



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and
Rural Affairs

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Fisheries Bill:
Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers' Organisation and
Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation

5 March 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Declan McAleer (Chairperson)
Mr Philip McGuigan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Clare Bailey
Mr John Blair
Mr Maurice Bradley
Mr William Irwin

Witnesses:

Mr Alan McCulla	Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers' Organisation
Mr Harry Wick	Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): I welcome Alan McCulla, the chief executive of the Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation (ANIFPO) and Harry Wick, chief executive of the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation (NIFPO). Perhaps you could take 10 minutes to brief the Committee, after which we will ask some questions.

Mr Alan McCulla (Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers' Organisation): Mr Chairman, members, thank you very much for the invitation to give evidence on the UK Fisheries Bill.

I will give some background, Chair. I go back to 1973, when, as we would describe it, there was some clever manoeuvring by the then European Economic Community (EEC) member states around the UK's entry terms to the EEC, which has given those member states a huge advantage for the last 40 years over fishermen in Northern Ireland. Essentially, to this day, it provides EU fishing fleets with an exploitative relationship over UK and Northern Ireland fishermen, which has come back to haunt the present in a powerful way. That relationship was christened all those years ago with the common fisheries policy. The British Government, at the time, knew what they were doing but considered fishing expendable in order to achieve other national objectives.

The statistics arising from that decision are now familiar. The UK is allowed to catch about 40% of the fisheries resources in its own waters, whilst other countries catch 60%. The EU fleets fish around six times as much in UK waters as the UK fishes in EU waters. There has been nothing balanced, fair or reciprocal about these arrangements, especially compared to the arrangements of other coastal states outside the common fisheries policy area.

We believe that Brexit will present a unique opportunity for the UK's fishing industry and that, as an independent coastal state, we will control access to the UK and Northern Ireland waters and ensure that local fishermen get a fair deal on quotas. We will revive coastal communities, which will bring immediate and long-term opportunities. We will grow the industry's role as world leaders in sustainable fisheries management.

At the end of the transition period, the UK will become an independent coastal state. In the Fisheries Bill, we welcome powers for the UK to set its own quotas and control access over who may fish in UK waters, and under what conditions. Being an independent coastal state will allow greater representation amongst all the Administrations, including the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Bill correctly promotes sustainable fisheries management. We welcome the Government's commitment to using science, data and information to inform decisions on fisheries management. We welcome the Bill's commitment to an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management. The Bill, of course, will provide much more flexibility than the common fisheries policy. We welcome the introduction of the new climate change objective in the Bill. The Bill will establish a duty to create fisheries management plans to fish at sustainable limits for all stocks. Again, as an industry we welcome that. The Bill seeks to strengthen and to demonstrate the Government's plan for co-management. That is management between fisheries managers in the Departments, the fisheries industry and, of course, stakeholders. The Bill is right to forecast an important role for secondary legislation, and that is where, in future, the Northern Ireland Assembly will come into its own. We welcome the Bill's intent to grant equal access rights to the UK fleets fishing anywhere in UK waters. The Bill sets ambitious, but realistic, measures to minimise discards. The Government must not back down on their promises to UK fishermen. It is vital that parliamentarians, including those in the Assembly, maintain pressure on the Government to ensure that the potential of Brexit for UK and Northern Ireland fishermen is not traded away as part of a deal for another industry. The Prime Minister has delivered encouraging words. In a speech last month, he set out plans for the trade negotiations with Brussels, saying that fisheries negotiations:

"must reflect the fact that the UK will be an independent coastal state at the end of this year 2020, controlling our own waters."

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, when launching the Fisheries Bill, said:

"This new bill takes back control of our waters, enabling the UK to create a sustainable, profitable fishing industry for our coastal communities, while securing the long term health of British fisheries."

Finally, we welcome the Committee's and the Assembly's commitment to a sustainable and economically viable fishing industry in Northern Ireland by contributing to a vital legislative framework that supports all sectors of the industry. The industry that we represent has proven to be resilient in the face of significant challenges from the EU. We are not blasé about the work that lies ahead, but we are confident about the prospects for our industry and the contribution that it can make to the Northern Ireland economy.

Mr Harry Wick (Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation): Thank you for the invitation, Chair. I will not repeat what Alan has said, because that summation is right on the money and I fully endorse his comments. The only thing that I will add in consideration of the Bill is that I consider it a picture frame or a framework. Whilst it does not necessarily directly address the issues that concern the Northern Ireland fishing industry, it certainly gives us a platform from which to address the industry in future and in secondary legislation.

However, there are one or two caveats. The Bill is by no means final, so we do not know what the picture will look like. It will be very difficult, and there are challenges, certainly, in trying to ascertain or predict what issues we might face further down the line. It also has to be considered, and this is being formed in the context of negotiations between the UK and EU, what our future relationship looks like. So, we have an idea of where we want the picture frame to sit, and we have a clearer image of how that picture will look. However, there is some uncertainty around areas that we may miss that may not be included in the picture.

Mr McGuigan: Thank you. You caught me on the hop there. Thank you very much for your interesting presentation. Given Boris Johnson's tendency to go back on his word and change his deals, I am not

sure that I would be confident that he, or the Conservative Government, will maintain any promise that they have given, but time will tell.

