

Evidence for Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee on the Joint Fisheries Statement

28.02.22

Dear Chairman,

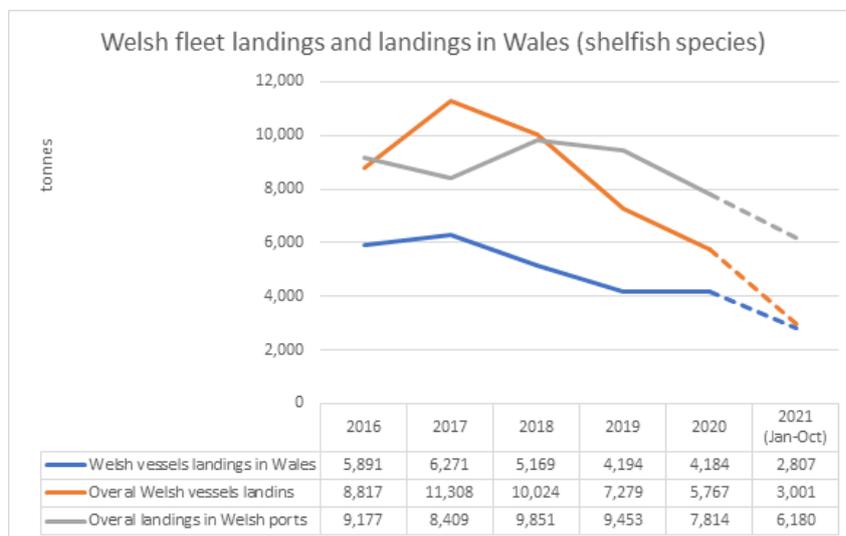
Thank you for the opportunity to provide evidence in written form to the committee. Apologies once again for not being to take part in the committee in person and thank you for your concern.

I am responding on behalf of the Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales with our charitable objectives of securing the protection of rural communities and environment of Wales. I am also responding as development lead for industry trade consortium, Aquaculture Industry Wales.

In terms of scrutiny of the Joint Fisheries Statement, we believe a good place to start is with regard to the performance of our fisheries and aquaculture sector over the last few years and to look at how the JFS may seek to change this moving forward.

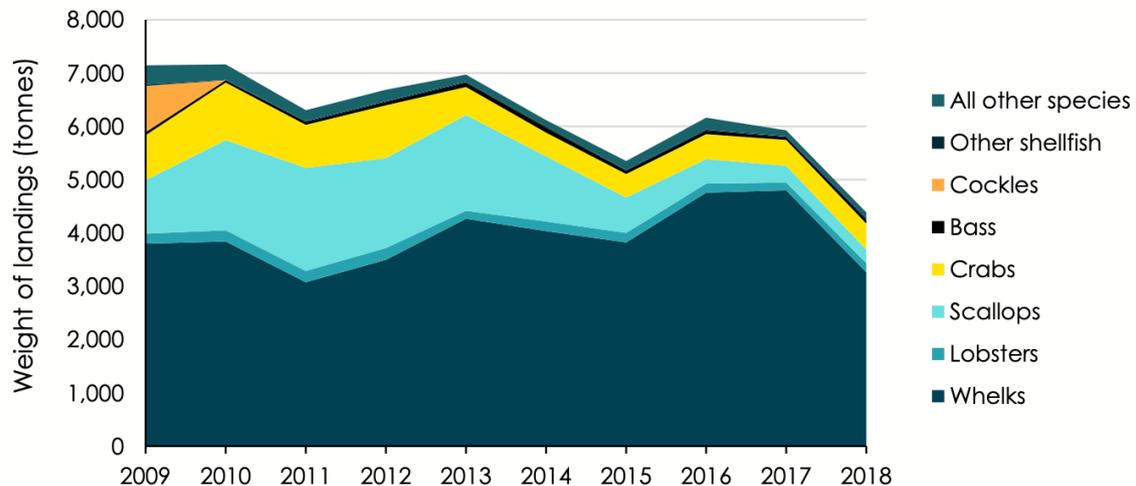
Background

Wales has not fared well over recent years, with the impacts of COVID and Brexit leading to significant declines of landings into Welsh ports by Welsh vessels. The following table is from the latest data available from UK Government's sea fisheries statistics.



