

Rural Affairs Committee
Wednesday 30 September 2026
6th Meeting, 2026 (Session 7)

Marine and fisheries

Introduction

1. In June 2026, the Committee agreed to undertake a series of evidence sessions with stakeholders on topics within its remit, including marine and fisheries. The purpose of these sessions is to give Members a broad understanding of the issues and challenges in the remit and to assist with the development of the Committee's work programme. They will also inform questioning of the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs and the Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands.

Predecessor Committee work on marine and fisheries

2. In its legacy report, the Session 6 Rural Affairs and Islands (RAI) Committee recommended that its successor committee give specific [focus to inshore fisheries](#) in Session 7. This followed its previous work, including a [round-table evidence session on inshore fisheries in October 2022](#). The Rural Affairs Committee agreed on 9 September to take forward work on inshore fisheries and will discuss the timing and scope of that work at a later date.
3. The RAI Committee's scrutiny of seasonal closures in the Firth of Clyde also raised issues relating to the Scottish Government's consideration of the scientific evidence underpinning policy decisions and the resources available within the Marine Directorate to address knowledge gaps. This was further reinforced by the RAI Committee's pre-budget scrutiny for 2025 to 2026, which identified concerns that structural changes to the delivery of science within the Marine Directorate, real-terms budget reductions, and deteriorating facilities were weakening Scotland's fisheries research capacity and international reputation.
4. The Marine Directorate's 2026-27 budget is £79.3 million, unchanged in cash terms but £1.7 million lower in real terms than 2025-26, representing a third consecutive annual real-terms reduction.
5. As part of its work, the RAI Committee also highlighted issues including the overfishing of key shellfish stocks, the lack of quotas for crab and lobster, spatial management and gear conflict, as raised by [Petition PE1951](#).

Background

Scotlands seas

6. Scotland's seas are almost six times its land area and contribute around £5.6 billion GVA and 2.9% of Scottish employment including through fishing, aquaculture and renewables.
7. The [UK Marine Strategy Regulations 2010](#) require the UK Government and devolved governments to take the necessary measures to achieve or maintain 'Good Environmental Status' (GES) in all marine waters under UK jurisdiction. The latest 2026 assessment under the [UK Marine Strategy](#) found that GES was achieved for two of the 11 assessed descriptors. [A recent \(June 2026\) report by Environmental Standards Scotland](#) (ESS) concluded that Scottish Ministers have failed to effectively fulfil their legal duties under the 2010 Regulations to protect and restore Scotland's seafloor, with progress falling short of key environmental targets.
8. The health of the marine environment remains under significant pressure from climate change, fishing, seabed disturbance, pollution, invasive non-native species and growing development. Alongside these pressures, marine space is increasingly contested by fishing, aquaculture, renewables, shipping, tourism and conservation.

Fishing

9. Commercial fishing remains particularly important to Scotland within the UK, with Scottish vessels accounting for 64% by weight and 71% by value of all UK-vessel landings in 2024.
10. [The Provisional Scottish Sea Fisheries Statistics 2025](#) show that Scottish vessels landed 509,000 tonnes of fish and shellfish worth £960 million. The Scottish fishing fleet comprised 1,998 active vessels and 3,735 fishers in 2024, but the number of fishers employed has fallen by 15% since 2015.
11. According to the [Scottish Marine Assessment 2020](#), fishing remains one of the most geographically widespread direct pressures on the marine environment, particularly bottom-contacting and pelagic fishing methods. At the same time, fishing remains economically and socially important to many island and coastal communities.
12. [The Programme for Government \(PfG\)](#) sets out a commitment to "support our fishing sector, associated supply chain companies and processing sector" including through the [Marine Fund Scotland](#).
13. While fisheries management is largely devolved and Scottish Ministers are responsible for regulating and supporting Scotland's fishing industry, management takes place within a wider UK framework. [The Fisheries Act 2020](#) established common fisheries objectives, the [Joint Fisheries Statement](#) and a

system of [Fisheries Management Plans](#) are agreed across the four UK fisheries administrations.

14. International fisheries negotiations, treaty obligations and the determination of overall UK fishing opportunities remain matters for the UK Government, while Scottish Ministers are responsible for implementing fisheries policy and management measures within devolved competence.