I have a number of questions. We have been meeting different people. We met officials and others today, so some of these questions will be repetitive, but it is always good to get the industry's point of view. First, with regards to the opportunities that additional quotas would offer the industry — we asked this of the officials — will the industry be able to cope with additional quotas? Is it ready and prepared to catch more fish in the new scenario?

Secondly, it would be useful to get an industry's point of view on the potential impacts. I also asked the officials earlier about this. There are positives about new quotas and fairer fishing, but there are also a lot of potential negatives. One of those is a new immigration policy that may have an impact on your ability to do what you like to do.

Thirdly, what is your analysis of the impact that potential checks will have on the produce, particularly in the processing industry, and also potential tariffs?

You welcomed the climate change objectives. From the industry's point of view, can you give us a bit more detail about how you see the climate change aspects of the Bill impacting on the fishing industry?

We had a discussion this morning about the pronunciation of the voisinage protocol. Finally, what are your thoughts on the voisinage protocol?

Mr McCulla: Thank you very much, Mr McGuigan. There are quite a few questions there.

Mr McGuigan: Sorry.

Mr McCulla: I beg the Chair's patience as we answer them. On the quota use, the answer is a direct yes. As far as we are concerned, the very first thing that should happen, come 1 January next year, is the end of a discriminatory regime called the Hague Preference. The Hague Preference was built into the common fisheries policy in 1983. It was designed to protect communities around the northern part of these islands that were particularly dependent on fishing.

When it was actually triggered in 1990 and 1991, we in Northern Ireland quickly found that this mechanism that was supposed to protect us actually discriminated against us. I do not want to recite all the examples, Mr McGuigan, but the one example that stands out for me is cod, which has become a rather iconic fish over the years. Since 1991, Northern Ireland fishermen have lost something like £50 million worth of cod that we have had to surrender to our colleagues in the Republic of Ireland because of the Hague Preference. That will end. It has to end, because we are out of the EU and no longer part of the common fisheries policy. Will that fish be caught come January 1 next year and during 2021? Of course it will.

Of course we need to build capacity into the industry, and that includes adequate infrastructure at the coast. As we have always said, the strapline is "give us the tools, and we will deliver", and we will deliver for the Northern Ireland economy.

On the negatives, Mr McGuigan, the immigration policy has been a big problem for us over many years. The fishing industry has, unfortunately, had negative publicity that has driven away people who would traditionally have sought employment on fishing vessels. It is combined with the much bigger issue of social change in Northern Ireland, and elsewhere, about career progression. The jury is still out amongst the fishing industry on the immigration policy that was announced in London last week. We still have a big issue in the UK about allowing specialised and skilled crew from non-UK countries to come inside the 12-mile limit. We believe that the immigration policy at least gives us focus and direction about where to direct the next stage of the campaign to address that issue.

I will hand over to Harry on the checks in the protocol. Clearly, we are very interested in how the protocol will work. The Joint Committee will have a lot of work to do. I understand that some of the discussions in Brussels this week are using this term, "talks about talks" about what the Joint Committee will be allowed to do. There are all sorts of anomalies that we need to be very careful about. Our understanding of one of them is that, come 1 January 2021, fishing vessels based in Northern Ireland will be British-registered ships largely fishing in British waters, landing into a part of

the United Kingdom, but it may be that when they land into this part of the United Kingdom, because it is British fish, it has been suggested that they may have to pay tariffs.

We are being told, and given some comfort, that this was not actually the intention. I hope that it is not the intention. It is the job of the Joint Committee to iron that out, and we look forward to urgent clarification on that, amongst other points.

Mr Wick: I will add to one or two of the points that Alan has raised. On the issue of quotas, because the fishing industry is managed sustainably and in accordance with the best scientific advice, we are accustomed to pretty huge swings in the amounts of fish of any particular species that you can catch in any one year. Some years it can swing by as much as 70%. However, in our most economically important species, nephrops, we have seen a 40% decline in the past two years.

The catch, and our capacity to capitalise on a new influx of quota, is absolutely there, and we look forward to the opportunity of doing that.

With respect to immigration, I am probably a little more pessimistic than Alan. I see immigration policy, as stated by the UK Government, as wholly inappropriate for the majority of Northern Ireland and for the vast majority of the fishing industry. There is no clear route for us to bring in individuals from around the world, on whom we now rely. There are some options for us to explore in gaining a route, but we have been down this road with the Government for quite some time now, and none of our options in the past has proved successful. Therefore I am very wary of being given false encouragement in that department by the UK Government, and I would very much like to see the Northern Irish Government do whatever they can to bring the matter into their own hands, though I appreciate that is legislatively very difficult .

There is a real opportunity for Northern Ireland in the protocol, but it is entirely dependent upon the status of the broader trade agreement with Europe. If we have a free trade agreement, the advantages offered by the Northern Ireland protocol fade away, and we will not have any kind of advantage. If there are trade tariffs as a result of agreement between the UK and the EU, and Northern Ireland gets to the point where, through the protocol, it is exempt from those tariffs, there are opportunities to make Northern Ireland a hub for the fishing industry in the UK and to increase the business that happens here. However, there are risks to achieving that. The Scottish industry has a very powerful lobby, and it certainly would not like to see that. Big interests in England would not like to see it either. Our colleagues in the Republic of Ireland would not like it. If Northern Ireland is to have an advantage, we need to fight our corner very hard.

