

Mr George Eustice, MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Nobel House, 17 Smith Square
London
SW1P 3JR

Date: 21 January 2015

Re: EU deep-sea fisheries legislation

Dear Minister Eustice,

We write to you as scientists with a professional interest in the deep sea to urge you to take advantage of a historical opportunity to secure significant protection for the deep ocean surrounding Europe. As you are aware, the European Council is debating new EU legislation for the management of deep-sea fisheries in EU waters and the high seas of the Northeast Atlantic. We are calling on you exercise leadership to negotiate a new EU regulation to phase-out bottom trawl fishing in the deep sea, among other measures, to protect vulnerable species and habitats. We would point out that the UK was the first EU Member State to extend the European Habitats Directive to protect deep-sea ecosystems and so has led Europe in progressive management of offshore habitats.

There is overwhelming scientific evidence that bottom trawling along the continental slopes, on seamounts, and in other deep-sea areas in the Northeast Atlantic is detrimental to deep-sea ecosystems and species. Numerous scientific papers and reports have documented the damage caused by bottom trawl fishing on cold-water corals, sponge fields and other vulnerable deep-sea ecosystems. Many of us have witnessed this damage first hand during our research both in European waters and the high seas. Moreover, given the high vulnerability of slow growing, long lived and low fecundity deep-sea species and the unselective character of the gear, deep-sea bottom trawling has led to the depletion of whole communities of deep-sea fish, including both commercially targeted as well as by-catch species, in UK and EU waters.

Recent scientific information has indicated that, in addition to the problems highlighted above, chronic and intensive deep-sea bottom trawling on continental slope sediment areas reduces the abundance and diversity of the organisms living in the sediment and reduces the capacity of slope sediments to act as carbon sinks. Similarly, a recent study by researchers from the University of Southampton and the Marine Institute of Ireland estimated that species of deep-sea fish inhabiting continental slope areas off the UK and Ireland sequester approximately one million tons of carbon per year. The Global Ocean Commission has also found that the value of carbon sequestration by the high seas, globally, far outweighs the economic benefits of high seas fishing, of which deep-sea fishing is a tiny fraction. These are important ecosystem services provided by deep-sea species and seabed ecosystems at risk from the continued use of bottom trawl gear.

To the extent that deep-sea species can be fished sustainably, it is not necessary to fish with bottom trawl gear. Deep sea fish can be caught using other bottom gears provided they are well managed and the limits on the catch are set at sustainable levels. Moreover, from the information we've seen, there appears to be very little bottom trawling activity by EU fleets in the northeast Atlantic below 600 meters depth and the existing trawl activity below this depth is likely to be highly damaging in comparison to the economic benefits of these fisheries.

A new EU regulation for the management of the EU's deep-sea fisheries that would require a phase-out of the use of bottom trawl gear in the deep-sea and a shift to low impact, selective fishing gear and provide for the protection of vulnerable deep-sea ecosystems, the recovery of damaged ecosystems and the rebuilding of depleted fish stocks and species is an eminently sensible and achievable goal.

The UK is a world-class centre of deep-sea research, with new species and habitats still being discovered not far from our shores. This issue requires leadership, for the protection of UK waters and those of Europe and the high seas. We urge you to use your influence to negotiate a new EU regulation for the management of deep-sea fishing to conserve and protect deep-sea species and ecosystems before more are irreparably depleted or destroyed and their wealth lost to present and future generations.

The following individuals have signed the letter (affiliations are for identification only, and do not imply endorsement by the signers' institutions):



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