



Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs

OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE

The Rt. Hon. Mark Spencer MP
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Mr Jacob Jensen
Minister for Food, Agriculture
and Fisheries,
Holbergsgade 6
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Denmark

30th January 2024

Dear Jacob,

We spoke in September about sandeel management and my department's consultation proposing a spatial closure of English waters of the North Sea. Following your request, I agreed to wait for a response from ICES to a joint EU-UK technical request clarifying how ecosystem considerations are factored into and applied in single stock advice for forage fish species.

That advice was published by ICES on 28th November, and we note that the response supports the use of national regulation to support ecosystem functions and suggests that the annual single species advice for sandeel from ICES should only be one part of an overall management regime to ensure that local food availability is preserved. It also advocates for local regulation to ensure management delivers for ecosystem needs. This ICES report therefore supports our strategy for a more precautionary approach to sandeel management such as the introduction of spatial closures. Therefore, I want to let you know of our intention to prohibit the fishing of sandeels within English waters of ICES Area 4 (North Sea). This measure will apply to all vessels of any nationality, and it will be effective on 26 March, before the start of the next sandeel fishing season. We will send a formal notification of this measure in due course, in line with Article 496 of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement and the guidelines on notifications that we agreed with the EU last year.

I am taking this decision because fishing for forage fish like sandeels has negative impacts on the marine ecosystem, including on vulnerable marine species. Sandeels have been described as one of the most important forage fish, and declines in sandeel abundance due to fishing has been shown to result in declines in vulnerable seabirds like kittiwakes and some commercially valuable fish. Presently there are no management measures that specifically protect sandeels as part of the wider ecosystem in English waters. Amidst the ongoing avian flu outbreak and recognising the limited actions government can take to address the virus spread directly, increasing the availability of sandeels as a food source is an important step towards increasing seabird resilience more widely.

As you know, the UK held a public consultation last year from 6th March to 30th May on potential management measures. It showed that over 95% of respondents support some form of prohibition on fishing for sandeels, with a majority favouring the spatial closure of all English waters. The evidence report published alongside our consultation indicates that a prohibition of fishing for sandeel in the North Sea will deliver benefits to seabirds, other species of fish, as well as marine mammals. I am confident that this decision is being taken based on the best available scientific evidence which shows for example that the closure could lead to an increase in seabird biomass of around 7% in 10 years.

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I appreciate the constructive dialogue that we have had on this, and your response to our consultation. I trust we can continue to work together in our shared endeavour to protect and restore our marine ecosystems, while supporting a future for sustainable fisheries.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "M Spencer". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "M".

Rt. Hon. Mark Spencer MP