starts to bring them into the industry, because we have a huge issue with depopulation. Perhaps we should start with them and tell them about fisheries management, because it was lovely to see that quite a lot of the young guys who we have trained up were very active in the debate about highly protected marine areas.

However, I fear that we are talking about a sector that does not really exist any more. If you had come to me eight years ago, that would have been great, but I am very aware that I have about 35 boats now, compared with 65 then, which definitely makes engagement more challenging. We must appreciate that capacity in the fishing industry is quite tight, so people have to feel that it is worth their while and that they will make a positive change, rather than feeling that things are just being done to them.

Elspeth Macdonald: It is worth thinking about a couple of pertinent things.

I said that there is ambition to extend the pelagic self-sampling scheme beyond sampling of fish to taking environmental samples and doing environmental monitoring. There does not seem to be much enthusiasm at the marine directorate to engage with that, which may be because resources are stretched.

We must also think about the barriers that exist and about how we can harness and use the knowledge and information that fishermen have. They spend far more time at sea than anyone else. We know that the ICES model is not built to incorporate the sort of anecdotal information that comes from stakeholders, rather than from the national Governments that are part of the ICES machinery. I think that ICES recognises that missed opportunity and is beginning to think about how to formalise and structure that.

It is not fair to think that fishermen are not interested or knowledgeable or that they do not want to do more. Many of them are all those things. They are knowledgeable, they want to do more and they are really interested in what happens to the samples that they take and the projects that they are involved in, but we need better mechanisms to make things work better.

Ariane Burgess: My question is inspired by what you just said. Not this past summer but the one before—this summer did not really happen—I met with fishermen who said that they would love to be around the table with politicians and scientists. During this morning's tea break, Colin Moffat and I were chatting about the fact that information is not quite getting through. Scientists gather data in one way while fishermen who are out on their boats see something different.

How do we join those dots and get together to make urgent changes? We have forums such as the RFGs and the IFMAC, but something is missing. I think Alastair Hamilton said that not everybody wants to get round the table and that the problem is that some people just want to go out and fish. It seems to me that we have all those different forums but that something is not quite working. Elspeth Macdonald is nodding.

Elspeth Macdonald: We have a lot of forums. There are different reasons why there are barriers and difficulties, including resourcing. The industry and other stakeholders might have great ideas about things that might not be within the realms of what the Government can engage with.

There are barriers within ICES. How do you capture and formalise information and how do you ensure that it is robust? How do you deal with data that is observational rather than having been collected through scientific programmes?

There can also be fatigue if people engage with things but, as Elaine Whyte suggested, do not see change happening, and we cannot avoid the fact that there was a loss of trust about the highly protected marine areas policy. That was difficult and we have had to work hard to ensure that the industry remains engaged and does not walk away from other conversations about conservation.

There are a lot of moving parts. It goes back to what I said at the outset: the marine directorate is spinning an awful lot of plates, and industry bodies such as the SFF are having to try to stay on those spinning plates and keep up with them all. Everybody is spread pretty thinly, which brings us back round to thinking about whether there is more to do around prioritisation.

Colin Moffat made an important point—we have spent a lot of today talking about fisheries, but there is a lot more to the marine directorate's responsibilities than that.

The Convener: I will bring in Robin Cook and Phil Taylor, and then Michel Kaiser.

Dr Cook: I want to pick up on the point that Elspeth Macdonald made about the ICES model finding it difficult to incorporate industry perspectives. Of course, it is much more difficult in the context of shared stocks such as North Sea cod, where the situation is very international, to get everybody's industry involved. However, there is scope in Scotland to do that for certain stocks—for example, cod in the Clyde.

America has a very different system, because there is one country controlling the whole thing. In America, they ensure that the evidence on which the management is predicated is shared so that, instead of presenting people with an assessment of scientific evidence and saying, "We're going to do this—what do you think?", they go in at a lower level where the industry itself is involved in preparing the evidence on which the management decisions are made. As a result, they get much more buy-in to the whole process.

It seems to me that, at least for certain stocks or certain fisheries in Scotland, there is scope to do that. A marine directorate assessment does not have to simply be presented to the industry; the industry can participate in the whole process.

The Convener: Sorry—I missed out Elaine Whyte from my list. I will bring her in before Colin Moffat.

