

Rural Affairs Committee, Wednesday 20th September

Throughout the current parliamentary session, the Marine Conservation Society will be calling for:

Robust measures to protect seabed habitats from damaging forms of fishing

The recent [report from Environmental Standards Scotland](#) made clear that Scottish Ministers are failing in their legal duties to achieve Good Environmental Status for the seabed. As we have long advocated, crucial measures needed to protect the seabed should include:

- **Protections for Scotland's inshore MPAs and Priority Marine Features.**
 - The recently launched, and long-delayed, consultation of fisheries management measures for in shore MPAs and PMFs is a crucial opportunity to establish much-needed protections for important marine habitats.
- **Stronger protections for Scotland's offshore MPAs.**
 - The measures introduced in 2025, while much-needed, did not go far enough and were often zonal, as opposed to whole-site, in nature. The condition of these offshore MPAs should be carefully monitored, so these protections can be further strengthened if necessary, as part of an adaptive management approach.
- **A presumption against bottom-towed fishing gear in a significant proportion of inshore waters.**
 - Scotland's Inshore Fisheries Management Initiative (IFMI) should explore and pilot spatial and regional management of inshore fishing and incentivise low-impact inshore fishing.

A holistic, ecosystem-based approach to marine planning

This should include:

- **An ecosystem-based approach to marine planning.**
 - National Marine Plan 2, should be used to deliver a holistic approach to marine planning, which considers the cumulative impact of all pressures on the marine environment, including fishing and offshore wind.
 - We believe that fisheries management should be integrated with marine planning.
- **Further development of regional marine plans.**
 - Only two regional marine plans have been adopted, some 16 years after the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010 was passed. We want to see the adoption of the long-awaited Clyde Regional Marine Plan and for the Scottish Government to support Marine Planning Partnerships to develop Regional Marine Plans for other Scottish marine regions.

- **Scaling up Marine Restoration**

- In Dec 2025 Scotland introduced the Marine and Coastal Restoration plan, a dedicated strategy to accelerate the active restoration of marine and coastal habitats and species. Building on this successful step the Scottish Government could create Restoration regulatory Sandbox Zones, pre-approved areas in which restoration could take place by accredited organisations under streamlined approvals using existing legislation. This would accelerate well-designed restoration projects, reduce the burden of ad hoc licence applications and give marine stakeholders greater certainty about what forms of regeneration will be permitted, and where, in Scotland.

Improvements to Scotland's water network

This should include:

- **100% monitoring of Scotland's Combined Sewage Overflows (CSOs).**

- Sewer overflows in Scotland discharged sewage into Scotland's waters more than 24,000 times in 2024. Only a limited number of overflows in Scotland are monitored (this was still as low as 32% by the end of 2024), compared to 100% in England and Wales. There are currently no published plans for Scottish Water to reach this level of monitoring in Scotland and this should be urgently addressed.

- **A comprehensive plan to tackle Sewage Related Debris (SRD).**

- Sanitary waste, such as wet wipes, pads, tampons and tampon applicators, is flushed down the toilet, it can end up in the marine environment as Sewage Related Debris (SRD) when untreated sewage is discharged into rivers and the sea from storm overflows. Over 23,500 items of SRD were found on surveyed Scottish beaches over 2025. Scotland must support consumers to move to reusable products to support a circular economy, implement the ban and manufacture of single-use plastic in wet wipes by the end of 2027 and other single-use plastic sanitary items where there are suitable alternatives by 2030.

- **Stronger monitoring of PFAS – 'forever chemicals' – and action to prevent PFAS from entering our water network.**

- Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) are a group of about 15,000 man-made chemicals found in a range of everyday goods like waterproof coats, takeaway containers and paints. Robust water quality monitoring is essential to understanding the scale and distribution of persistent pollutants, effectively targeting interventions, reducing long-term clean-up costs, protecting public health, and supporting biodiversity recovery. Implementing this requires updating the monitoring frameworks under both the Water Environment and Water Services (Scotland) Act 2003 and the Urban Waste Water Treatment (Scotland) Regulations 1994.

Further investment in the blue economy

This should include:

- **More funding for the Marine Directorate.**
 - The Marine Directorate is already struggling with its current workload. With important work in the Directorate's pipeline, including the implementation of inshore fisheries management measures, and the Inshore Fisheries Management Improvement programme (IFMI), a lack of funding must not be a limiting factor in the government's ambitions on these issues.
- **The introduction of Scottish Government-backed 'Blue Bonds'.**
 - With the Scottish Government still in the process of finalising its initial bond issuances, we are calling for some of these bonds to be issued in the form of *Blue Bonds*, the proceeds of which would be ringfenced for blue capital investments.
 - This approach would complement the existing Scottish Marine Environmental Enhancement Fund (SMEEF) and leverage a step-change in private finance for ocean regeneration.

Circular economy measures to tackle marine litter.

These should include:

- **Scotland's Deposit Return Scheme going ahead as planned in October 2027.**
 - With drinks related litter found on 93% of surveyed beaches in Scotland in 2025 we need to ensure Scotland delivers a comprehensive DRS in October 2027 for metal and plastic containers and monitors its impact on marine litter, recycling performance and circular economy outcomes. A focus on future proofing of the infrastructure for reuse should also be prioritized.
- **A new levy on single-use cups, as well as investment in further pathways to encourage more reuse practices.**
 - The Scottish Government consulted in 2024 on introducing a mandatory minimum charge on single use disposable beverage cups in Scotland, which we supported with Beachwatch data. This follows the recommendations highlighted by the Expert Panel on Environmental Charging and Other Measures (EPECOM) report in 2019. Single use cups were found on 50% of surveyed Scottish beaches in 2025 highlighting the need to implement the EPECOM recommendations including a charge on single use and investing in reuse schemes.
- **Free fishing gear recycling services at all Scottish ports and harbours to tackle harmful disposal of end-of-life fishing gear.**
 - The Marine Conservation Society has been working with the Scottish Islands Federation to increase the number of Beachwatch surveys being conducted in the Highlands and Islands to ensure the Beachwatch dataset reflects the litter impacting island beaches. The data collected shows that there are differences in the types of litter that island communities face compared to those on the mainland, highlighting the need for policy interventions on different types of litter impacting different locations. In 2025, fishing and aquaculture related litter made up 34% of all litter collected on Scottish Islands compared to only 9% on mainland beaches.