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18 March 2022

Mairi Gougeon MSP  
Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands  
Scottish Government

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

Thank you very much for your time on March 16<sup>th</sup> and for the discussions on marine issues. We discussed the following points:

**Ocean recovery and restoration:**

In the context of the intertwined climate emergency and nature crisis, creating a *de facto* ocean emergency, we outlined our goal of Ocean Recovery, further detail on which is in our [Ocean Recovery Plan](#). Both the Blue Economy Strategy and the National Marine Plan provide key vehicles for the transformative change needed to move Scotland's seas towards ecosystem recovery at scale. We welcome the ambition toward an upward trajectory on ocean health, the case for which is stark from Scotland's Marine Assessment 2020, and underpinned by the vision of a coherent plan focussed on ocean recovery. We agree that a new National Marine Plan must make the most of the opportunity to drive eight years of ambitious ocean recovery to 2030. We understand there is no fixed date yet for this and that it will be a three-year process, which will include consideration of critical next steps for delayed Regional Marine Planning. We welcome that coherence of approach.

**Scotwind:**

Thank you for the further details on the ScotWind application process and the assurance that there is no departure from a plan-led process. We understand that Marine Scotland is carrying out assessments under the sectoral marine plan, has established a plan review process, and determined that more evidence on potential impact is needed, particularly regarding east coast seabirds. We look forward to consultations on those within the next year.

Although we recognise that offshore wind for Innovation and Targeted Oil and Gas (INTOG) is further offshore than ScotWind sites, direct environmental concerns will still exist. We therefore welcome INTOG being included in the sectoral marine plan review. However, we consider the decarbonisation of oil and gas operations through the INTOG initiative as an interim measure, within a just transition, to phase-out exploration and extraction of oil and gas for use as fossil fuels. We support the approach of facilitating climate change mitigation development where environmentally sustainable, as long as restoration and ocean recovery remain the key drivers of marine planning. We look forward to discussing further the potential environmental impact of ScotWind with your officials and Mr Mathieson, particularly with respect to opportunities for strategic compensation.



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### **Climate and nature smart fisheries:**

We welcomed the consultations on Joint Fisheries Statement, Future Catching Policy and Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) and the proposed cap on inshore fishing effort as a ceiling from which to reduce effort and pressure. We reiterated that commercial fishing, particularly the bottom trawl and mechanical dredge sectors, is the most widespread sectoral pressure on our ocean health and is operating beyond environmental limits. Future fisheries management must set catch limits and removals in line with scientific advice, address impacts on sensitive species and bycatch, and be based on ecosystem-based spatial management to protect key ecosystems, including blue carbon and critical fish and shellfish habitat, address gear conflict and integrate with wider marine planning.

We are all very keen to see the fishing industry future-proofed and part of that will be proof of sustainability, giving market advantage. Linking catching policy to ecosystem-based spatial management will also be key. Building the evidence base through use of Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) with cameras is a key tool for increasing sustainability and provenance and providing an opportunity for fishers to show how their catch was caught. It is much more than a blunt compliance tool.

We also welcomed your Government's proposal to cap inshore fishing effort, as a ceiling from which to reduce effort. This is a key step towards creating a lower impact inshore zone, as required under an ecosystem-based approach to management. We believe there must be a presumption against mobile fishing gear across a significant part of this inshore area. To ensure low impact across the fishing fleet sectors, static fishing effort should also be reviewed, as it can contribute to bycatch of sensitive species.

You also asked for our thoughts on the draft Future Catching Policy and we will be responding to the consultation in detail. We agree that following the scientific advice on removals, ecosystem-based measures (both technical and spatial), and REM with cameras will be crucial. We will also be responding to the JFS and REM consultations and look forward to the inshore cap consultation.

Our members, Whale and Dolphin Conservation and Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust, are working on marine animal entanglements, which their research is showing as having a population-level impact on minke and humpback whale. WDC hope to begin trialling technical solutions with fishers this summer and would be delighted to meet with you to discuss further.

In our meeting we briefly discussed Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs) and we note that a consultation on those, including a mix of inshore and offshore HPMAs, is due soon. We support the definition of HPMAs according to the IUCN definition of "fully" protected and expect to see them provide additional benefits beyond the current MPA network. Additionally, we believe they should be area-based and located on damaged and depleted habitat to create a greater potential for ocean recovery. We note that this work is still to start, including developing the criteria for identifying potential sites, and welcomed invitation to a meeting extended by your officials. We look forward to working with you on the topic. We noted the value of the ecosystem services and natural capital approach and we highlighted the important report from some of our members in the Future Fisheries Alliance (MCS, RSPB and WWF) with recommendations for climate smart fishing: [Shifting gears](#).

### **Aquaculture:**

We welcome Professor Griggs report recently published. We consider the proposed recommendations have the potential to improve regulation and confidence in decision making, if acted upon correctly. We do have a concern over the presented conflict between the precautionary principle and an adaptive management approach, and would not want to see a move from the former to the latter. We would also welcome some

further clarity on some of the recommendations, and LINK would like to be involved in the subsequent working groups/project board proposed. We would also recommend the inclusion of academics who are actively involved in this area of work.

We asked about the coherence of the Scottish Government's aquaculture vision, its project board and wider stakeholder involvement and the Salmon Interaction Working Group. We look forward to the publication of the vision, which we hope will provide clarity on the long-term ambitions for the sector and place sustainability at its heart with enhanced emphasis on the environment, its protection and community benefits. After the vision is published, we look forward to more detail on a long-term strategy.

Finally, we discussed our plans to publish an updated 'Rhetoric to Reality' report. This is an assessment we last ran in 2011, which looked at eight key areas of policy for our sector and assessed the ambition of legislation with its execution to date. We have repeated this exercise 10 years on, at the start of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration and with the new SNP/Green agreement in place. This we believe is a great opportunity for Scotland to pick up the pace on its leadership in climate and nature. We anticipate publishing the report in mid-April and will ensure you see an early copy, pre-publication.

Once again, thank you for your time. If you require further information on any of the issues we have raised, we would be delighted to supply that.

Yours sincerely,

Deborah Long, Chief Officer, LINK

Calum Duncan, Convenor of LINK's Marine Group and Head of Conservation Scotland at Marine Conservation Society

Sam Collin, Vice Convenor of LINK's Marine Group and Living Seas Manager at Scottish Wildlife Trust.



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