Elaine Whyte: I fully support what Robin Cook said. With regard to the Clyde cod box trials, I feel that we were getting there, and fishermen were understanding the randomisation of stations and scientists were understanding why fishermen go in a certain way, and then we lost all that. I think that Robin is right on the button—we would love to do more of that.

With regard to perspectives, to go back to Elena Whitham's question on how we understand each other better, I feel that there are things that are really important to fishermen. For example, Alastair Hamilton mentioned the importance for fishermen of making a living to feed their family—doing it sustainably, of course—as their community relies on that. I recently had a conversation with somebody—I said that I was very concerned about the boat numbers, and he said, "Fishing will always bounce back." Well, it will not always bounce back, because we have a lot of inshore harbours around the country that are empty. Maidens harbour had one of our biggest fleets, but there are no boats there now.

The fishermen feel that the things that are important to them, and the socio-economic debate, are not being heard. We talked about MPAs yesterday with Marine Scotland and the marine directorate. Duncan Macinnes from the

Western Isles explained that the gentlemen who ran one of his biggest boats came from Poland, because they felt that Scotland was a better place to do business. They have now moved back to Poland, after a massive investment in the community in the Western Isles, because they felt that Scotland was no longer a good place in which to do business, given the uncertainty over some policy debates.

We need to get people round the table at the beginning and do co-management and co-science. That would take away a lot of people's fear. People do not want to invest in an industry in which they do not understand what is going to happen to them next.

The Convener: I will bring in Colin Moffat and Michel Kaiser, and then Phil Taylor.

Professor Moffat: The more information that we can gather, the better. I would fully support fishermen, and the compliance vessels, gathering data. However, the challenge with that is that it would require significant co-ordination.

A good example of such co-ordination is the continuous plankton recorder, which has been going since 1931—basically, ferries tow a machine behind them. If we can get something similar for fishing vessels, or any other vessels, we can gather the data. However, the key reason why the CPR has worked is because it has been well co-ordinated: the samples have been analysed and the information has gone back to the people who have been gathering it. At present, I do not think that there is anybody who can take on such work—the marine directorate certainly could not do so. Nevertheless, the benefits of putting in place something like that could be significant.

Professor Kaiser: We could go on about that for a long time, but we cannot, so I will be brief. I think that what Colin Moffat suggests is possible now, with innovation and technologies. We can fit fishing equipment with environmental data sensors, which can transmit to the cloud when they come to the surface. The key point, however, is about giving that data and value back to the fishing industry. What does that data do? It improves inshore weather forecast models, for example, which improves safety and could have insurance premium implications. We have been talking to Lloyd's Register about the possibility of reducing the insurance premium if you are able to show that you do not go fishing in anything over force 8, for example. There are ways of doing that.

Picking up on Ariane Burgess's point, I note that this industry has been promised everything but, very often, and most usually, is given nothing. I remember convening a meeting with Seafish and Fishing into the Future in November 2019, just before we went into Covid lockdown. We had 90 fishermen—not fishing representatives—in London, together with about 90 scientists and policy makers, and the unanimous view in the room was that co-management was the way forward.

I will leave the committee with a recommendation, which is to look at three model systems in the UK. Shetland has a very good example of co-management. The Isle of Man Ramsey Bay system is excellent, functioning, highly profitable and very good for the environment. There is also the inshore potting agreement in Devon at Start Bay, where they collaborate with the Belgian, Dutch and French fishers in the mid-channel.

Those three models provide a UK basis of systems that work, although they have had hiccups along the way. I endorse the committee investigating those further. It is always useful to have a model to base something on.

Phil Taylor: One of the big challenges that co-management has faced throughout is that the objective is not agreed. If we all sat down and agreed those objectives and stuck firm to them, we could all be adult enough to debate things and make progress on achieving them. The committee needs to do more scrutiny, post hoc, of what is not delivered versus what it was said would be delivered.

For example, the 2021-22 programme for government states:

> "We will deliver fisheries management measures for existing Marine Protected Areas ... by March 2024."

We could all have worked together in a co-management way to progress that, but that has been missed. It has been completely neglected, and we need to look at that. That programme for government also states:

> "We will ... take specific, evidence-based measures to protect the inshore seabed in areas outwith MPAs."

