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Our Reference: 202600502103
Your Reference: Delay to inshore Marine Protected Area Management consultation

30 January 2026

Dear Esther,

Thank you for your letter of 15 January 2026 regarding the postponing of the consultation on fisheries management measures for inshore Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and Priority Marine Features (PMFs).

The Scottish Government has made a long-term commitment to ensuring the sustainable management of the marine environment. This includes developing and implementing a coherent network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and to protect the 11 Priority Marine Features (PMFs) that are most vulnerable to demersal mobile fishing gear outside of the MPA network. The aim is to benefit the conservation of vulnerable and characteristic marine species and habitats in Scottish waters.

The fisheries management measures for offshore MPAs came into effect 16 October 2025, marking a significant step forward in safeguarding our seas for future generations, increasing MPA coverage and contributing towards achieving Good Environmental Status. Putting in place the remaining fisheries management measures to protect marine features inside and outside MPAs will help deliver on our commitment to achieve and maintain good environmental status for our waters.

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Tha Ministearanna h-Alba, an luchd-comhairleachaidh sònraichte agus Rùnaire Maireannach fo chumhachan Achd Coiteachaidh (Alba) 2016. Faicibh www.lobbying.scot

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The decision to delay the launch of the consultation on fisheries management measures for inshore Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and proposed Priority Marine Features (PMFs) areas was due to delays in delivery by external contractors and not a change in policy. Putting in place the required management measures for our MPAs and PMFs will continue to be a priority.

Developing evidence-based fisheries management measures for over 160 sites and areas within the inshore area in a way that ensures appropriate protection for the protected features, and at the same time minimises socio-economic impacts on our critical inshore fisheries sector, is complex and challenging. Despite Marine Directorate Officials' best efforts, more time is needed to finalise the statutory assessments to ensure they are robust and the consultation sets out all the evidence required to enable people to fully understand what is being proposed.

This is the largest consultation on marine protection, covering over 160 sites with over 80 related assessments and supporting documents. As such, it is essential that the publicly committed to 16-week consultation period is undertaken to give stakeholders a fair chance to review and provide meaningful feedback.

The decision to postpone the consultation until after the election was taken as it was not possible to postpone until January, have a 16 week consultation period, and avoid the pre-election period.

We are working hard to understand how measures may impact local industries. The Scottish Government is committed to working closely with the fishing industry to understand and address potential socio-economic impacts. We recognise that these new measures may bring additional challenges to coastal communities, and have undertaken online and face to face meetings with stakeholder groups and individuals frequently since 2019. We are actively exploring ways to further support fishers, fishing-related industries, and their communities. We will work in partnership with industry, and other key stakeholders to identify barriers and shape the most effective and fair approaches to mitigation.

This includes work to identify opportunities for mitigation that will help fishers continue to operate where possible, support the resilience of seafood supply chains, and contribute to the sustainable growth of the Blue Economy. We are also looking at ways to close key knowledge gaps that may be limiting the potential of inshore fisheries to deliver long-term benefits for communities.

The fisheries management measures will support in achieving conservation objectives for MPAs and afford PMFs protection in a way which supports the policy aims of the NMP, protecting the sensitive features while allowing sustainable activity elsewhere, if appropriate.

Yours sincerely



GILLIAN MARTIN

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