Climate change is an area where I feel the fishing industry's achievements are undersung. We welcome climate change being brought onto the agenda for the fishing industry and in broader society. It is important to remember, however, that the fishing industry has the lowest carbon footprint of any of the proteins, and that includes tofu, corn, beef, chicken and lamb. We are already ahead of the game in that regard. We are constantly driving for efficiency improvements that improve the bottom line for our members, but, because we burn fuel, also have advantages for the climate.

Look at some of the issues that we already address. They include carbon sequestration. Shellfish and scallop shells are 12% carbon. If you look at what the UK shellfish industry catches, in carbon sequestration, it is the equivalent of 1.1 million trees. It is even better than a tree. You can find examples of shells in core samples that are 8,000 years old. That carbon is sequestered through fishing and, when it goes to landfill, it is sequestered for a very long time indeed. By comparison, the benefits of trees last for only 25 years and then, after about 80 years, they drop off.

There are other initiatives in the industry. We are investigating the use of carapace nephrop shells to replace microplastics. You could also use nephrops by-products as a substitute for plastic in food wrapping. It is completely biodegradable and has anti-microbial properties. We in the fishing industry get the issues of the environment and climate change very strongly. We welcome any legislative support that helps us to achieve the goals that we all share in this regard.

Do you want to discuss voisinage now, Alan?

Mr McCulla: I am happy to do that. I will finish off the point on climate change, Mr McGuigan. Hopefully, the Chair has received a letter from me inviting the Committee down to the coast. I hope that the Committee can accept that invitation soon. We look forward to your coming to see, in real action, what Harry has just described.

With regard to sustainable fisheries and climate change, nobody is more interested in the sustainability of fish stocks than fishermen. After all, if we have no fish stocks, we have no fishing industry. That is the bottom line. Harry comes to the Assembly this afternoon from a meeting in the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) in New Forge Lane, where we discussed the next phase. It is an industry-led project that includes partners in AFBI and the Department. Some years ago, it was formed to look at gear trials and selective fisheries, etc. The discussion this morning was about moving that on to the next stage and, as we start to look at management measures for marine-protected areas, which, undoubtedly, will be coming to the Committee in the years ahead, what we will actually do to address those areas as well.

Voisinage was a serious issue, Mr McGuigan. It was a matter of sincere regret, in October 2016, that the High Court in Dublin advised us that the voisinage agreement — the exchange of letters in 1965 — contravened the Irish constitution. Of course, we encouraged Ministers in the Republic and our own people to seek urgent resolution to that. Time went by, but, clearly, this time 12 twelve months ago, it was resolved. Do we want to see a return to a hard border down this side of the Irish Sea? Of course not.

We need to put things into perspective. Depending on the fishery, on the stock and on the port, of course there is a significant reliance on fishing in Irish waters, but, to give the Committee some indication of where the priorities lie, Northern Ireland's fleet overall takes about 80% of its catch from UK waters, so that leaves 20% that comes from Irish waters. On the other hand, if you look at some of the stocks that Ireland has an interest in, such as mackerel and pelagic stock — its most valuable stock — you see that 70% of it is taken from UK waters. Nephrops, or langoustine, is its second-most valuable stock: 40% of that is taken from UK waters. Clearly, it is in everybody's interest that we find an equitable and fair deal that addresses the discrimination and imbalances that have been imposed on Northern Ireland's fishermen for nearly 50 years.

Mr Irwin: You are very welcome. It is good to see a wee bit of optimism.

Mr McCulla: Absolutely.

Mr Irwin: I am an optimist. Even with all the doom and gloom about the farming and agricultural sector, farmers are still positive, believe it or not. They are very positive.

There has been mention of the restraints that the fishing industry is under with regard to cod. I presume that that will change. I have always thought that discarding fish that have been caught and thrown back into the sea is disgraceful. Will that change? Will the industry still have to adhere to those rules?

Mr McCulla: Mr Irwin, thanks very much for your questions. With regard to cod, in 2000 the Irish Sea was the first European waters to be subjected to cod-recovery measures — measures that continue to this day. I suppose that the question is this: have they been successful? That can only be measured by the best available science. In 2000, the total allowable catch (TAC) that was set for cod in the Irish Sea was 2,100 tons, which represented a significant reduction compared with historic figures. Twenty years later, the TAC for the same stock is 257 tons. We will leave it to you, Mr Irwin, and members, to judge whether those measures have been a success. Clearly, I would say that they have not.

One of the reasons that they have not is the rigidity of the common fisheries policy. With leaving that policy and developing bespoke management tools for the Irish Sea and the other waters around these islands, we can be more flexible in our approach. We can look at annual negotiations and decide what are the best tools that can be deployed in order to ensure that we can rebuild the cod stock and sustain other stocks. It is worth pointing out — we were reminded of this at the meeting this morning — that the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), annually assesses fish stocks in all European waters. Over the past few months, it has said that the recovery — this word "recovery" — of cod stock is less to do with fishing pressure and more to do with other environmental factors. ICES told us that the management tools that are already in place should have worked some years ago. However, climatic change and issues that are, in many ways, beyond our control stymied the recovery of some of these stocks.

