

An Introduction to UK Fisheries Management

Summary

This document is drawn from [Oceana's Taking Stock report](#), published in September 2023, and provides a short introduction to UK fisheries management. It can be read alongside the report's [executive summary](#), which outlines our findings and policy recommendations. For further detail the full report can be downloaded [here](#).

Introduction

- Since the UK's exit from the EU, the legal and regulatory framework for fisheries management in the UK has been provided by the Fisheries Act 2020.
- This act replaces the EU's Common Fisheries Policy with domestic legislation, establishing new powers for UK authorities to manage fisheries and control access to UK waters.
- However, as fish know no political boundaries, most fish stocks are still shared with our EU neighbours and managed under the terms of the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement.

Where does the UK fleet catch fish?

- The majority ([86%](#) by live weight) of landings by UK vessels in 2021 were from UK waters.
- Despite Brexit, EU member state vessels continue to fish in UK waters as the UK fleet does in theirs.
- The most important fishing grounds for UK vessels outside UK waters remain within EU-27 waters, which accounted for [11%](#) by weight of total UK fishing industry catch in 2021. Meanwhile, non-UK vessels landed 20,000 tonnes of fish and shellfish in the UK in 2021.

How are Fish Stocks Managed?

- Northeast Atlantic fisheries targeting commercial species are primarily managed through setting of total allowable catches (TACs): limits on the quantity of a particular species landed within a certain timeframe.
- Since most stocks are shared, the UK sets TACs with the EU, Norway and other coastal states based on independent scientific advice from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES). Previously, EU TACs were set by EU Agriculture and Fisheries Council (AGRIFISH), with the UK represented by its Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries.
- Fisheries for non-quota species, such as many of the shellfish found in UK inshore waters, are typically controlled by restricting the amount of fishing effort (for example, limiting the type of fishing, participants in a fishery, or days of fishing).

Management of Shared Stocks

- The UK and EU agreed to negotiate TACs annually under the terms of the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement following advice provided by ICES.
- We are currently in an 'adjustment period' lasting until 30 June 2026, during which the EU and UK will negotiate annually to determine access to each other's waters, TAC limits for each shared stock, and respective fishing rights to those stocks.
- During this five-year adjustment period, 25% of the EU's share of catch for a number of stocks EU vessels have historically fished in UK waters will be transferred to the UK.
- Following the adjustment period, the EU and UK will establish a new long-term framework for the management of shared fish stocks, although this will still involve annual negotiations on vessel access and TACs.
- Since Brexit, the UK has also negotiated several bilateral fisheries agreements with other coastal nations of the Northeast Atlantic, including Norway, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Iceland, relating to joint fisheries management.
- The UK also participates in several trilateral negotiations on jointly managed fish stocks, for example with the EU and Norway, as well as with a wider group of 'coastal states' on widely distributed stocks such as mackerel.

UK Fisheries Management

- Negotiations over, and setting of, TACs are mostly led by Defra but with close involvement of the Scottish Government.
- Much of the relevant regulation is UK-wide, including:
 - The Fisheries Framework – which sets out areas where a joint approach to fisheries management across the UK will be followed.
 - The Fisheries Act – which sets out eight key objectives for ensuring the sustainable management of UK fish stocks and the wider marine ecosystem.
 - The Joint Fisheries Statement – which sets out the jointly agreed policies of the devolved fisheries administrations for achieving Fisheries Act objectives.
 - Fisheries Management Plans – that are action plans setting out management measures and objectives for species or groups of species.
- Nonetheless, under the umbrella of that legislation, day-to-day fisheries management is largely devolved to the respective fisheries authorities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Concerns over the Fisheries Act

- NGOs and parliamentarians raised concerns that the act fails to impose a firm legal duty for the government to achieve the objectives of the Fisheries Act and to ensure all fish stocks are fished at sustainable levels. It also fails to establish a timeframe for achieving healthy stocks.
- This apparent flexibility has the potential to undermine the UK Government's assurances of its commitment to 'gold standard' fisheries management, as well as the UK's international obligations on sustainability and biodiversity.
- Additionally, requirements for remote electric monitoring of fishing activity via cameras on board vessels were removed before the act was passed by parliament. These are considered by many to be crucial to ensuring sustainable fisheries management.

Fisheries Management Plans

- Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs) are intended to be evidence-based comprehensive action plans for specific fisheries or groups of fisheries.
- They are intended to promote sustainable fishing practices, implement the Fisheries Act's objectives, and help ensure the long-term viability of fish stocks and fishing communities. However, they will only do this if the Fisheries Act's fisheries objectives are implemented, especially the ecosystem, precautionary, bycatch and climate objectives. For example, if the scallop FMP fails to spatially manage fishing for this species, which can have a devastating impact on inshore ecosystems, then it will undermine the Fisheries Act objectives.
- There are 43 FMPs currently [listed](#) by government with a timetable for preparation and publication that spans 2021 to 2028.
- An initial six 'frontrunner' FMPs were consulted on in summer 2023, some developed by industry and others with input from industry and other stakeholders. Concerns have been raised that the fishing industry has undue influence on the development of some FMPs, potentially leading to plans that prioritise short-term economic interests over long-term sustainability, precautionary and ecosystem objectives.
- As FMPs represent a key tool in the implementation of the Fisheries Act, the aspiration and effectiveness of these plans will undoubtedly continue to attract close scrutiny over the coming years as they are developed and implemented.

Allocation of fishing opportunities within the UK

- The UK's allocation amongst its fleet of the overall fishing opportunities which it secures is unaffected by Brexit – this was always a responsibility of the UK Government, not the EU.
- Fishing by UK vessels for non-quota species, such as most shellfish stocks, is also unaffected, since those stocks did not fall under the CFP.
- Licenced fishing vessels with a quota entitlement are divided into three groups, with each receiving a number of fixed quota allocation (FQA) units – each devolved fisheries administration then receives a quota allocation in tonnes from the UK Government for each stock based on their proportional share of these three groups.
 - The 'sector pool' – vessels, typically over 10m length but not exclusively, that are members of a producer organisation (PO).
 - The 'non-sector pool' – vessels over 10m that are not members of a PO.
 - The '10m and under pool' – vessels under 10m that are not members of a PO.
- The '10m and under pool' is managed centrally by each fisheries administration, rather than quota allocations being associated with individual fishing licences.
- There are concerns over the limited availability of quota for vessels that are 10m and under, which are allocated around 3% of UK quota, despite accounting for almost 80% of the fleet.
- Under section 25 of the Fisheries Act, allocation should be prioritised for low-impact fishers who comply with regulations and contribute to the local economy, so there should be a shift in the balance of quota between the over and under 10m fleets.
- Quota does not necessarily remain static once allocated: fisheries administrations and producers can swap quota domestically and internationally.
- This has led to the concentration of quota ownership by a limited number of both UK and international companies, which needs to be redressed. Five families own or control around 30% of UK FQA units and in England, around 50% of FQA units are held by Dutch, Icelandic and Spanish companies.