With the vast majority of the Welsh fleet targeting shellfish, overall Welsh vessel landings into Welsh ports and Welsh vessel landings into all ports are a serious cause for concern.

The table below is taken from The Welsh Centre for Public Policy's report on Policy Options. For Welsh Fishing Opportunities¹ and details the further narrowing of opportunities for Welsh fishers landing in Welsh ports across the main species over a longer time frame.



Couple data from our wild capture fisheries in Wales with the difficulties emanating from leaving the European Union for the Menai production segment, the picture is sadly one of decline.

There are however some positives to take from the ability of the Welsh fisheries sector to adapt and make the most of the Joint Fisheries Statement (JFS) and the fisheries management plans (FMP) that will develop from the JFS. The fabric of the sector in Wales, particularly within the inshore fishing fleet lends itself probably more than any other devolved nation, to working towards a truly sustainable status. This will only happen through renewed efforts with regard to engagement and better investment policy decisions in the sector.

The Joint Fisheries Statement

It is important to note that there has been limited external engagement from Welsh Government on the JFS, with opportunities for those with an interest in the sector to engage via the Communities of Interest groups.

When compared to comparator policy design such the the Sustainable Farming Scheme where engagement has been thorough, there could have been a higher level of information

¹ <https://www.wcpp.org.uk/publication/policy-options-for-welsh-fishing-opportunities/>

provision on the JFS. We understand the scale of the industry is different and there are resource implications to undertake such an exercise, but such is the importance of the JFS to future fisheries management arrangements, it is an opportunity missed.

Milestones and Targets

The progression of the JFS should be clearly laid out for stakeholders to understand the key points at which they may wish to engage, in particular with the FMP's that may be developed for specific Welsh fisheries.

At a minimum, the timetable for the development and sign off of the FMP's should be clearly laid out and open for engagement by interested parties via consultation.

Welsh Fisheries and Aquaculture Strategy

It is somewhat of a disappointment that the development of the JFS is not being backed or even developed in tandem by a clear strategy for the sectors in their broadest sense in Wales.

The Marine and Fisheries Strategy 2013-2020 is now beyond its completion date and without wishing to move into the depths of the issues of that strategy, particularly in relation to the targets for aquaculture development, it was written at a time, for a time, that does not exist any longer.

Without wishing to labour the point, looking across to comparator sectors in the food and drink sector, there are strategies in place or strategic development initiatives with the red meat and dairy sector.

There should be an intrinsic link between the progress of the JFS, fisheries and aquaculture strategy in Wales to set direction for the future. Whether this is industry led or government led is a question for discussion, but any future strategy needs to cover the sector in a holistic sense supporting onshore opportunities, resilience within coastal communities as well as climate change and environmental status of our seas and stocks.

Welsh Government must ensure that strategy is linked to public investment mechanisms for fisheries and aquaculture. The European Maritime and Fisheries Fund 2014-2020 has, in our opinion, not delivered the investment the sector needed in the programme period. Again, a lack of engagement has led to policy decisions being made around specific union priorities not being utilised in Wales, to the detriment of the inshore fleet.

We have also found that post Brexit, this has continued alongside 'England only' fisheries and aquaculture investment programmes actually placing Welsh fishers and growers at an economic and competitive disadvantage. This has been through disparity in intervention rates of grants and also restrictions on capital investment items in Wales that has not been the case in other devolved administrations or UK Government.

Participatory decision making – engagement (co-production / management)

Much has been spoken of the concept of co-management in fisheries and the opportunity really is now to put together a meaningful engagement structure that can support the embryonic stages of co-management of Welsh fisheries.

While it may seem that this document is overly focusing on engagement with the fisheries, aquaculture and seafood sector in general it is for good reason.