On the issue of discards, no fisherman in their right mind wants to throw valuable protein — valuable food — over the side of a trawler, especially when much of the world is going hungry. The discard plan that became European law was a UK idea supported by Ireland. Regrettably, as it was adopted by the EU, it is a policy that needs to be urgently reviewed, and, of course, we are relieved that, in the draft

UK Fisheries Bill, there is a maintenance of the discard plan, but it provides the flexibility to allow us to develop a system that is more flexible and that ultimately will work and achieve the desired outcome.

Mr Irwin: Am I right in saying that there were different scientific opinions on the recovery of cod stocks?

Mr McCulla: Look at the advice over the past few years. The total allowable catch for cod in the Irish Sea was cut by 68% this year, which was not good news. When senior fishery scientists in the UK admit that the advice published by ICES and the models used to power that advice are not fit for purpose, there is clearly something wrong in the system. There is general agreement — hopefully, Harry can say more about this than me — across the board in the scientific community and certainly in the industry that we need a focus here and a lot of hard work to address this.

Mr Wick: We had a false dawn with cod recovery. An awful lot depends on the temperature of the water over the winter. If it is not cold enough, the cod do not reproduce to the same extent. We have experienced warmer sea temperatures over the years and a reduction in cod reproduction. However, a couple of years ago, a series of colder winters gave us a bit of a false dawn in terms of recruitment into the stock. That positive blip has now passed through, all those fish are gone and we are back to where we were before, where the warmer winters have taken their effect on the reproduction of cod.

Two different kinds of discarding need to be addressed. The first is the unavoidable catch of juvenile fish, which are the fish that are too small for market, fish that fishermen do not want to catch and fish that everyone agrees should go back until they have a chance to become adults and reproduce. We already take a number of measures to avoid catching juvenile fish. We have been engaged in a gear trials project for a number of years to try to come up with different methods that allow these fish to escape from our gear before they are caught, and we are seeing some success in that field. Everyone can agree that, over the years, we have made significant progress.

The other kind of fish discarding is high grading. If I have x amount of quota to catch, I go to sea, catch a species of fish and there will be a range of market values. The bad practice in the bad old days was to ditch the lower-value fish, fish again and retain only the high-value fish. We absolutely need to stop that practice. A landing obligation or discard ban should be focused on preventing that. Responsible fishermen do not engage in that practice. It is certainly more a problem of the past than of the present, because there is much less tolerance in the fishing community now for that kind of practice than there was in years gone by.

Industry and science are working in collaboration to tackle the juvenile fish issue without the need for excessive legislation. The issue that I have with the current landing obligation is that, in some quarters, a successful landing obligation is seen as mountains of juvenile fish lying dead on the quayside. That is not what people should be looking for. People should be looking for changes in behaviour, and that is what the Northern Ireland fleet is starting to exhibit. Fishermen now talk to each other at sea and tell each other, when they come across small whiting or juvenile whitefish in particular areas, that they need to move on. We are starting to see those changes in practice and that is encouraging. I agree with Alan that the current landing obligation is not fit for purpose and needs to be reviewed. I also agree that there is a necessity for some type of landing obligation to exist.

Mr Irwin: OK. Thank you.

Mr McCulla: If I may, Mr Chairman, I want to finish my remarks on the discards, the landing obligation and the work that has been done in Northern Ireland for some years. Sometimes, we in Northern Ireland are very poor at promoting the positives and the good work that has been done. It is not very often that people will hear me refer to or quote a former European Maritime Commissioner in a good news story, but I remember sitting in Brussels a few years ago and he said, in front of an audience, that he had heard stories from all over Europe about what fishermen are doing to improve their gear, to reduce discards and to work towards sustainability. He singled out Northern Ireland and said, "In Northern Ireland, you guys do not just talk about it; you deliver it". That is a positive headline to take away.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Alan and Harry, I want to pick up on something. When you look at the quota management rules, do you feel that we will get our fair share of the quota allocation under the new arrangements? What would happen if there were a dispute between the other regions on quota allocations?

Mr McCulla: Yes. When you go around the coast and ask fishermen why they voted to leave in 2016, they will come up with different answers, Mr Chairman, but, certainly, a fairer share of the available quotas would be the headline. There are extreme examples, not on our doorstep, but in the English Channel. The name says it all. It is the "English Channel", yet England, or the UK, gets 9% of the cod in that area and France gets 80%. There are headline issues like that.

Closer to home, I mentioned the hake preference, which also applies to whiting and plaice. We assume that that mechanism will fall and that the discrimination that it automatically puts in place, and has put in place since 1990, will go and we will get a fairer share back right away. However, the reality is that something like 70% to 75% of the Irish Sea is what some people call British waters. That means that around 25% will remain European waters. The easy thing would be to say that we will demand 75% of all the fish stocks in the Irish Sea, but we share those fish stocks with other member states and will continue to share them with Ireland and the rest of the EU in the future. They need to be managed jointly and with care.

