

Consultation response to Marine bird pSPAs by the Scottish Environment LINK Marine Group

January 2017



Summary

- LINK members **strongly support** the proposal to classify five SPAs in Scottish offshore waters.
- LINK members support the Scottish Government's **commitment to safeguarding and enhancing marine biodiversity** through the implementation of EU legislation.
- SPAs are required to meet obligations under the EU Birds Directive and LINK members believe that the **scientific evidence presented fully justifies the case for classification**.
- **Sound management** is now required and statutory agencies must have sufficient resources to **assess site condition** in order to achieve the conservation objectives.
- The five pSPAs, if designated and well managed, will provide a **valuable contribution towards Scotland's MPA network**.

Introduction

Scottish Environment LINK is the forum for Scotland's voluntary environment community, with over 35 member bodies representing a broad spectrum of environmental interests with the common goal of contributing to a more environmentally sustainable society.

Its member bodies represent a wide community of environmental interest, sharing the common goal of contributing to a more sustainable society. LINK provides a forum for these organizations, enabling informed debate, assisting co-operation within the voluntary sector, and acting as a strong voice for the environment.

Acting at local, national and international levels, LINK aims to ensure that the environmental community participates in the development of policy and legislation affecting Scotland.

LINK works mainly through groups of members working together on topics of mutual interest, exploring the issues and developing advocacy to promote sustainable development, respecting environmental limits.

LINK members welcome the opportunity to comment on this consultation.

General Comments

LINK members welcome and **strongly support the proposal to classify five new SPAs in Scottish offshore waters on the basis that the scientific evidence presented fully justifies the case for classification**. An ecologically coherent network of marine protected areas is critical to protect and recover marine biodiversity in Scottish seas and crucially underpins a healthy and sustainable society. Scotland's **internationally important seabird populations have shown significant declines** as they face ever increasing pressures and therefore the need for effective and coherent management for marine wildlife is urgent.

Site Comments

LINK members welcome protection of some of the most important parts of the environment for marine birds from adverse human pressures and support the classification of all five pSPAs.

We believe that the Solway Firth pSPA should include the entire Cree Estuary SSSI within its boundary, currently only a small area in the south of the SSSI is included. The Cree Estuary SSSI regularly hosts Annex 1 Birds Directive species including, whooper swans and barnacle geese, and also migratory species including, pink footed geese and pintails. A larger area used by these species could be encompassed if the boundary of the pSPA included the Cree Estuary SSSI.

As there are different features within the pSPAs and the adjacent SPAs, overlapping the designations would provide the greatest protection for two important offshore colonies in the north and the west of Scotland. It may also mean that additional species will qualify for designation within the pSPAs, providing more protection for species breeding on the islands. LINK members are also concerned that the proposed boundary will make it more difficult to manage coherently. Therefore, in this case, we believe that the inner boundary of the pSPA should overlap with the current SPA to the MLW mark on the islands of Foula and St Kilda.

Comments on the Advice to Support Management

LINK members support a progressive approach to the management measures and would suggest that a **more precautionary approach is needed at a site level**. LINK members attest that the management proposals could do more to consider the wider supporting ecosystem for marine birds. LINK members would suggest a precautionary approach for spatial restrictions on benthic fisheries whilst research regarding the interactions between benthic fisheries and key prey species continues. LINK members acknowledge that set nets are a principle threat to qualifying features of the pSPAs and welcome advice suggesting seasonal and spatial restrictions on their use, particularly in the *Seas off St Kilda* and *Seas off Foula* pSPAs. Additionally, LINK members support the introduction of mitigation measures for long-lining across both the *Seas off St Kilda* and *Seas off Foula* pSPAs.

LINK members again seek clarification from the Scottish Government about their intentions to develop a biosecurity plan to protect Scotland's bird populations and the habitats and prey they rely on. Invasive non-native species (INNS) are a worrying potential pressure. Invasive vertebrates could indirectly affect the pSPAs by reaching islands where colonies exist, including the Foula and St Kilda SPAs, and aquatic INNS are a threat to the wider marine environment potentially impacting prey species or habitats on which birds depend. LINK members see the production of adequate biosecurity plans as a key priority to avoid extremely costly and difficult eradication projects, which are unlikely to be feasible in the marine environment.

Additional Comments

LINK members are concerned that the site conservation objectives do not adequately recognise the current status of SPA features and do not address the concept of restoring populations or supporting improvements in habitat extent or food availability. For example, the proposals do not adequately take into account the documented decline in sandeel quantity, a critically important prey item for many

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seabird species. In many cases **to achieve “favourable condition”, populations, distributions and supporting habitat or food for seabirds will have to increase.**

We are additionally concerned by the use of the term “*natural change*” which does not appropriately capture interannual fluctuations in abundances and phenological differences and suggests there is a clear differentiation between natural and anthropogenic sources of change when this is not always apparent. **We suggest the term “natural variability” is more appropriate** as this term does not allow for long term declines to be discounted as part of a natural process.

This response was compiled on behalf of LINK Marine Group and is supported by:

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