

**Advice from Natural England and JNCC**  
**North Sea and West of Scotland Haddock FMP**

**Advice issued 31 January 2024**



# Executive Summary

This advice forms part of a commission from Defra to Natural England and JNCC to provide nature conservation advice to support the development of English and UK Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs). The advice provides information on the risks arising from the fisheries contained in the North Sea and West of Scotland Haddock FMP to:

1. the designated features of Marine Protected Areas in English waters
2. UK Marine Strategy descriptors

Advice is presented separately for risks to MPA features and UK MS descriptors. Although the underlying impact pathways are very similar (e.g. bycatch poses a risk to both) and some species are both MPA features and are part of UK MS indicators, there are also important differences. The UK MS covers a much broader range of species than those protected by MPA designations, especially for cetaceans and fish. Also, the underlying objectives of the two legislative drivers are different and therefore there may be subtle but important differences to the ascription of risk and precaution.

The advice has scoped in otter trawls, pair trawls and seines as being the most relevant gear types for consideration. More specific information on gear types, location and fishing effort during subsequent FMP development may improve the ability to assess risk within this FMP and may alter some of the risk-ratings presented in future. The primary aim of the advice is to provide a pragmatic steer on where the greatest concerns lie for interactions between fishing gear types, the designated features of MPAs and UK MS descriptors.

## Risks relating to the designated features of MPAs in English waters

There are three primary ecological risks to MPA features arising from the gear types associated with haddock fisheries; removal of target species, removal of non-target species, and impacts on habitats. These impacts can affect the designated features of MPAs both inside and outside the boundaries of MPAs

Assessment of the impact of fishing activity occurring within MPAs in English waters has or will be carried out by the IFCAs or MMO. Therefore, it is assumed that appropriate management should either be in place or introduced soon to ensure any fishing within MPAs is compatible with the MPA's conservation objectives. **Therefore, the existing assessment and management pathways mitigate risks arising from fishing activity within English MPA boundaries, and no additional action is suggested for the FMP within English MPA site boundaries.** However, potential risks remain to designated mobile species when they move outside of the protection of the MPA.

The results of an initial consideration of the available evidence and expert opinion of the main risks arising from the North Sea and West of Scotland Haddock FMP to the designated features of English MPAs are summarised below.

**While the risk to the conservation status of designated mobile species from demersal trawls and seines is generally considered low, there are still significant gaps in the available evidence. As a result, the FMP risk rating has been upgraded to moderate, taking a precautionary approach into account. Gathering additional evidence has the potential to downgrade this risk in the future.**

## Risks relating to UK Marine Strategy descriptors

The UK Marine Strategy Regulations 2010 (SI 2010/1627) provide the policy framework for delivering marine environmental policy at the UK level and set out how the vision of clean,

healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse oceans and seas will be achieved. The Regulations place a number of duties on the Defra Secretary of State, including the need to define the characteristics of Good Environmental Status (GES) and in turn develop an associated Programme of Measures required to deliver GES. Good Environmental Status (GES) establishes a 'benchmark' for our seas which seeks to '*protect the marine environment, preventing its deterioration and restoring it where practical, while allowing sustainable use of marine resources*'. For each descriptor there are a number of practical targets and indicators that facilitate assessment of our delivery against each descriptor.

The UK Marine Strategy Regulations require management action to be taken to achieve or maintain GES. The Fisheries Act (2020) enables regulators to deliver on this ambition through the Ecosystem Objective, which states that fish and aquaculture activities should be managed using an ecosystem-based approach, which is, in-part, defined in the Act by the achievement of GES. Equally, the recently published Joint Fisheries Statement (2022) lays out the ambition across UK administrations to take action to achieve or maintain Good Environmental Status (GES) in all UK waters (Joint Fisheries Statement, 2022).

Previous work by Natural England investigating the impact of the pressures associated with the fishing industry across all 11 descriptors of Good Environmental Status (GES)<sup>1</sup> in the UK marine environment has highlighted 6 key issues<sup>2</sup>. Of these issues, only a subset will be relevant to any particular fishery / sector.

The results of an initial consideration of the available evidence and expert opinion of the main risks arising from the North Sea and West of Scotland Haddock FMP to UK MS Descriptors are summarised below.

- There is a **high risk** to seafloor integrity (D6) due to benthic disturbance caused by demersal trawls and seines and the contribution to current failure to meet targets for D6 seafloor integrity. Strategic work at a broad geographic scale is required to identify opportunities to mitigate risk and understand trade-offs.
- While the risk from demersal trawls and seines to achieving GES for marine mammals and seabirds (D1 & D4) is generally considered low, there are still significant gaps in the available evidence. As a result, the FMP risk rating has been upgraded to **moderate**, taking a precautionary approach into account. Gathering additional evidence has the potential to downgrade this risk in the future.
- There is a **moderate** risk to marine litter (D10) due to abandoned, lost or discarded fishing gear.

The detailed advice put forth in this report includes several recommendations for the North Sea and West of Scotland Haddock FMP aimed at identifying and minimizing the associated risks to UK MS descriptors. Further work between Defra and its ALBs is recommended to elucidate management advice for D1, D4 fish – the indicators for which are complex and include a long list of sensitive fish species. Many of the recommendations identify the need for a strategic, joined-up approach between FMPs, industry, Defra, ALBs and other stakeholders to find and implement solutions.

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<sup>1</sup> The 11 descriptors include: biodiversity; non-indigenous species; commercial fish; food webs; eutrophication; sea-floor integrity; hydrographical conditions; contaminants; contaminants in seafood; marine litter and underwater noise. For more information, see [Introduction to UK Marine Strategy \(cefas.co.uk\)](https://www.cefas.co.uk)

<sup>2</sup> Key issues are: impact of the removal of targeted species on the status of fish stocks; benthic disturbance related pressures associated with towed demersal gear; impact of the removal of targeted fish stocks on other species / wider environment; impact of bycatch (bird / mammal / fish) on biodiversity, food webs or stocks; fishing related sources contributing to marine litter; noise from pingers / acoustic deterrents contributing to marine noise.