Nevertheless, the example that I have in front of me is haddock, which has become a very important stock locally over the past number of years. Northern Ireland fishermen currently get a share of about 48% of the entire haddock quota that is allocated in the Irish Sea. Some papers refer to it as "zonal management", which is the phrase that will be used to distribute quota, and we should get around 80% of the TAC. We are not reinventing the wheel; this has been done before. Of course, one reference that people point to is the agreement between the EU and the kingdom of Norway, which dates back to 1980. Then, there was a serious discussion between the EU side and the Norwegian side on how fish stocks, particularly in the North Sea, should be allocated, and the zonal attachment theory was rolled out again and accepted by the EU side. In addition to that being accepted, the EU agreed that there would be a rebalancing of fishing efforts in each other's waters. In other words, the EU would have to give something up.

That is the new equilibrium that we are talking about. The UK will become an independent coastal state. As such, we will be subject to existing international law, which allows the UK, including Northern Ireland, to claim back a fair share of the natural resources inside the UK's exclusive economic zone.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): We heard earlier that over 80% of our fish is exported beyond the North. Do you have any assessment of the tariffs or delays or the impact of not being accessible might have on the industry should we end up in a no-deal situation?

Mr Wick: I will address your first issue about quotas. I understood your question as referring to the allocation of quota within the UK.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Yes.

Mr Wick: We absolutely must avoid the Brexit dividend, as it is informally known, being allocated according to the territorial waters of each of the devolved Administrations. The Northern Ireland zone is very small comparatively, and it does not reflect the activity of the Northern Ireland fleet. Dividing it up according to square miles of territorial water would be pretty catastrophic for us in comparison with what we could have through other methods. My organisation would endorse two methods. The first is allocation along existing fixed-quota allocation (FQA) lines. Let us say that a fisherman owns 2% of the particular quota for a species in an area. He would also expect 2% of any Brexit dividend that came along. Every quota holder gets his share of what is brought in to the pool by virtue of the size of the quota that he already possesses. Of course, we would have to consider the non-sector, and I would expect that initial allocation to be top-sliced pro rata for the vessels that do not use FQAs.

The second method that I would endorse — it is the opinion of my organisation — so that no fisherman or fisherwoman in the UK would be worse off after Brexit, is that quota is divided equally among fishing vessel licence holders and then allocated to organisations like mine and Alan's to manage on behalf of our members. We are the ones who sit closest to it and can see where the most pressing needs for extra quota are and where the most benefit can be gained.

Unlike the rest of the UK, we have the advantage of being a small country, so we work very closely with the non-sector boats. In the past, both of our organisations have worked to support the non-sector by giving up some of our quota to it so that it can keep those boats fishing. As a result, there is an awful lot less dissent in Northern Ireland about how quotas should be allocated than in other areas of the United Kingdom.

You will have to remind me of your second question.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): The second question was about the fact that we export over 80% of our fish. Do you have any assessment of the impact on the industry here if we did not have a UK-EU deal on fisheries?

Mr Wick: I would expect to be protected by the Northern Ireland protocol if there was no deal, but, as I mentioned earlier, the Northern Ireland protocol is not a given; it will have to be fought for if it is to apply to the fishing industry as well. I am fairly confident that the demand for Northern Ireland's products will not go away. It is unrivalled in Europe in terms of exports from other parts of the world. That is evidenced by the fact that, recently, a competitor to our langoustine called the Argentinian red came in to the Spanish and French markets. It saw a real peak because it is a cheaper product, but, in recent months, our product has started to rise to the fore again on the basis that it is superior. When selling a high-end product and real demand for it is there, I would certainly expect consumers in France and Spain to be very dissatisfied with a logistics chain that placed artificial constraints on their being able to get that product. My organisation does not export. Alan's does, so he is a better authority in this area than I am.

Mr McCulla: Apologies, Chair, for misunderstanding your question about the quota distribution, but section 9 of the written evidence that I supplied to the Committee deals with that.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): That is what I was drawing out.

Mr McCulla: That echoes what Harry said on that issue.

We are familiar with trade tariffs. Member vessels owned and operated from Northern Ireland are already landing their produce into third countries, most notably Norway. We are used to the additional documentation and the tariff issues there. Nevertheless, we are clearly very reluctant to see that expanded across the rest of the fleet, but we are ready for it. As Harry said, we have the Northern Ireland protocol in place. My understanding is that it protects us from a no-deal situation. Nevertheless, many details are still to be worked out in that. I referred to one, namely that, as UK-registered trawlers, the entire fishing fleet in Northern Ireland was being advised that, when landing a catch here at home, it might be subject to tariffs. That is a peculiarity that the joint committee needs to overcome. The protocol suggests that any product that is brought east-west — from GB into Northern Ireland — could be subject to tariffs as well. That seems an absurdity when Northern Ireland boats that are possibly landing in England or Scotland are bringing their product home for processing, and that is all sent back to the GB market. I get from discussions that, when the protocol was being signed off, details like this were clearly not taken into consideration, and we expect that, going forward, it will be ironed out. Trading into the Republic of Ireland and the product then crossing the land bridge to go back into Europe is another detail that still needs to be ironed out.

