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Scottish Parliament
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Dear Finlay,

Annual fisheries negotiations for 2026: update to Committee

Following the recent conclusion of annual fisheries negotiations between the UK and Coastal State partners, I am writing to provide you with a report on the outcomes of the negotiations. The setting of fishing opportunities, including quotas, management measures, and access agreements, is routine annual business for all fishing nations. This year's agreements will deliver fishing opportunities worth approximately £540 million to Scottish fishers.

The number of Total Allowable Catches (TACs) for key stocks within Scottish sea basins, which were set at or below Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) and/or headline advice, has remained the same as in 2025.

Scotland's approach to negotiations

Fishing opportunities are negotiated with Coastal State partners in a suite of international forums. This includes multilateral Coastal States negotiations on widely distributed pelagic stocks, a trilateral agreement between the UK, EU and Norway on shared North Sea stocks, bilateral agreements with each of the EU, Norway, and the Faroe Islands, on shared stocks and exchanges of fishing opportunities, and participation in meetings of Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs) such as the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC), which agrees management measures in international waters.

The Scottish Government holds a consistent policy at annual negotiations to ensure the best outcomes for Scottish fishing interests by securing sustainable catching opportunities. That means getting it right for Scotland's marine ecosystem, fishing industry, and coastal communities, both now and into the future.

Our approach to international negotiations is set out in the Future Fisheries Management Strategy, which forms part of the overarching vision of Scotland's National Marine Plan.

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This strategy aligns with Scotland's national and international obligations, including the Fisheries Act 2020, the Joint Fisheries Statement and the Scottish Government's Four Priorities. These frameworks guide our rationale and positions.

These are negotiations of significant importance to Scotland, and as you are aware, challenging scientific advice for this negotiating cycle made it more important than ever to work to get it right both for our stocks and our fishing industry. As I outlined in the debating chamber on 18 November, one of my key objectives going into the negotiations was to secure suitable packages of measures for both Northern Shelf cod, and North East Atlantic mackerel.

To achieve a positive outcome for Scotland, it is vital that we actively engage with and listen to Scottish stakeholders; and engage with the UK Government, to form a joint UK approach to the negotiations. As set out in my letter of 26 November, Scotland engaged closely with the UK Government, at both a ministerial and official level, and with a wide range of Scottish stakeholders, in the lead up to the negotiations.

The Joint Fisheries Statement requires the UK to approach international fisheries negotiations in a principled manner and with regard to the fisheries objectives in the Fisheries Act 2020. Objectives relevant to international negotiations include the sustainability objective (which balances environmental, economic, and social considerations), the precautionary objective, the scientific evidence objective, and the national benefit objective. The statement outlines policies for achieving these objectives, ensuring sustainable management of fisheries across the UK, and considering both short-term and long-term impacts on fish stocks and the fishing industry before taking action.

In line with these commitments, we seek to secure sustainable catching opportunities by following scientific advice and setting TACs consistent with MSY objectives wherever appropriate. However, it is important to retain flexibility to argue for tailored approaches or mitigation measures when necessary.

For stocks that are data-limited and not assessed under the MSY approach, we believe that following a precautionary approach should also be considered sustainable. We aim to recover stocks in decline by introducing appropriate management measures, reducing discards, addressing choke situations, and balancing the socioeconomic challenges of negative scientific advice, particularly for key demersal stocks.

We continue to pursue the concept of adopting a TAC constraint principle, managing large increases or decreases at sensible levels to reduce business shocks and protect the long-term sustainability of stocks. Where scientific advice cannot be followed directly, we aim to take an incremental approach to reach sustainable catch levels over time, while maintaining or increasing Spawning Stock Biomass (SSB) wherever possible.

Scotland's overarching approach to negotiations reflects our national and international commitments, including wider international treaties such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). By aligning with sustainability, precautionary, scientific evidence, and ecosystem objectives, we seek to deliver the best outcomes for Scotland's fishing and environmental interests as a whole, consistent with our National Marine Plan.

Below is a summary of the key outcomes of each of the negotiating fora in which Scottish Government played an active part.

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Coastal States negotiations

I am very pleased to report that, on 16 December, the UK, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, and Norway agreed an enhanced sharing arrangement for North-East Atlantic mackerel. This arrangement delivers a measurable reduction in fishing pressure and provides much needed stability for our industries.

The four-party agreement provides a package of measures which aim to better manage the stock. It limits fishing by Coastal States to around 107.5% of the TAC, versus almost 118% without this cooperation – a significant reduction. Parties to the agreement have also agreed to set their quotas for 2026 in line with an MSY catch scenario, of 299,010 tonnes. This is a decrease of -48% compared to 2025, though mitigates the headline advice of -70%. A key priority for Scotland to protect our industry, particularly our onshore processors.

This outcome balances ecological recovery with socio-economic realities, avoiding extreme measures that could harm fishing communities, while reducing pressure on the stock and enabling long-term recovery.

A six-party comprehensive arrangement, with the EU and Greenland included, remains my ultimate goal. I am pleased that all parties have committed to work in good faith to secure a full six-party agreement that includes the EU and Greenland. The current arrangement leaves the door open for that, and we hope to begin those discussions again in the coming days and weeks.