We refer to again to the report by the Welsh Centre for Public Policy, Policy Options for Welsh Fishing Opportunities that highlighted this issue on pages 11 to 13 of the document focusing on the issues between key institutions and organisations. The final paragraph of this section summarises the issues as:

'These criticisms highlight the importance of new forms of diverse stakeholder involvement in future fisheries management as well as during consultations on how this management should take shape. While scope and appetite for radical change exist, processes must be gradual if there are low levels of trust on which to build.'

Given the gradual erosion of engagement over the last decade, we would advocate that now is the time to start rebuilding trust with all who work in the sector and have a stake a sustainable, vibrant and resilient Welsh fisheries and aquaculture sector.

Suggested Approaches

It is clear that there are cross cutting policy objectives between Ministerial portfolios, particularly that of Minister Griffiths, Minister Julie James and Deputy Minister Lee Waters.

The resourcing issues within the Marine and Fisheries Division of Welsh Government has been a constant theme for a number of years and given the breadth of the work of the division across marine and fisheries, a hugely complex area, we have sympathy with this.

The JFS offers the opportunity not only to bring the concept of co-management into play, but also integration of existing Welsh Government direction in terms of climate change, nature recovery and marine planning.

Having been involved with the Wales Marine Action and Advisory Group (WMAAG) to develop the Minister for Climate Change's ask for a structured Blue Recovery Plan, it is clear that many elements and indeed the objectives of the JFS link through to the components of Blue Recovery, with particular reference to marine and fisheries evidence and coastal community development.

With the Wales Marine and Fisheries Advisory Group (WMFAG) being put under review, it is possible that now is the time to bring these groups together and start the process of co-management design and development with the breath of actors and stakeholders required.

Welsh JFS Fisheries Management Plans

We understand that Welsh Government may develop individual FMP's for key Welsh species. In statements relating to the development of the latest Whelk Management Order, Minister Griffiths stated that she will deploy a similar approach to regulatory development for other species.

Having co-ordinated a response on behalf of 48 fishers in relation to the Whelk Management Order consultation, there are concerns with regard to the proposed approach being rolled out to other species and how this may translate into Welsh FMPs.

At the heart of good fisheries management is science and research with strong industry engagement. Within future FMPs we would advocate that this is made a priority to avoid the continued scenario of reactive regulation that does not allow operators in the sector to effectively plan and invest in their businesses.

Fishing Opportunities

With the benefit of having heard the questions raised at the ETRA Committee in session, Sarah Murphy MS raised the question of retaining and recruiting individuals in the industry.

We must refer to the data at the top of this document in response to this question. While the same trend of decline can be seen in other administrations within the UK in terms of shellfish landing decline within their indigenous fleets into their ports, Wales is over exposed to its reliance on the shellfish sector when compared to other nations of the UK with diversity with their fleets and fisheries.

It is not only a lack of fishing opportunities, but new pressures on operators such as the changes to vessel audits under the Marine and Coastguard Agency that is resulting in much

more stringent standards. This is alongside change in terms of vessel and catch monitoring system implementation and market disruption.

The JFS is therefore critical in terms of ensuring the development of sustainable fishing opportunities for the sector in Wales. While aquaculture sits very much on the fringes of the JFS, it is also critical that Welsh Government works to support aquaculture development opportunities in Wales. Onshore, foreshore and offshore co-located aquaculture can provide complimentary opportunities to our wild capture fisheries in terms of onshore processing and distribution at scale.

Summary

While the development of the JFS can be taken in isolation as a task to be progressed by Welsh and UK Governments, we would advocate that it should be taken as an opportunity to undertake the activity we have discussed in our response above.

Noting the question at ETRA Committee from Samuel Kurtz MS as to whether previous approaches to fisheries management have been a success or a failure, we firmly believe that we need to look back and learn from the experiences of the last 10 years in order to progress the sector from its current position.

We shouldn't silo the fisheries and aquaculture sector, but ensure that it takes its place at the heart of Welsh Government ambitions and vision for a food sector that has sustainability as its central pillar.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written evidence to the committee.

Jon Parker

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Aquaculture Industry Wales