



Seafood Ireland Alliance

Statement to The Oireachtas Joint Committee on Fisheries & Maritime Affairs

Marine Protected Areas

General Comments

The Seafood Ireland Alliance (SIA) recognises the need for conservation and restoration of sensitive marine habitats and ecosystems. This is important not only for addressing the biodiversity crisis but also for supporting sustainable fisheries which are critical for food security. As outlined in the EU Action Plan: Protecting and Restoring Marine Ecosystems for Sustainable and Resilient Fisheries¹, *'Sustainably managed and caught fish is a source of high quality and affordable protein with a relatively low carbon footprint. It is essential to food security for many people and to maintaining the economic basis of fishing communities. Ensuring sustainable fishing and sustainably managed fish stocks is also key to protecting ocean biodiversity and fighting against climate change.'*.

The development of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) offers one approach towards protecting marine habitats and sensitive species. However, to be effective and successful their development, design and designation need to be informed by robust, transparent science and supported by the participation and engagement of relevant stakeholders. The key recommendation of the 2020 MPA Advisory Group report² was that *'Early and sustained stakeholder engagement should be integral to the selection and management processes for MPAs. Engagement should be inclusive and equitable, and the process should be designed to ensure that it is transparent, meaningful and facilitating.'*

The SIA would contend that, to date, the Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) processes in Ireland, including those associated with MPAs have not been based on robust impartial science and have not included effective stakeholder engagement with the seafood sector. As a result, there is concern within the fishing industry about the forthcoming MPA process and the impacts on the sector. Without due consideration of existing fishing activities and recognition of the legitimate rights of fishermen to fish, there is potential for negative impact arising from the designation of MPAs through loss of access to traditional fishing grounds as well as significant displacement to other areas leading to unsustainable levels of fishing pressure. Therefore, the SIA reiterates that while supportive of MPAs, the designation and management processes must follow the principles of co-creation, co-design and co-management with the fishing industry playing a central role.

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52023DC0102>

² <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/expanding-irelands-marine-protected-area-network.pdf>

Designation of Marine Protected Areas

In designating MPAs the SIA highlight the need to follow these basic principles:

- Selection should be based principally on scientific evidence and involve meaningful stakeholder engagement processes
- The key objective should be to safeguard natural features based on principle of sustainable use
- Management should be on a site-by-site basis, rather than on simplistic general principles
- There should be a presumption of use within MPA if conservation objectives can be met, accepting that some activities may need to be restricted
- Possible management measures should be explored with stakeholders

It is important that going forward in the creation of an MPA network, Ireland must avoid the mistakes of the past. The interests of other, competing industries (e.g. Offshore Renewable Energy) and the politically motivated pursuit of arbitrarily defined conservation targets (e.g. the ban on trawling inside 6nm) should not be prioritised at the expense of the fishing industry.

Examples where Marine Spatial Planning processes have failed to meaningfully engage with the fishing industry and dismissed submissions by industry are outlined below:

- **MPA draft Bill³:** During the pre-legislative scrutiny by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the chair of the MPA Advisory Group highlighted the lack of stakeholder engagement in the text of the draft Bill. This was further exacerbated by the exclusion of the fishing and aquaculture industries from the debates in the Oireachtas Committee. Only after the members of the fishing industry and IFA Aquaculture contacted the Committee directly and requested the opportunity to present their views on the bill where they acknowledged as being relevant stakeholders⁴. Though the stand-alone MPA Bill has now been superseded by an alternative legislative process, the way in which the seafood industry was treated at the initial stages was indicative of the concerns held on the lack of meaningful engagement.
- **South Coast DMAP (SC-DMAP):** The public consultation process for the SC-DMAP was little more than a box ticking exercise and provided no meaningful fora through which the seafood industry could effectively contribute to the process. The seafood industry concerns were outlined in a submission to the consultation process⁵, in which it outlined the failure to adhere to and apply the overarching and fisheries policies stipulated in the National Marine Planning Framework⁶. There was no attempt to avoid, minimise or mitigate the potential impact on commercial fisheries and essential fish habitats during the identification of the four SC-DMAP areas. Commercial fisheries were only considered in the context of co-existence and co-location and there was no demonstration of how avoidance of significant adverse impacts on commercial fisheries and essential fish habitats was considered as the preferred option. The constraint analyses, employed in the site selection process, openly applied subjective criteria to aid in the selection of areas which were deemed technically and economically attractive for ORE development despite likely significant impact on fishing activity and

