



Plain English summary: Scotland's Future Catching Policy - selectivity consultation, 2026

This is a plain English summary of Scottish Environment LINK's response to this consultation.

Glossary of terms

Bycatch - any sea creature caught accidentally while fishing for a different species. It can include non-target fish or shellfish species, or animals such as whales, sharks or seabirds.

Catch - all the fish and sea creatures brought up in the net or on the hooks during a fishing trip.

Codend - the bag-shaped end of a trawl net where fish collect as it is towed through the water.

Creel - a type of cage or basket trap, baited and placed on the seabed to catch shellfish such as lobsters, crabs and langoustine. There can be several strung together on ropes, known as a fleet of creels.

Demersal - relating to the sea floor or the water just above it.

Directed fishery - a fishery in which a vessel is deliberately/primarily targeting one specific species.

Haul - a single fishing operation from when the net or lines are placed in the water, left to fish, and then pulled up.

Mesh size - the size of the individual holes in a fishing net. A larger mesh size means bigger holes.

Nephrops - the scientific name for the Norway lobster or langoustine (*Nephrops norvegicus*)

Square mesh panel - a section of netting fitted into the top of a trawl net. The mesh is arranged in squares, rather than the traditional diamond shape. Because of this shape, it stays open during towing, giving small fish a chance to escape before reaching the codend.

Stakeholder - anyone with an interest in, or who is affected by, a policy or decision.

Trawler - a fishing vessel that catches fish or shellfish by dragging a large net through the water or along the seabed.

Whitefish - a category of sea fish with white flesh that live near or on the seabed, such as cod, haddock, whiting, plaice or hake.



What is being consulted on?

The Scottish Government is consulting on how to make fishing in Scottish waters more selective, which means catching more of the fish that fishers want, and fewer of the fish, marine mammals, seabirds and other wildlife that they do not. The consultation covers a wide range of proposals, from changes to net design and fishing rules, to how bycatch of sensitive species like whales, dolphins and seabirds is reported and reduced. It also proposes simplifying the current patchwork of fishing regulations into a single, clearer framework.

We broadly support the direction of these proposals, but we have raised important concerns throughout our response. Our overarching view is that better rules and better gear will only deliver real results if they are backed up by independent monitoring, particularly through cameras on fishing vessels (known as Remote Electronic Monitoring, or REM). Without this, many of the proposals will be difficult to enforce and their benefits unverifiable. We have also highlighted that the legal duty of the Scottish Government is to eliminate unwanted bycatch where possible, not just reduce it, and the consultation does not fully reflect this higher ambition.

LINK's views

1. Simplifying the framework of rules

The Scottish Government proposes bringing together the many different pieces of fishing legislation into one clearer framework. We support this in principle.

- Simplification must not weaken environmental protections. The goal should be to make rules clearer, more effective and less burdensome to fishers, but not to reduce obligations on fishers.
- Any review of existing measures should be transparent. Stakeholders should be able to see which rules are being changed, why, and what evidence underpins those decisions.
- This is also an opportunity to identify gaps, i.e. where current rules fall short, and to better join up fishing policy with marine protected areas, climate commitments and wider sea management.
- Simplified rules should be fair across all fleet types and not inadvertently disadvantage smaller-scale or inshore fishers.

2. Reporting catches more frequently

Currently, fishing boats must submit a daily electronic log of their catches. The proposal is to require vessels to report after every individual haul of the net, rather than once a day.

- We are neutral on this proposal. More detailed data on what fishers are catching could help with stock management and enforcement, but only if it is reliable.



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- Like the existing daily log, reporting each haul would still rely on fishers recording their own catches honestly. More frequent reporting does not resolve the core problem of this data being unverified and may also increase administrative burden on fishers.
- Cameras on boats (Remote Electronic Monitoring, or REM) are a better long-term option. They automatically record what happens and provide an independent, reliable record. The Scottish Government should clearly explain how reporting each haul will work alongside REM as it is rolled out. They should make sure boats that already have cameras don't have to do the same reporting twice.

3. Improved net design for demersal (bottom-towed) whitefish trawlers

These proposals cover the large and mixed demersal trawl fleets, vessels targeting species like haddock, cod and whiting using bottom trawls. The main proposal is to allow a different type of net mesh (square mesh rather than the traditional diamond shape) which lets small fish escape more easily.

- We support in principle allowing square mesh codends with a minimum size of 100mm, but there are important concerns that need to be addressed.
- However, flatfish (plaice, dab, flounder) do not escape as easily through square mesh and extra measures will be needed in fisheries that often catch these species.
- The proposals do not mention skates, rays and sharks, which is a major gap. These species cannot escape through mesh no matter its design due to their body shape, and they are already under pressure. They will need their own protections, such as limits on where fishing is allowed.
- The proposed 'one net rule' update (aligning the rule with the 120mm threshold already used in law) closes a genuine loophole and we support it, provided it is actively enforced.
- We support allowing dual-codend separator gear, which lets fishers catch and separate *Nephrops* (langoustines) and whitefish on the same trip, but only where the setup has been properly tested and proven to work.
- All changes to fishing gear should rely on REM cameras to check they are being used correctly and that they really do improve selectivity in practice.