There are still issues, but you are quite right: probably a lot more than 80% of the seafood that is landed in Northern Ireland is exported beyond these six counties. Most of it goes into the GB market, but a sizeable proportion still goes into the EU market. As an exporter, the best example I can give is that, in May every year, the world's biggest seafood show is held in Brussels. In 2016, before the referendum, we went round some of our customers at the show and asked the very simple question, "If the UK votes Leave, will you still be my friend and still buy seafood from Northern Ireland?". People tended to look at me, somewhat bemused, and ask "Why would we not buy it? If the quality is good and the price is right, we will buy it". Business will find a way to address these challenges.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): In the context of us getting additional quota for here, are you confident that our fleet and infrastructure will be sufficient to absorb that?

Mr McCulla: The fleet and the industry have contracted. There is a difference in meaning between the words "contract" and "decline". The fishing industry here has not declined. Moving forward, there is clearly much work to be done. Investment is needed in the fleet and in the infrastructure. Historically, Members of the Assembly have asked the question: what is the value of the seafood sector to Northern Ireland? The answer that is usually wheeled out is that about £25 million worth of fish is landed annually into Northern Ireland. If the question is changed slightly and is about the value of seafood caught by the Northern Ireland fleet and landed any place, the number shoots up from about £25 million to £70 million. We want to bring more of that £70 million back to Northern Ireland, and that is before we even start talking about what the windfall from Brexit might be. Unfortunately, our infrastructure, primarily along the County Down coast, does not currently cater for bringing that extra product home. That is why there are several ideas, including the one about a new outer harbour at

Kilkeel, to provide the infrastructure so that we can bring that seafood home to create employment, to pay taxes and to help our economy.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): From a financial point of view, are you concerned that we are out of the European maritime and fisheries fund (EMFF) and there is no clear indication from the British Treasury about funding, support or a replacement for that?

Mr McCulla: We are pretty confident that there will be a replacement, but, of course, we do not know what shape that will be yet. I want to make a point: fishermen have never benefited in the way that farmers have from the common agricultural policy; there is no single fish payment. Yes, there has been help, as you rightly said, Chairman, through the EMFF and its predecessors, but no fisherman wants to go to government with their hand out looking for help. We are very optimistic about the future of the industry. I say it again: give us the tools and we can make the industry work without subsidies. We are in a place where we are competing with our colleagues in Ireland and other parts of the EU, and we know that they will get assistance to help them to address the challenge of the UK leaving the club. Likewise, in that sense, we will need assistance to help us to refocus and prepare for the opportunities that lie ahead.

Mr Wick: That assistance is very important. A regulation in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea states that, if a nation cannot capitalise on its fish stocks, it is obliged to allow other countries to take advantage of that opportunity. We do not want to be in that position. We would certainly welcome any help, from any source, that would allow our fleet to be in a position in which we can capitalise on the extra opportunity via infrastructure investments and various other forms of assistance for individual businesses.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you very much for your interesting presentation. You mentioned cod. I am searching through my papers. Cod had gone and has come back. All my notes on it have gone. When reading the information, I recall noting that no reliable data for cod is available. Is that correct?

Mr Wick: Having spoken to the scientists this morning on that very issue, I would say that the science is there. It is the mechanism through which that science is assessed that is inadequate. We conduct cod surveys annually — one is ongoing — and have a fishing boat that is dedicated to finding cod and recording its presence. We also have proposals afoot to carry out acoustic surveys in the future. Fishing vessel sonars are now so advanced that you can attach one to a boat and it will tell you what species of fish you are looking at. We can turn the vessels that target haddock, which is very closely related to cod, into survey vessels for cod as well as they go about their normal business.

Yes, there could be improvements. The current science is adequate. It could be better, but it is good enough for the job. What is not good enough for the job are the criteria on which that science is assessed.

Mr McCulla: I will add to that, Mr Bradley, that it is a bit like the problem that you just experienced with your computer: sometimes you put information in and nothing comes back out. There is lots of data out there, but we have been told by our fisheries scientists that the advice is only as good as the information that is input in the first place. Especially in Northern Ireland and the Irish Sea, we have been caught in a situation for the last 20 years in which we have been discouraging fishermen from catching cod. We are telling them, "Please, do not catch any cod, because we need to do all that we can to make that stock recover". Information is input into the computer every year that shows fewer and fewer cod being caught, and the computer program interprets that as there being fewer and fewer cod in the sea to start with. Hence, the comments that I referred to earlier from senior fisheries scientists in the UK, who have said that this assessment and this model are not fit for purpose and need to be overhauled.

(The Deputy Chairperson [Mr McGuigan] in the Chair)

Mr M Bradley: Yes. Quotas have yet to be established, and the Bill has yet to be finalised. Using that scenario, do you see a situation in which vessels registered in the UK but berthed outside the UK will be able to fish in UK waters?

Mr McCulla: Those are what the industry calls flagships. They are UK-flagged but probably owned by people in other parts of the European Union. That is a very interesting subject. It is already covered by what is known in the industry as the economic link, whereby various mechanisms make sure that value from what is UK quota is returned to the UK. That has been in operation for some years. Whether it has been good enough is debatable. Certainly, my understanding is that, going forward, the UK will, at the very least, look to reinforce that economic link to make sure that more of the UK quota that is caught contributes to the UK economy.

