

Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands
The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

24 April 2026

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

As organisations working for the sustainable management of Scotland's marine area, we stand ready to welcome meaningful steps on the part of the Scottish Government to monitor and tackle bycatch and illegal discarding in Scotland's fisheries - as promised within Scotland's Fisheries Management Strategy 2020-2030. The new requirement for REM systems on pelagic trawls vessels operating in Scottish waters, following the work on the scallop dredge fleet, shows real leadership and we commend your work to deliver this step.

We also welcome the work done by officials in the proposed Future Catching Policy consultation and will engage with this in full. However, it is clear that these measures are insufficient to resolve the ongoing harm caused by excessive bycatch and discarding, and do not deliver what was promised.

The scale of bycatch (and illegal discarding) in the demersal and nephrops fisheries demands urgent action: the consultation documents detail discards in those fisheries totalling over 24,000 tonnes in 2024. That is the equivalent of 1,000 HGVs worth of fish. This total includes some 4,000 tonnes of cod - a stock that scientists have advised should not be caught at all across the North Sea in 2026, due to steep declines - as well as over 8,000 tonnes of haddock, which we estimate to be around 18 million fish suppers. We remain concerned that the total bycatch figures are underestimated. A [CEFAS report](#) suggested that these levels of bycatch push catches well beyond agreed catch limits - potentially as much as 60% above the agreed catch quota levels in the case of cod stocks. This level of waste adds to food insecurity and the cost of living crisis, and is clearly unacceptable.

- **The FCP consultation does not deliver what is required or what was promised.** Despite the scale of the problem, the proposals put forward in this consultation fall far short of what is required. The Joint Fisheries Statement sets that fisheries policy authorities are "*committed to ending the wasteful practice of discarding and to*

increasing the level of accountability for fishing activities at sea". The Fisheries Act itself requires all catches to be recorded and accounted for. Scotland's Future Fisheries Strategy committed to measures to reduce impact in nursery and spawning grounds as well as resolve issues around penalties. Gear-modifications to improve selectivity in the nephrops and demersal fleets - like increased minimum mesh sizes, a shift to square mesh for trawl vessels, the adoption of dual cod end nets - are potentially useful steps. However, unless they are underpinned by monitoring to deter underreporting and illegal discarding, they amount to tinkering at the edges.

- **Reliance on self-reporting undermines viability of regulation:** We welcome the proposal for haul-by-haul reporting and catch-composition levels to inform move on rules, but do not consider these to be workable where they rely entirely on fishers self-reporting. Given the current widespread disregard for the Landing Obligation, the beneficial impacts of the proposed technical measures are unlikely to be realised without independent monitoring of catches on the water. Despite this, no independently verifiable monitoring is being proposed. It is extremely naive to assume a vessel would self-report a catch which would prohibit it, but not other competitors, from fishing in an area.
- **Missing monitoring:** REM systems combining GPS data, cameras and gear sensors to record catches on the water offer the clear solution - this is demonstrably implementable, given deployment on scallop dredge vessels and pelagic trawl vessels, and has been known to resolve these issues since the 2010s when Marine Directorate piloted and researched its utility. Mandatory use of REM would satisfy a key element of the Bycatch Objective of the Fisheries Act 2020 (that all catches are "recorded and accounted for") and deliver on [Sea Fisheries Objective 9](#) of Scotland's National Marine Plan, which calls for "*Management of removals rather than landings, where necessary, through fully documented fisheries.*" This move has also been endorsed by the Scottish Parliament, which [voted](#) to require tracking on all Scottish vessels back in 2018.
- **Backtracking on Landing Obligation:** We are deeply concerned by language in the consultation that undermines the Landing Obligation, and appears to be another attempt to deregulate this issue. The consultation asserts that the Landing Obligation has been challenging to implement due to "*the difficulty in enforcing the landing obligation on such a large scale, which has resulted in poor adherence and compliance levels*" alongside "*...operational challenges in mixed fisheries, where it can be very difficult to avoid unwanted catches.*" The first of these issues is easily resolved via the use of REM, which in turn would drive the adoption of more selective gear, as

there would be tangible benefits for those able to evidence clean catches. Deregulation of the Landing Obligation was comprehensively rejected when the Future Catching Policy was consulted on in 2023. This consultation must not now open up a back door to it. We therefore ask that the Scottish Government reiterates its commitment to maintaining and implementing the Landing Obligation.

It is impossible to endorse the proposed package of selectivity measures without certainty as to the timeline for the introduction of on-the-water monitoring of catches in the demersal and nephrops fleets, and without a clear commitment from the Scottish Government to maintain the Landing Obligation. Both will be necessary to deliver on the objectives of the Fisheries Act 2020 and Scotland's National Marine Plan, and to achieve Good Environmental Status for the UK Marine Environment.

We would appreciate the opportunity to meet to discuss our concerns in more detail. Please let us know a convenient time for a call ahead of the consultation deadline.

Yours sincerely,

Phil Taylor, Open Seas

Joe Richards, Blue Marine Foundation

Charles Millar, Sustainable Inshore Fisheries Trust

Bally Philp, Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation

Lucy Kay, COAST

Robert Younger, Fish Legal

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