³ <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-housing-local-government-and-heritage/publications/general-scheme-of-marine-protected-areas-bill-2022/>

⁴ <https://kfo.ie/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/General scheme of MPA bill 2022 PO response.pdf>

⁵ <https://kfo.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/SIRF Submission to South Coast DMAP 14062024.pdf>

⁶ <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/national-marine-planning-framework.pdf>

marine species. Significant potential impacts to commercial fisheries that were highlighted by the Marine Institute were also not transparently communicated in the publicly available consultation documents. In effect, to the SIA, the SC-DMAP process was carried out to achieve a pre-defined outcome of finding sites for ORE development regardless of the impacts.

- **Ecological Sensitivity Analyses:** Two Ecological Sensitivity Analysis (ESA) in the Irish Sea⁷ (IS-ESA) and Celtic Sea⁸ (CS-ESA) have carried out by the MPA Advisory Group. They had the stated aim of informing future designation of MPAs in Irish waters by identifying areas of comparatively higher and lower ecological sensitivity from within which future MPAs could be sited. Additionally, they were to inform planning decisions to be taken about the potential siting of ORE infrastructure in the Irish Sea and the selection of the SC-DMAP areas in the Celtic Sea. Seafood industry submissions⁹¹⁰¹¹ provide detailed summaries of the various issues with the analysis concerning the selection of features and data availability. A significant issue was also highlighted in the CS-ESA with the way the SC-DMAP areas were treated in the analyses. The four SC-DMAP areas overlapped significantly with the areas identified as being sensitive to ORE development. However, the analysis was then adjusted to preclude the selection of these areas in the potential MPA network. The output of the analysis failed in its primary objective of safeguarding areas determined to be environmentally sensitive to the potential development of ORE in the short term.
- **Natura 2000 sites – SACs and SPAs:** Though designated under the EU Habitats Directive¹² and EU Birds Directive¹³, Natura 2000 sites including Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs) will be counted as part of the MPA network and included in the % protected areas in Irish waters. Therefore, they must be afforded consideration when discussing MPAs. In Ireland the designation of SACs and SPAs falls under the remit of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and the Minister for Housing Local Government and Heritage. Unfortunately, Natura 2000 designations in Ireland have largely been made behind closed doors and with no stakeholder engagement, with the only avenue for input being through objection and appeal. One such example is the notice of intention to designate Porcupine Shelf and Southern Canyons as SACs, issued by DHLGH in November 2022. The sites were proposed based on Reef habitat being present and together encompassed 29,166 km². Due process was not followed with the designations, and no attempt was made to engage stakeholders. An objection¹⁴ was lodged in February 2023 by the KFO since the proposed SACs did not reflect the scientific evidence provided and did not align with the designation basis. Therein followed a long frustrating processing where repeated attempts to discuss the objection with NPWS and the Minister were ignored. The objection was rejected on rather spurious grounds and the only course of action the KFO could take was to lodge an appeal¹⁵ to the Designated Areas Appeals Advisory Board

⁷ <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/main-report-of-the-irish-sea-sensitivity-analysis-project.pdf>

⁸ <https://assets.gov.ie/297322/8ef60372-cedd-4df5-a562-65b9e2fc2835.pdf>

⁹ https://kfo.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/KFO_ISEFPO_comments_on_ecological_sensitivity_analysis_in_Irish_Sea_21072023.pdf

¹⁰ https://kfo.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/SIRF_comments_on_Celtic_Sea_ESA_01032024.pdf