Again, Mr Bradley, it feeds into the lack of infrastructure. We have vessels that are owned and operated from Northern Ireland that are simply too big to use the fisheries infrastructure that we have here. That is one of the reasons that fishermen take that seafood and land it in other parts of Europe. By improving the infrastructure, we provide the facilities so that those vessels can bring their seafood home to Northern Ireland, which is also good for the economy. It creates jobs in the coastal communities and builds on the tools that the Fisheries Bill will, hopefully, provide for us.

Mr M Bradley: That is very apt. At an earlier presentation, we were told about a capital grant application for the three harbours in County Down, so maybe the infrastructure will improve in time for Brexit.

Mr McCulla: Good.

Mr Wick: We would certainly welcome that.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): Maurice, were you asking about the issue that we talked about earlier in relation to fishermen from England in particular selling their quota? Was that the answer that you were given, or is that something totally different?

Mr M Bradley: That is not what I was asking.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): Or selling their licence?

Mr M Bradley: I know where you are coming from. A point raised earlier was that some of the Welsh fleet would sell their quotas elsewhere.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): Or sell their licence?

Mr M Bradley: It was something like that.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): Is that a problem?

Mr McCulla: At present, in Northern Ireland, no. I suspect that, if it was going to be a problem for us, we would have started to see some activity on that front already. That is not to say that it will not happen in the future. At the moment, there are probably as many licences on the market as there have been for the past few years. They are moving very slowly and not being bought by non-UK interests. I am not unduly concerned about that at present, but it is very difficult to predict the future in fisheries, and it is a risk that I would like to be closed off with a robust economic link before we get too much further down the line.

Ms Bailey: Thank you very much for your presentations. I apologise for being late and missing the start. It was good to hear that the UK Government have used fisheries as a bargaining tool before. Last week, we heard reports that they were a potential bargaining tool again. However, I cannot marry that with reports from Downing Street that there is no economic benefit to the UK in our fishing industry. That certainly causes alarm bells to ring for me.

Questions on quite a lot of what I wanted to know have been asked. The licensing process is being looked at. What are your thoughts on how licensing enforcement powers might be rolled out? How will that work? Do you see any potential problems with it? I am looking specifically at the domestic UK market. You identified that although the Scottish fishing industry is powerful and has a strong voice, the fishing industry in each region of the UK is very different. Given that we have a smaller coast, are there any potential developments that would allow us to have access to a competitive internal market and to licensing?

Mr Wick: There are two issues with the points that you raised. The first is that, if it becomes apparent that Northern Ireland vessels have a competitive advantage, the demand for Northern Irish licences from other parts of the UK will increase dramatically. If there is an advantage in being Northern Irish, many will want to try to be Northern Irish. The second issue, in terms of enforcement and vulnerabilities, is the Isle of Man waters. As it would stand post-Brexit, a non-UK vessel can access Isle of Man waters and fish there perfectly legally. That is fine when done legally, but there is a real vulnerability there for illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, in the form of misreporting. That is claiming that you caught fish in one area, whereas, in fact, you caught them elsewhere. That is a particular vulnerability that I want to see guarded against. I used to be a fisheries enforcement officer. It was my job to board fishing vessels around the UK to inspect their catch and compliance with EU legislation. My experience in that role gives me very little confidence that vessels from certain countries in Europe will behave honourably. I want to see that particular vulnerability closed off.

Mr McCulla: Deputy Chair, I want to respond to Ms Bailey's initial comment about the bargaining tool. That is a real concern, but there are a couple of points to be made about it. I hear all the time that fishing is unimportant and will be traded away, for example, for the interests of the City of London. That is like comparing apples and oranges. If fishing is considered by those commentators to be so unimportant in the UK, it is clearly not the case in the EU. If you watched 'The Andrew Marr Show' on Sunday morning, you would have seen the French European Minister saying that they would bring the talks on a trade agreement to a standstill if they did not get their way in the fishery deal. It is clearly very important to the European side. If it is so important to them, clearly there is something there that we need to look at and get back. That is the bottom line.

The reality is that the EU has trading deals right across the world. In no other trade deal does the EU demand access to the natural resources of the other country. Fish is a natural resource of the UK. The EU side argues that they should have the same access to our natural resources as they had when we were a member of the club. To me, there is something flawed with that argument.

I will carry on with Harry's point about trade quotas. This is one of the benefits of the UK Fisheries Bill, which we are here to give evidence on. That is the primary legislation going through Westminster. It gives the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly power to make secondary legislation. Within that, we can fine-tune fisheries policy to suit the specific circumstances here in Northern Ireland.

Look at quota management, and the trade in quota. There are particular issues in the English context that do not exist here. In the Fisheries Bill, there are enabling powers that would allow the Minister or the Secretary of State to do things that will suit the English industry but not the industry here. There is no suggestion that we are going to change the way things are done here. Nevertheless, the Bill gives you good people the opportunity to fine-tune fisheries policy to make it work specifically for Northern Ireland. That is a good thing.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): Thank you. Claire, are you finished?

Ms Bailey: Yes, thank you.

Mr Blair: I apologise for being late. I had to attend another meeting between 11.00 am and 2.00 pm. I am sorry that I missed the presentation.

I visited Kilkeel one day at the end of last August or in early September. Whatever proportion fishing is of the economy, I fully understand that any negative change would have a tremendous adverse effect on the town and its surrounding area, economically and socially.