Marine Protected Areas

15. Scotland has a substantial network of more than 240 Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), covering around 37% of Scottish waters. However, the most recent [MPA progress report](#) found that 70% of sites had only partially implemented management measures.
16. [On 14 September, the Scottish Government wrote to the Committee](#) to advise that it had [launched a consultation on fisheries management measures for inshore marine protected areas and priority marine features](#). The consultation opened in September 2026 and will run until January 2027. Delivery of these measures was [first delayed in 2019](#), and the Scottish Government subsequently [committed to consult on them in 2024](#).

Meeting on 30 September

17. On 30 September, the Committee will take evidence from two separate panels with the following stakeholders:

Panel 1

- Elaine Whyte, Executive Secretary, Communities Inshore Fisheries Alliance
- Elspeth MacDonald, Chief Executive, Scottish Fishermen's Federation
- Alistair Bally Philp, National Coordinator, Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation

Panel 2

- Calum Duncan, Principal Policy Specialist, Marine Conservation Society
- Jessica Jones, Marine Group Convenor, Scottish Environment Link
- Annabel Lawrence, member of CAOLAS – member group of the Coastal Communities Network
- Heather McFarlane Senior Project Manager, Fidra
- Phil Taylor, Director, Open Seas

18. Ahead of the session, the Committee received a written submission from the Scottish Fishermen's Federation (Annex A).

Clerks to the Committee

September 2026

Annexe A

Scottish Fishermen's Federation

Introductory Submission to the Rural Affairs Committee of the Scottish Parliament

September 2026

The Scottish Fishermen's Federation (SFF) is pleased to be invited to provide evidence to the Rural Affairs Committee on 30th September 2026 and provides this paper by way of background information. We are happy to provide the Committee with more detail if that would be of assistance.

Background

The Scottish Fishermen's Federation (SFF) is a democratically constituted industry group set up in 1973 and its key aims are:

- Promoting and protecting the collective interests of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation's constituent Associations.
- Supporting production of healthy and sustainable wild-caught seafood, ensuring a sustainable future for the industry and our marine environment.
- Advancing the reputation of fishing by championing responsible practice in meeting a growing demand for healthy, climate-smart food.
- Improving fishing safety through supporting and promoting professional standards of training and compliance with safety standards.
- Showing fishing as a positive career choice – one with a viable and positive future.

SFF is comprised of eight constituent Associations, with around 450 vessels within their membership, representing a wide range of fishing businesses, both inshore and offshore and catching a wide range of fish and shellfish species across demersal, pelagic and shellfish fleets.

Provisional Scottish Sea Fisheries Statistics for 2025¹ report that Scotland had 1,993 active fishing vessels in 2025, around three-quarters of which were under 10 meters in length. These vessels were crewed by 3,738 fishermen and landed 509,000 tonnes of fish and shellfish worth £960 million in 2025. By sector, pelagic landings accounted for £582 million, demersal landings for £204 million and shellfish for £174 million.

¹ [Provisional Scottish Sea Fisheries Statistics 2025 - gov.scot](https://gov.scot/Provisional-Scottish-Sea-Fisheries-Statistics-2025)

Whilst full 2025 figures for the UK are not due to be published until the end of October, Scotland generally accounts for around between 60-70% of total UK landings and value (71% of landings and 63% of value in 2024²).

Fishing – contributing to food security and good nutrition

Fishing is a surprisingly complex business in terms of policy and regulation, but fundamentally it is about food production. Commercial fishing produces high quality healthy protein from renewable resources, with a very low carbon footprint. Compared to other forms of food production, commercial fisheries require few external inputs, the main input being the fuel needed to power fishing vessels. There is no requirement for chemicals, fertilisers or water inputs.

Fish and shellfish are consumed across the globe, and it is widely acknowledged that seafood has an important role to play in feeding a growing population. It is important therefore not just to think of food security in the context of Scotland and the UK but to look at the growing global demand for protein, and the inputs and resources needed to provide that.