My officials will continue to put their full energy into finding solutions and compromises going forward to ensure long-term sustainability of this key stock. It is our responsibility as one of the biggest players in this stock.

In parallel to the negotiations on mackerel, Coastal States consultations took place to set the 2026 TACs for blue whiting and Atlanto-Scandian (also known as Norwegian Spring Spawning) herring. The TACs for both stocks were set in line with headline ICES advice, in line with Scotland's position. Sharing discussions on these stocks are ongoing.

UK-EU-Norway trilateral negotiations

Our top priority going into the trilateral talks was to agree a suitable package of proportionate and balanced measures for Northern Shelf cod. I am pleased that the TAC has been set at a level that avoids the worst-case scenario of shutting down the mixed demersal fishery in Scottish waters, whilst increasing spawning stock biomass. Alongside the TAC, Parties have committed to a number of actions in both the short and longer term, seeking to improve the way cod is assessed and managed going forward.

On North Sea herring, Parties agreed a package of long term management measures, including agreement on a LTMS for the stock, alongside a new, single-fleet management model. The new agreement will see the TAC for 2026 being set based on the LTMS. The UK will have a start share of 19.3% of the TAC, and in addition will receive a transfer from Norway of 0.2% of the TAC, in return for increased access into UK waters. This means that the UK net share will be 19.5% of the TAC.

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Quotas for the remaining whitefish stocks were set at levels within the headline advice, with saithe set marginally lower in order to reduce the risk of the stock falling below Blim to 5%.

In addition to setting the TACs, the Parties agreed to progress a number of areas of joint working during 2026. Parties will meet in early 2026 to plan the year ahead, and in May/June 2026 for an intersessional meeting. The EU will chair the consultations during 2026.

UK-EU bilateral negotiations

I welcome that we have reached agreement with the EU on 2026 catch limits and management measures for a range of North Sea and West of Scotland stocks, including key Scottish stocks of nephrops, monkfish, Rockall haddock and cod, and West of Scotland whiting, cod, and haddock.

One of the measures agreed includes the removal of the maximum landing size for spurdog. This measure, alongside setting the TAC below headline advice, strikes a sustainable balance between the fishing opportunity and protection of the biomass. The UK Statutory instrument is currently being progressed, and the measure has been welcomed by industry.

Throughout 2025, the UK and EU have worked together on a number of joint workstreams through the UK-EU Specialised Committee on Fisheries. The commitments to enhance evidence and understanding of Rockall cod, spurdog and North Sea blue ling are of particular importance to Scotland. We look forward to continuing this cooperation in 2026.

UK-Norway bilateral negotiations

The agreement with Norway continues to provide much-welcomed additional opportunities and flexibility for Scotland's fishing industry. The agreement maintains the existing demersal and pelagic access agreements, allowing UK vessels to catch up to 30,000 tonnes and 20,000 tonnes respectively of their own quota in Norwegian waters.

Discussions will continue in 2026 on the future shape and scale of both access arrangements, acknowledging the importance of them to both parties and building on the agreement made with Norway in the trilateral on North Sea herring.

Quota exchanges have also been agreed for 2026 at a smaller level than 2025 due to challenges in quota availability from both parties. As in 2025, there were no available stocks of interest to the Scottish fleet. As such, we ensured the level Scotland contributed to this element of the deal decreased further in 2026, reducing from 37% to 35% of the outward quota to Norway.

UK-Faroe bilateral negotiations

I am pleased agreement has been made with the Faroe Islands almost three months earlier than in previous years. This allows primarily Scottish vessels to utilise these additional opportunities, worth approximately £4m. These opportunities provide increased flexibility for the Scottish fleet putting less pressure on stocks in Scottish waters by enabling our larger whitefish vessels to divert their effort into Faroese waters.

The structure of the agreement mirrors last year, with the outward transfer of Greenland halibut and NAFO 3L cod in exchange for Faroese cod, haddock, saithe, ling and blue ling.

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The overall tonnage of the inward stocks remains similar to 2025 with a reduction in the outward stocks to mirror the interests of the Faroese industry.

Agreement was also made on a suitable level of North Sea herring bycatch, in exchange for mackerel quota, to allow the Faroese to prosecute their agreed mackerel quota in UK waters.

North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission

The NEAFC annual meeting took place in November. Measures were adopted for stocks including Atlanto-Scandian (Norwegian Spring Spawning) herring and Rockall haddock, as well as a number of control and enforcement measures.

NEAFC measures have not yet been agreed for mackerel or blue whiting, however we are supportive of agreeing NEAFC measures by written correspondence for these stocks, should there be agreement within the Coastal States forum on what those measures could look like, in the ongoing discussions that are noted above. Agreement of NEAFC measures by correspondence is not uncommon, and follows well-established processes and principles.

Conclusion of negotiations

Stakeholders have been fully updated on the outcomes of the negotiations, and written or agreed records of each of the concluded negotiations are published on the Scottish Government website.

Allocations of quotas to individual Producer Organisations and vessels will be made in the coming weeks.

I hope this information is helpful.



MAIRI GOUGEON

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