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Finlay Carson MSP  
Rural Affairs and Islands Committee  
The Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh  
EH99 1SP

26 November 2025

Dear Finlay,

Thank you for your letter of 30 October 2025 regarding the setting of 2026 fishing opportunities, following the publication of ICES scientific advice for mackerel and Northern Shelf cod. Negotiations on catch limits for 2026 are in full swing, and given the significant importance to Scotland's rural economy and the unprecedented circumstances of recommended cuts, I welcome the RAI Committee's interest in this matter. The Scottish Government held a debate in the Parliament on Tuesday 18 November on supporting Scotland's fishing industry, and I welcome that the Scottish Government motion I put forward was agreed to.

This autumn, the ICES advice is challenging for a number of Scottish stocks. Mackerel and cod are iconic stocks for Scottish fishermen, and the importance of these stocks is made clear in the recently published Scottish Sea Fisheries statistics for 2024. In 2024, the value of mackerel landings increased by 10%, and the value of cod landings increased by 12%, however the science shows that significant cuts in the quotas for these stocks is necessary. There are many factors for this negative advice, but low recruitment across the Northeast Atlantic is a significant factor.

However, while the picture for 2026 is challenging, we have a strong base to build from. The Scottish Sustainable Fishing Indicator (SFI), published by the Scottish Government, summarises the sustainability status of commercial fish and shellfish stocks in Scottish waters. This shows that the sustainability status of stocks in Scottish waters has increased through time, from 39% in 1995 to 73% in 2023.

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Looking forward to 2026, it is essential that the UK works with its Coastal State partners to find solutions that ensure the sustainability both of fish stocks and of the fishing industry.

**What discussions [the Scottish Government] has held with the UK Government, at both a ministerial and official level, regarding the UK's position in international negotiations on catch limits and quota shares.**

You have specifically asked what discussions have been held with UK Government. I have exchanged several letters with Dame Angela Eagle setting out the challenges facing Scotland quotas for next year, and outlining the options for a UK approach to the annual fisheries negotiations. I have also provided detailed analysis on the stark impact the recommended cuts for mackerel and cod will have on our catching and processing sectors.

There are clear choices to be made about the catch limits for 2026, and as managers it is our duty to balance our legal obligations and ensure the sustainability both of our fish stocks and of our coastal communities. As I outlined in the debating chamber on 18 November, my objective is to find a suitable package of measures for both cod and mackerel, with a focus on delivering a positive impact on stock biomass, as well as introducing measures that will strengthen management both in the short and the longer term.

Fisheries negotiations is a policy area where there is good and constructive cooperation between officials in the Marine Directorate and Defra. The Scottish zone is the fourth largest of all core European waters, and home to the majority of key northern fish stocks. Officials from the Marine Directorate play a full and active part in the UK delegation, representing Scotland and Scottish stocks and sea basins in the negotiations in London, Brussels, Oslo, Torshavn, and last week, Edinburgh. In doing so, they provide the technical expertise and perspective on Scottish stocks that is so important to delivering a successful outcome.

**How the Scottish Government is engaging with fishing stakeholders to understand the potential impact of quota reductions for key stocks.**

We are very fortunate to have a passionate, expert and committed community of stakeholders who work with officials from the Marine Directorate to shape and form our strategic approach to negotiations. Stakeholders are provided with briefings on the scientific advice, work directly with the negotiations team throughout the summer and autumn, and then during live negotiations receive regular briefings from Scotland's Chief Negotiator. We try to be as transparent as possible throughout the live talks, noting that there are sensitivities and confidentiality that have to be respected. Our stakeholder community has provided detailed information on the impacts and importance of decisions that are taken through these negotiations.

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**If [the Scottish Government] is considering any financial support packages for impacted vessels depending on the outcome of international negotiations.**

Funding is also vitally important to meet the challenges that reduced quota will have on our coastal communities. You will be aware of the UK Government's recent announcement that it intends to allocate just £28 million of the £360 million Fishing and Coastal Growth Fund to Scotland. This allocation is unacceptable. The Scottish fishing sector accounts for over 60% of the UK's fishing capacity and seafood exports, and more than 75% of all UK quota species are landed by Scottish vessels.

We made clear on numerous occasions during our engagement with DEFRA our expectations that we continue to maintain an arrangement outside of the Barnett formula which recognises the relative size and importance of fishing industries across the UK, and that Scotland should receive at least 46% of the Fund on a devolved basis. The announced allocation pays no attention to what we requested. We believe there is sufficient flexibility within the HM Treasury Statement of Funding Policy to take an approach to the allocation of this funding which does not use the Barnett formula, and which reflects the importance of the fishing sector for Scotland. We are strongly urging the UK Government to reconsider its approach, and enter into discussions with the devolved governments and fishing industry leaders to agree a way forward which treats our industries and communities with the respect they deserve.

The end of year fisheries negotiations often involve a number of very technical issues, and given that those negotiations are ongoing with our Coastal State partners, there are sensitivities that are time critical. We are working to deliver negotiated outcomes by the end of the year to allow fishermen to know what fishing opportunities they will have at the start of 2026. If it is helpful to the Committee the Scottish Government negotiations team, comprising policy and scientific officials, can be made available to provide you with a confidential briefing on the state of play of the negotiations. Otherwise, I will be writing to the Committee on the completion of the negotiations on 2026 fishing opportunities, which will hopefully be early in the New Year.

Yours sincerely,



**MAIRI GOUGEON**

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