Globally, over 3 billion people rely on fish for 20% of their protein intake³. Not all of that will be wild-caught – a significant proportion will be from aquaculture. The global population is projected to rise to 9.8 billion people by 2050 - an extra 2 billion people who will need to eat. Sustainable wild-capture fisheries have a key role to play in ensuring food security for many people worldwide.

The most recent considerations from the World Health Organisation⁴ conclude that consuming fish provides energy, protein and a range of other nutrients important for health, and that there are benefits related to fish consumption during all life stages (pregnancy, childhood and adulthood). The Eatwell Guide⁵ which represents governments' nutritional advice for Scotland and the rest of the UK recommends that people should eat at least two portions of fish per week, one of which should be oily fish.

Fisheries management – some context

With very limited exceptions (e.g. shooting of wild game) commercial fishing is unique in terms of modern food production as it relies on completely wild, natural resources (fish and shellfish) that are not subject to any rearing, cultivation or husbandry by humans.

Fisheries management is in place to manage the amounts of fish that can be harvested and the ways by which this is done, but fish and shellfish stocks are also influenced by many naturally occurring factors.

Fishing is clearly one pressure on fish stocks – and indeed the only one that can be actively managed - but it is widely recognised that fisheries are impacted by

² [2025_12_02 - UK Sea Fisheries Statistics 2024 report - .pdf](#)

³ [Global Fish Consumption Statistics 2026](#)

⁴ [Joint FAO/WHO Expert Consultation on the Risks and Benefits of Fish Consumption](#)

⁵ [Eatwell Guide | Food Standards Scotland](#)

factors over which no actors in the supply chain have any control. These include natural fluctuations in stocks caused by changes in population dynamics – e.g. increased or decreased predation by other species, competition between species for resources (food and habitat), changes in weather patterns and fluctuations in recruitment to a stock. There are examples where in the absence of any fishing pressure, stocks have decreased through naturally occurring factors. For commercial fisheries to be able to contribute to sustainable food security and good health, there should be effective co-designed management based on robust data and well-founded science that informs evidence-based policy making.

On a global scale Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing remains a major threat to the sustainable management of some fish stocks. But in Scotland and the UK fishing is subject to mature and long-established management and regulations. Many of our stocks are jointly managed with our neighbouring fishing nations. In Scotland, the Scottish Government's Sustainable Fishing Indicator⁶ (SFI), which summarises the sustainability status of commercial fish and shellfish stocks in Scottish waters, shows that the sustainability status of stocks in Scottish waters has increased through time, from 39% in 1995 to 73% in 2023⁷, though dipping just under 70% in the most recent update. Whilst there is always more to do, this overall positive trend demonstrates the ongoing recovery of the commercial fish stocks in Scotland.

Public support

Fishing has been integral to Scotland's society, culture and economy for hundreds of years – it's often called a traditional industry and it's part of our national identity. But fishing is not just part of Scotland's heritage – it is always looking to the future. Our fishing industry is modern, efficient, professional and globally recognised.

It is heartening that the Scottish public continues to support our industry – regular polling carried out independently by Opinion Matters⁸ on behalf of SFF shows sustained levels of positive public opinion with around 63% of Scots expressing positive opinions and only 6% having a negative opinion.

82% of respondents in our most recent poll agreed that the Scottish Government should do more to support this important form of food production.

SFF's current priorities

In preparation for the election in 2026, SFF published a manifesto setting out our 'asks' – our key priorities – across a number of policy areas. These remain the areas that we will focus on and the manifesto is attached as Appendix 1.

⁶ [Written question and answer: S6W-36300 | Scottish Parliament Website](#)

⁷ [Written question and answer: S6W-41726 | Scottish Parliament Website](#)

⁸ Research conducted by Opinion Matters among a sample of 1,000 nationally representative adults in Scotland aged 18+. Fieldwork conducted 22nd – 26th January 2026.

In conclusion, SFF has enjoyed a good working relationship with the Rural Affairs Committee over the years and has valued the opportunities to provide evidence and information to the Committee on relevant matters. We look forward to continuing this in the new session of Parliament.

The full text of the manifesto "[Scottish Fishermen's Federation Holyrood Elections 2026: "Stand up for Fishing"](#)" referred to above as an appendix, is available online.