

House of Commons Fisheries Bill

Committee Stage Briefing



September 2020

Labelling fish to ensure consumers can choose sustainable, British fish

An amendment is being proposed to ensure fish products are labelled with information on origin and catch method, to make sure British consumers can choose British fish and support the UK industry.

Negotiations between the EU and UK about fishing quota and tariffs are ongoing and we don't know how they will conclude. There are several things the UK Government can do now to help the UK industry regardless of the outcome of these negotiations. Guaranteeing that their fish will be identifiable to UK consumers is one of them.

Summary: labelling fish by species and catch method would support consumers, and the UK fishing industry:

- **Information at the point of purchase will enable consumers to make informed choices**, including expressing a preference for fish that has been caught in a sustainable way. The British public will benefit from certainty and clarity, and have increased confidence in the quality of the UK produce.
- **Protecting consumers (and British fishers) in post-Brexit trade deals.** Leaked documents from November 2019 revealed that the USA are hostile to food labelling, including front of pack nutrition labelling and foods with protected geographical status like Melton Mowbray pies or Cornish sardines. Setting labelling regulations in law will offer protection that UK seafood produce will be distinguishable in the future.
- **Support the aims of the Fisheries Bill** - The Bill aims to restore or maintain UK fish stocks at sustainable levels. Labelling fish will help ensure consumers can identify better choices, preferentially choose sustainably sourced fish, and offer an incentive for the industry to be more sustainable. We should create an environment to enable these softer, market-based incentives to flourish. Such methods are preferable to harsh enforcement and financial penalties

FAQs

Isn't seafood labelling required already?

Yes, in 2013 EU regulation 1379/2013 set out requirements for unprocessed and some forms of processed fish to be labelled or marked with:

- the exact species used (the scientific name and also the 'Commercial Designation', like cod or Dover Sole, which make more sense to the consumer than scientific species names)
- how this species has been produced, and
- where it originates from.

Why do we need this if labelling regulations will be transposed as per the EU Withdrawal Act 2018?

There are a few reasons why these labelling regulations should be put into the Fisheries Bill:

- The Internal Market Bill proposed by Government last week includes the power to override the EU Withdrawal Act 2018, which could include the labelling regulations
- There are powers in the Fishing Bill to change labelling rules
- The USA have expressed a particular interest in challenging the UK on labelling, including front-of-pack health labelling and Protected Geographical Origin labelling in a trade deal, so there's a risk they could insist on changing fish labelling regulations as well

Adding this into law would therefore give fish processing and retail businesses certainty about the packaging they need to produce going forward. It would also protect consumers from labelling regulations being watered down in the future. It would also send a clear signal to the fishing industry that if you use more sustainable fishing methods, and are a UK fisher, this information will be recognised on packaging for customers to see.

Which products or species could particularly benefit?

Salmon: Scottish farmed salmon is rated '3' by the Marine Conservation Society, considered OK to eat. Salmon imported from Chile, and farmed using methods with a more significant environmental impact has a lower rating of '4'. (<https://www.mcsuk.org/goodfishguide/search?name=salmon>)

Consumers require information on the country of origin and farming method to be able to choose between the two. Whether consumers make decisions on sustainability, or wanting to support the Scottish industry, this information would allow them to do that.

Plaice – some UK stocks of plaice are showing good signs of recovery and sustainable management, especially in the North Sea and English Channel. The 2007 recovery plan successfully brought fishing pressure down to sustainable levels, and the stock has since dramatically increased in size. Scientific advice from ICES now says that 166,000 tonnes can be caught sustainably. In the early 2000s, they recommended only around 60,000 tonnes (see Table 7 via this link). This labelling would differentiate fish caught in the North Sea, the English Channel, and the west coast of the UK including the North-west, from those caught in some parts of the Baltic sea which are at much lower level and considered 'Fish to Avoid'.

Hake – Hake is the 10th most valuable species for UK fishing – in 2018 landings were worth 25.4 million. It is landed mainly in Cornwall, Devon, and around the Scottish coast. Following stock decline in the 1980s, a recovery plan was introduced based on scientific advice and all stocks are now considered sustainable.

Catches have been able to increase – without depleting the stock.

This labelling regulation would allow consumers to differentiate UK hake and imported hake (mostly from South Africa) caught by Otter trawl and with a lower sustainability rating (see <https://www.mcsuk.org/goodfishguide/search?name=hake>)

Herring – Herring is the UK's 8th most valuable species (worth 45.3million in 2018). Most herring is exported at the moment but the UK market is growing and a bigger domestic market would be beneficial to the industry. Labelling would allow consumers to differentiate sustainable UK herring caught in in the east of the UK, including north Irish Sea, North Sea, eastern English Channel.

Wouldn't it make some UK species look bad, as it would identify them as unsustainable?

Unfortunately it could. Consumers could look at packaging, identify it as an unsustainably caught fish and choose not to buy it. This could include the following:

- UK cod from the North Sea: As it happens, most of the catches for this species are sold to foodservice (mainly restaurants), not retailers, so they wouldn't be covered by the labelling rules
- UK Nephrops (Langoustines) caught in certain areas: Again, most are exported to overseas markets
- UK Scallops: Again, most go to restaurants but the key challenge for scallops is the lack of data on stocks and catches. This rule won't solve that problem – data deficiency has been a problem for years, and must be solved by other means!

Ultimately, we must find a way to incentivise and recognise sustainable fishing. The solution is not to hide information from consumers, but improve the sustainability of fisheries so the industry will see the benefits of preferential consumer choice. Such 'soft' mechanisms like labelling are part of a range of measures to improve sustainability and would – we believe - be preferable to more punitive measures to deliver on the aims of this Bill.

Can't we just label with country of origin? Isn't that enough?

Country of origin labelling is not adequate information to determine the sustainability status of a fish, and therefore would not, by itself, allow consumers to make choices on this basis. It would not provide differentiation for more sustainable UK fishers, and therefore not provide the market benefits or incentives to improve.

Giving as much information to the consumer as possible allows the government to use consumers as a tool to help deliver the aims of this Bill. It comes at very low cost, and is happening already.

We would welcome the opportunity to talk to you about these issues and can provide briefings with more detail.

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