My questions were about the bargaining chip, and they have already been touched on. I will ask you this directly: especially during the time that the local Assembly was not sitting, were you given any reassurance at all by the GB side that fisheries would not be used as a bargaining chip in an overall trade deal, against something like, for example, the financial services sector? I am keen to know whether Westminster has afforded you any such reassurance. Secondly, can you reassure me that you are convinced that turning one jurisdiction, if we call it that, into five — or six if you count the Isle of Man, and I assume we might have to do that — will not come with very serious challenges in relation to processes that might come forward, regulations and protocol and, therefore, have a knock-on effect on supply chains and, of course, shelf life?

Mr McCulla: Mr Blair, thanks for the questions. As I expected, they are very interesting and very straight questions, and they deserve answers.

The first one was about guarantees. No, I certainly have not been given a specific guarantee —

Mr Blair: Neither has anybody else.

Mr McCulla: — that the industry will not be traded away. All I can look at is the Prime Minister's words and the Secretary of State's words, and comment was passed earlier on what we can or cannot read into them. Nevertheless, the way I look at it is that, from a GB/UK political point of view, the fishing industry has not been in the headlines as much as it is now since, probably, the 1970s, when we had a cod war with Iceland. It has really become a totemic issue in terms of how successful or otherwise Brexit will be. The sense — it is only a sense, not a guarantee — that I have from politicians in London is that there is no way that they can afford to sell the UK fishing industry out. There will be a compromise, as there is in any negotiation, but that will be against the background that the UK is, under international law, an independent coastal state. We are not inventing the wheel here. There are other examples out there, and I have already referred to Norway, and our aspiration is that we end up in a space similar to what Norway successfully negotiated with the EEC or EU some 40 years ago.

There are challenges internally within the UK, or on these islands, with four plus two in terms of devolved Administrations and Crown dependencies, and that takes up some of our time. Harry has already referred to issues with the Isle of Man. Clearly, we will look towards Scotland. We are very dependent on fishing in waters around Scotland. Northern Ireland only has 5% of UK waters, so, traditionally, Northern Ireland fishermen have had to travel all around these islands to make a living. They have bought fishing opportunities in the North Sea and in the west of Scotland, and that nomadic nature of the industry over many years has caused us to be so resilient. Clearly, there is a concern that the Parliament in Edinburgh could bring in a rule that only navy-blue ships with a white stripe painted down the side of them can fish in Scottish waters. In Northern Ireland, we need to be very strong in resisting that kind of approach.

Mr Blair: Thanks for that. We know that, under current systems, some of the Northern Ireland fleet fishes in some of what will be EU territory. Will that present an economic or geographic challenge if you lose access to fish that will become part of EU waters? What impact would there be from that?

Mr Wick: That will form the crux of the negotiations. The industry in Northern Ireland is very clear on what it wants on access to EU waters, and we are very clear about what we are prepared to concede. There is plenty in that for a sensible negotiation that leads towards a fair outcome for all parties. I am not unduly concerned because, if the EU comes to negotiations in good faith, a workable solution can be reached. I am confident that we can get there for everyone's benefit.

We have had plenty of assurances, but no guarantees. We draw some comfort from the fact that fishing is so far up the flagpole now that it would be hugely embarrassing for any politician or Conservative Government to try to pull it down. We take some comfort from that, but, again, it is not guaranteed.

There is a threat for devolved Administrations, but there are also opportunities. For example, if we look at the environmental, sustainability and climate change opportunities that the Bill offers us, we certainly feel that far more can be achieved if we bring those in-house to Northern Ireland than there would be if we were to leave it to the UK Government to make the decisions. The UK Government have to try to promote a one-size-fits-all approach. That really does not work for fishermen or environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOS); it leaves everyone hugely frustrated with what they are trying to achieve in the environmental field. It does not meet the aim. When we do it in Northern Ireland — again, this is one of the advantages of being a small country — Alan and I and the appropriate people in the Department sit around the table with a chart and a ruler, and we draw boxes. We all agree, and we all leave equally happy or unhappy, but sensible compromises are reached, and effective measures can be achieved. By bringing the likes of environmental, sustainability and conservation issues into a devolved Administration, you are actually sometimes far better able to achieve a result.

Mr McCulla: Going back to the issue of guarantees, the fear of being sold out — if I can put it that way, Mr Blair — is not unique to the UK. It is an issue that applies across Europe's fishing fleets as well. Colleagues in the Republic of Ireland, for example, have the same fear from their side; they say, "Well, Alan, do you really think that the Dublin Government are going to sacrifice €1 billion-worth of

red-meat trade across to England for the sake of the fishing industry?". They have that fear, too. I have taken comfort over the past couple of weeks from what was contained in the draft Commission negotiating guidelines or mandate for the trade deal and then what became the final version. In the draft, when it came to the fisheries section, the language that was used implied that the EU side accepted that there was going to be change and a new equilibrium. Clearly, when member states got their hands on it, the language was reinforced. I suggest that the Commission and Mr Barnier, having been through a round of negotiations already, have been more realistic about what the final outcome will be. There will be change, which will be positive for us.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): I think that everybody who wanted to ask a question has asked it, so I thank Alan and Harry for coming along and making that presentation. It was very useful.

Mr McCulla: Thank you.

Mr Wick: Thank you.