4. Rules for *Nephrops* (langoustine) trawlers

Nephrops trawlers use smaller mesh nets than whitefish vessels, which means they can accidentally catch more juvenile whitefish. The proposals introduce clearer rules about when vessels are classed as targeting *Nephrops*, and what additional obligations apply, including catch composition thresholds (limits on the





proportion of unwanted species in the catch) and 'move-on' rules requiring vessels to change location if too much bycatch is encountered.

- We support the principle of stronger rules for directed *Nephrops* fisheries, but they will only work if backed by independent monitoring. Relying on fishers to report their own catches hasn't worked in the past under the Landing Obligation.
- Move-on rules are welcome, but they shouldn't be the only tool. They need to be part of a wider approach that steers vessels away from areas where there are lots of juvenile fish and sensitive habitats, rather than just reacting after the damage is done.
- In the west of Scotland especially, cod stocks are in a very bad state. Any new rules about what can be caught must be at least as strict as those that previously existed. Evidence shows that too many cod are still being caught accidentally, even though the advice is to stop catching them altogether.
- The system should reward boats that fish responsibly, not just set minimum standards that vessels aim to just meet. For example, access to certain fishing grounds could be linked to a track record of low bycatch.

5. Technical net standards for Nephrops trawlers

These questions cover detailed technical changes to square mesh panels (escape panels sewn into nets to allow small fish out), net covers, lifting straps and related equipment used by the small mesh demersal fleet.

- We broadly support having the same square mesh panel rules across all Scottish waters. Having different rules for the North Sea and West of Scotland just make things more complicated without any clear environmental benefit.
- If exemptions for smaller, lower-powered vessels are removed, it needs to be done fairly with support to help them adjust. The evidence on how these changes affect them is mixed.
- We support placing panels closer to the end of the net (codend), as this allows more unwanted fish to escape. We also support using flotation buoys to keep panels open. Both changes are backed by evidence.
- Using non-elastic lifting straps makes sense, as it stops nets from stretching and appearing to meet minimum mesh size rules when they do not.



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- Any rules about net covers should make sure they cannot be used in ways that stop fish escaping through the mesh. These rules must be based on evidence about what actually works, not just convenience.

6. Reporting and reducing bycatch of marine mammals

Fishers are legally required to report any accidental catch or injury of marine mammals (whales, dolphins, porpoises, seals) within 48 hours. Despite this, zero incidents have been reported from Scottish waters, which is a figure that does not reflect reality.

- The fact that there are so many “zero reports” suggests people don’t trust the reporting system, not that there is no bycatch. Research from the Scottish Entanglement Alliance shows that fishers are more willing to share information when they trust the system and feel confident it won’t be used against them.
- Clear, meaningful protections must be in place for fishers when they report accidental bycatch, so they won’t face penalties for genuine mistakes.
- An independent organisation (such as the Scottish Marine Animal Stranding Scheme) could receive and review reports instead of sending them directly to enforcement authorities. This might help fishers feel more comfortable reporting.
- REM cameras, rolled out across the fleet, would remove the burden of self-reporting entirely and provide an objective record for everyone.

7. Extending reporting to seabirds; rules for longline and gillnet fleets

There is currently no rules for fishers to report the accidental catch of seabirds. The consultation also covers proposed measures for longline vessels (which use baited hooks on long lines) and gillnet vessels (static nets), both of which can accidentally catch seabirds and other sensitive species.

- We strongly support extending bycatch reporting to seabirds. Scotland holds globally important seabird populations, around 70% of whose species are now in decline, and bycatch is one of the biggest reasons for that decline worldwide.
- We support requiring longline fishing boats to use bird scaring lines (bright streamers towed over the area where baited hooks are deployed). Other best practice measures, like setting lines at night and properly managing waste from fish processing onboard should also be prioritised, especially near marine protected areas.





- For gillnets, more monitoring is needed in Scottish waters. REM and fully documented fisheries are the most effective route to understanding the true scale of seabird and cetacean bycatch in this sector.
- As with marine mammals, REM would be the simplest and most effective way to capture seabird bycatch data consistently across the fleet.

8. Protecting whales and sharks in creel fisheries

Creel and pot fishers use strings of baited traps connected by ropes on the seabed. Floating groundlines (the ropes that connect creels along the seabed) can loop up into the water column and entangle whales, basking sharks and other large marine animals. The proposal is to encourage and incentivise the use of sinking groundlines, which lie flat on the seabed and greatly reduce entanglement risk.

- We strongly support wider adoption of sinking groundlines where appropriate. The evidence from the Scottish Entanglement Alliance is compelling as they significantly reduce whale and shark entanglements, and many fishers who trialled them preferred them to floating rope.
- The consultation frames this as further trialling, but the evidence base is already strong. We urge the Scottish Government to commit to a funded, timed plan for wider adoption across the creel fleet where appropriate, not just more trials.
- Cost is the main barrier as sinking rope costs roughly twice as much as conventional floating rope. A subsidised gear replacement scheme (allowing vessels to switch as their existing rope reaches end of life) is essential to make this workable for inshore operators.
- Adoption should be considered and incentivised in high-risk areas (such as around marine protected areas or areas of high numbers of species vulnerable to entanglement)
- The whole gear set up could be reviewed, not just groundlines. Surface marker lines and buoy ropes can also entangle wildlife. We need a more joined-up approach along with better limits on the number of creels which can be used.

Got questions? Feel free to contact Esther Brooker (esther@scotlink.org)



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