Those are defined objectives. Colin Moffat mentioned earlier that we need to establish what we want to achieve, but that has been established, many times. The future fisheries management process took several years, up until 2020, to set out; then, in 2022, we had a 12-point action plan to deliver that. In co-management meetings, we ought to be talking about how we, as stakeholders, have our say about how those things should be delivered, whereby it is agreed that those are the things that we are to deliver.

The problem that we face—we faced it just recently—is that, at the beginning of the year, the marine directorate sets out what it is going to do, but then, at the end of the year, it does not want to do it anymore, for various reasons. I do not have the detail but, as far as I can tell, it is not resource

focused. That is leading to legislative failure and to the problems that Elaine Whyte has illustrated, which are alarming. That a fleet is reducing that far is illustrative of the fact that the commitments that are being made are failing to be delivered upon.

The Convener: We are fast approaching the end. I would like to think that we could tie up in the next five or 10 minutes. We have one last theme. We have covered most of it already, but Colin Beattie has a question on budget information and scrutiny.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): One thing that struck me, looking at the responses to the evidence gathering, was a comment about a lack of information on the organisational structure of the marine directorate, including which officials have responsibility for what. That immediately rings a bell about accountability in relation to budgets and the formation, execution and scrutiny of budgets.

I realise that we are talking about the marine directorate, but I am interested in hearing from those around the table how they feel about the validity of all this and what the impact is, and whether there is any stakeholder input at all into the budgets. If the statement is true, it will be quite difficult for the budget to be formed with the stakeholders.

Phil, can you comment first?

11:45

Phil Taylor: I do not entirely know the marine directorate's structure, but, from the organograms that have been shared, there seem to be some cross-departmental things to highlight. For example, we have sea fisheries on one side and sea fisheries science on the other. There is therefore a significant opportunity to improve the way in which the marine directorate silos work.

In my opinion, the place where, historically, that has been starkest has been planning and fisheries management. The Marine (Scotland) Act 2010 makes it very clear, again in my opinion, that fisheries should form part of the marine planning regime; that would help address the fact that a significant amount of offshore wind is going to be built in the sea, and that the historical fishing activity in those areas needs to be accounted for.

However, I cannot comment right now on whether that is being addressed. To me, at least, some of what we have heard today—for example, Professor Kaiser's comments about a culture of scientists feeling particularly isolated—points to certain serious management issues in relation to the ability to work outside silos and cross-departmentally.

Colin Beattie: Perhaps the key to this is knowing who is responsible for what, which the statement implies is not the case.

Colin, did you want to comment?

Professor Moffat: First, I would just say that the marine directorate has some significant assets in the form of its ships. The fact is that, when you allocate the budget, you cannot suddenly cut a bit off a ship. If you have five ships and the money that you are getting shrinks, you have less round about that to allocate. Moreover, some of the assets are tied up in laboratories, which are also fixed. That is the first problem.

As far as who is responsible for what, there were, historically, heads of science and compliance in the policy areas and, at that stage, it was very clear who had responsibility for specific budgets. Obviously, people have gone for a very different structure, so I cannot say exactly who would have responsibility for what. I think, though, that there is a challenge in understanding what is actually required of the marine directorate, as we have said, and who is responsible for deciding what science is going to be done. Is it the policy leads who will answer questions to the minister, or is it the scientists? That is a key question. It has to be a mixture of the two, because scientists want to be looking forward, understanding the key problems and seeing what has to be done, and that is a different perspective from that of the policy leads. I think that the voice of the scientist has diminished, and the voice of the policy lead has increased. To that extent, there is a lack of clarity over who should decide specifically what science has to be done and what budget should go to it.

Colin Beattie: Did you want to come in, Charles?

Charles Millar: On your question about engaging with the establishment of the portfolio approach within the marine directorate, we have had no involvement with that, and I am not aware of other groups having had any involvement either. They might have done so, but they can answer to that. The framework does not, to the best of my knowledge, involve a co-management approach within the directorate.

As for the budgeting and reporting side of things, what strikes me, as someone who has, in the past and in different lives, experienced quite a lot of analysis of corporate structures, is the curious lack of information about, as it were, the sub-portfolios. We have the organogram and the portfolios themselves, but there are quite varying sub-portfolios within each of the five main portfolios.

It strikes me as a curious omission not to be able to report to people who are participating in

scrutiny on that. That could be reasonably resolved so that you could break down the different entities that are under each portfolio. It is a granularity issue, which has been touched on before, but that seems to me to be a logical way to go about doing that.

