

Written Ministerial Statement

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Culture, Arts and Leisure

Proposals to suspend commercial eel fishing in Europe

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Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): I am writing to update Members on proposals to amend the EC Eel Regulations that could potentially result in the suspension of commercial eel fishing across Europe, including the eel fishery on Lough Neagh. This is to be discussed at a meeting of the European Parliament Fisheries Committee today.

The European eel stock has been in rapid decline since around 1980 and the European Commission introduced the Eel Conservation Regulation in 2007 requiring the establishment of National Eel Management Plans (EMP). The Plans must demonstrate, among other issues that at least 40% of adult eels from each river basin are escaping to spawn. The Lough Neagh Bann catchment area is the only area in the North where eel fishing is permitted.

As you will be aware, Lough Neagh is the largest commercial wild eel fishery in Europe and is unique in that there is no other eel fishery in Europe similarly structured and managed. The fishery is run by the Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative Society which has the rights to the eel fishing in the Lough and administers its own regulations, in addition to National and European imposed regulations, to ensure standards and sustainable fishing practices.

The Society has successfully balanced commercial activity with the effective conservation and management of the fishery over the past 40 years aimed at ensuring the sustainability of eel stocks. Scientific advice from the Agri Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) confirms that

Eel stock in the Lough Neagh/Bann basin are currently meeting its conservation targets. The vast majority of the eel catch is exported and it is estimated that the livelihoods of some 300 families in the area are dependent on the fishery with a value to the local economy in excess of £3m per annum. The EU has also recognised the regional importance of the eel and it enjoys protected geographical indication status.

I know that Members will share my concerns about the Commission's current eel measures regarding the proposal to automatically suspend fishing for eels across the EU. This would have a significant impact on the sustainability of the Lough Neagh eel fishery and the wider local economy within the catchment. While recognising the importance of conserving eel stocks, I am not prepared to consider any future proposals for the recovery of EU eels stocks without independent scientific evidence, an appropriate equality impact assessment in accordance with Section 75 of the NI Act 1998, consultation with all stakeholder interests and appropriate compensation for fishermen affected during any proposed suspension.

I am also firmly of the view that these proposals should be rejected and I have written to the Minister responsible for Fisheries in the Department of Environment Fisheries and Rural Affairs to express my concerns and to ensure that these views are conveyed to the European Parliament Fisheries Committee.

I am meeting with a delegation from the Lough Neagh Eel Fisheries Co-operative and other stakeholders this week and will also be meeting Michelle O'Neill, Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development in view of her interest in the matter.

I will keep Members updated on developments.