¹¹ https://kfo.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/SIRF_Submission_to_DHLGH_CSESA_11112024.pdf

¹² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/1992/43/oj/eng>

¹³ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32009L0147>

¹⁴ https://kfo.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/KFO_Response_to_NPWS_SAC_designations_15022023.pdf

¹⁵ https://kfo.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/KFO_Appeal_to_NPWS_SAC_designations_updated.pdf

(DAAAB). In March 2025, the KFO finally had an in person hearing with the DAAAB to review the objection and appeal. However, the outcome of the DAAAB hearing has not been publicly released and the recommendation of the DAAAB is apparently still sitting on the Ministers desk awaiting consideration. This example clearly illustrates that the entire process around the designation of Natura 2000 sites, which will be part of the MPA network, is flawed and needs reform.

Designated Maritime Area Plan (DMAP)

In November 2025, the Government announced that the MPA legislation would follow an alternative approach than that initially proposed. Instead of stand-alone legislation for MPAs, they would be incorporated into amendments to the Maritime Area Planning Act 2021 and MPA designations and management would be made through the Designated Maritime Area Plans (DMAPs) process. The SIA understands that this is supposed to mirror the current process under which the 'plan-led' approach to ORE is being implemented. Though the amendments are still to be drafted, based on the presentations at the MSP Advisory Group, the seafood industry has given the proposed approach a guarded welcome. There is a clear recognition of the seafood sector as a key stakeholder and a seeming intent for meaningful engagement during the process. However, concerns remain about this approach given the way the DMAP for ORE approach has initially been implemented in the case of the South Coast DMAP (SC-DMAP) and the weaknesses with the Ecological Sensitivity Analyses carried out to support the DMAP process. The SIA hopes the new approach to MPAs is transparent and leads a coordinated approach to developing, implementing and monitoring MPAs. Meaningful engagement with the fishing industry is a prerequisite as part of this process.

Positive Engagement

In discussing the future designation and management of MPAs, it is important to recognise the positives. One of these is the initiation of the MPA LIFE Ireland project. This is a long-term project that aims to provide the basis for designing and designating MPAs and includes a comprehensive suite of stakeholder engagement initiatives. The SIA is pleased to highlight that the seafood industry is represented on the project advisory board by the Chief Scientific & Sustainability Officer from the KFO, who has been heavily involved with many of the processes outlined above. It is hoped that his input will help the project team to properly engage with the seafood industry from an early stage of the project. It is important that the future MPA DMAP process is linked with the MPA LIFE Ireland project and that the emphasis on stakeholder involvement in that project is carried through into the MAP DMAP process so that a repeat of the mistakes made in the SC-DMAP process is avoided.

Additionally, it is also positive report that the fishing industry has had recent and constructive engagement with the ENGO, Fair Seas on the MPA process. While there are obvious differences between conservation and industry objectives when it comes to the designation of MPAs, there is an emerging consensus of the need for stakeholder inclusivity and a proportionate approach which also allows for industry to continue to operate in these areas while achieving environmental goals.

Finally, it is also important to acknowledge the work of the Seafood-ORE Working Group. While, not formally involved in the MPA process, this Working Group has provided a forum to discuss and develop processes for stakeholder engagement as well as on conflict resolution and measures to avoid, minimise and mitigate impacts. Some of these elements will provide useful guidance in developing the MPA network in the future in a proportionate and transparent way.

Conclusions

Amongst the seafood industry there is a recognition of the value of MPAs (supported by science). The industry wants to work constructively with other stakeholders towards their development in

a collaborative and constructive way. However, there is clear evidence that in recent processes the industry has been largely disregarded. The SIA stress the need for transparency and trade-offs to be decided openly and discussed by relevant stakeholders. In this regard, the fishing industry must be a main part of the process from day 1 and the process should in effect be the opposite of the SAC process that is neither transparent nor participatory. The SIA emphasises the importance of a balanced assessment to MPAs that account for both economic resilience and environmental sustainability.

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