Elspeth Macdonald: Similarly to others who have responded, there has not been much engagement by the marine directorate with stakeholders in shaping the formation of budgets or how things are structured. It has undergone a lot of internal restructuring in the past few years, which you can see from the information that was provided. That has been an anchor to making progress in some areas. I do not think that any of us can necessarily see what is different as a consequence of that—the structures look a bit different, but I do not know whether the delivery of anything is different.

Robin Cook alluded to this earlier. Back when the science part of what is now the marine directorate was an agency, there was much more transparency about structures and programmes of work. I recall that the annual report and accounts listed all the staff, the teams that they worked in and the structures. There was much more transparency and granularity around the allocation of budget, which has been lost with the move to the marine directorate.

There are some day-to-day practical issues. You do not always know who to pick up the phone to or where they are, because many staff still do a lot of home-based or remote working. It is sometimes difficult to corral all the people you need into a room to have a meeting. We can do many things online, but sometimes it is important to be in the room and be able to discuss things, particularly when you are having longer or more technical meetings.

There is a lot around transparency and greater granular information about the budget and the programmes, and about how the structures work and how we can make that work best, not just at a strategic level but day to day, to help stakeholders to engage better and help us to deliver business better.

Dr Cook: I do not know the current arrangement, but it used to be the case that all the scientific work was documented either in the form of a service-level agreement, which explained, for example, how data was being collected, where it was going to be used and so on, or research documents that were called ROAMEs—rationale, objectives, appraisal, monitoring, evaluation—which specified specific research projects. All of that was public information, so anybody could go and get it. That is the sort of information that you need here to be able to see exactly where the money is going, what research and science topics it is addressing and who is responsible.

I found it rather remarkable in recent years that I simply could not find who was head of science in the marine directorate. We have some information on that now, but as far as I know, that post is located here, in Edinburgh, and most of the staff are in Aberdeen. It is difficult to understand how you get scientific leadership with that kind of division of responsibilities and when there are frequent changes of head of science. Where is the continuity? Where is the interaction with the staff?

Elaine Whyte: We did not get involved in that, but a lot of people felt that the dropping of "fisheries" was quite a significant change. The department is no longer referred to as that.

The Clyde Fishermen's Trust drew up a vision of how we would like to engage with Government, where we think we could help and the policies we would like to be taken forward. As far as I know, we are the only association that did that out of necessity.

On where investment is going and the restructure, about six years ago, Rhoda Grant mentioned setting up a PACE—partnership action for continuing employment—initiative when the MPAs came out. At the time, we had a three-point plan to assess what was going on socio-economically in fishing.

I am not happy with the type of data that is coming out, and I do not know who to speak to about that. Good people are there, but Phil Taylor touched on silos and people not quite understanding the impacts of some of the decisions that are made. Because of the amount of consultation that is happening, people cannot get a breath. How can we streamline some of that and educate the different departments on the pressures that are on people? I mean not just the marine directorate but also the Marine and Coastguard Agency. Compliance issues are coming from different areas. It would be good for the marine directorate to understand the pressures, too—for example, depopulation and lack of crew—when it comes to how we can work together.

Dr Wells: I will give a slightly different perspective. We have worked really closely with the Scottish Government across a range of issues and strategies, so I feel that I well understand the new structures. Salmon and recreational fisheries has moved from one part of the marine directorate into a completely different part. I well understand that. I know the deputy director, I know the team very well, and I know the science function. You have to work at it, but we have been lucky enough to be able to put that work in and have that good

relationship, so we understand quite well what is going on.

I just wanted to put that on the record, because I feel that the marine directorate is getting a bit of a kicking here. It is resource poor and all the rest of it but, as someone said, there are some really good people in there, and they want to do a good job.

The Convener: I had a final question but, taking on board Alan Wells's points, it appears that there needs to be significantly more information about the budget and other information about the marine directorate to help us assess it and hold it to account. That information may be there but, at the moment, it certainly does not appear to be easily accessible or in a format that we can make conclusions on.

That brings us to the end of what has been a mammoth session. The two-and-a-half hours has come and gone very quickly. It has been hugely useful and will help us when we consider the budget. Thank you all very much.

11:57

Meeting continued in private until 12:30.

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