



7th June 2018

Island Fisheries [Heritage Licenses] Bill

Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine:

My name is Jeremy Percy and I am the Executive Director to the Low Impact Fishers of Europe Platform [LIFE]. I am also the Chairman of the UK's largest Fish Producer Organisation [by number], the Coastal PO.

I have been involved in the fishing industry for over 40 years, as crew, [including a spell fishing from Castletownbere for a couple of years in my youth], skipper, owner, fisheries manager and regulator, processor and auctioneer before moving into representation.

The Coastal PO exists to serve the interests of the UK's smaller scale fisheries sector and LIFE works on behalf of the European small scale fleet that makes up 62% of the fleet in Ireland, 77% in the UK and 80% by number across the EU.

The EU's definition of 'small scale' is vessels of less than 12 metres, not using towed gear. LIFE's definition reflects the diversity and needs of the small scale fleet on a more practical basis whereby our membership, that covers 16 member states and over 10,000 fishermen and women is made up of fishers who undertake day trips, use mainly passive gears, have the owner on board and land fresh fish. The size of their vessels varies according to the safety needs and the sea conditions pertaining in their local areas. Perhaps the best definition of small scale I've heard is that it is difficult to define but you know it when you see it, and that is very much the case for the vast majority of small scale fishing operations, in Ireland and elsewhere.

Until recently, our sector has never had effective and genuine representation at a policy level whereas the larger scale operators, with greater resources, have been able to influence the policy direction of successive CFP's over decades.

It is no coincidence that the current CFP reform is the first to recognize the value of the small scale fleet based on the fact that it was the first time that the representatives of our sector were able to contribute to its development, from the Green Paper stage onwards.

The other important change I've witnessed is with regard to the wider recognition of and the need to ensure the survival and prosperity of the coastal islands fleet and especially the communities they support.

The Heritage Bill that you are considering would provide the vital underpinning policy in support of those island communities around the coasts of Ireland. It is clear from experiences elsewhere that unless governments act proactively to provide the necessary recognition and practical support then these communities struggle and often fail to survive.

It is worth remembering that the boats we are talking about are small inshore vessels who would in all honesty struggle to make an impact on fish stocks, however hard they tried. These boats simply do not have the engine power, the size or the ability to carry much gear or indeed fish. These boats fall very well within the LIFE definition of small scale and despite vessel and gear improvements over the years can still be regarded as genuinely artisanal in their nature.

Whilst this sector may not often show up on an economist's spreadsheet, their intrinsic value goes far deeper than that. Whilst our small scale fishermen may not generate excess profits, they are nevertheless making a massive contribution to local employment, the maintenance of families and often vulnerable communities as well as providing meaningful employment in areas where alternative opportunities are lacking. They are not only the providers of the very best quality seafood [and have unexplored opportunities for adding value in that respect], but their mere presence underpins a very significant element of the tourist experience. There is clear evidence elsewhere in Europe that the loss of even a few small boats can and does have a dramatic impact on the sustainability of tourism locally. They are also the holders of centuries of tradition and culture, as well as the maritime knowledge and skills that once lost will never be regained.

The failures of member states to provide the aforementioned recognition and support to their small scale fleet, whilst understandable in the past due to the fact that they were not 'at the table' when the benefits were handed out, has been recognized by the current CFP through numerous references to the small scale sector, to provide a fair standard of living for the fisheries sector including small-scale fisheries and endeavouring to give preferential access for small scale, artisanal or coastal fishermen. This is all wrapped up in recital 20 that states that small offshore islands which are dependent on fishing should, where appropriate, be especially recognised and supported in order to enable them to survive and prosper. The EMFF also requires member states with over 1000 small scale vessels [Ireland 1437] to develop an action plan for the development, competitiveness and sustainability of small-scale coastal fishing;

So this is not just about one sector crying out for support, their particular needs have been finally recognized and enshrined in law.

With the greatest respect, the Committee has a one off opportunity to strip away decades of unfair treatment of the small scale fleet in your islands, rebalance the books in terms of access to the resource, and importantly, without unnecessarily impacting on the larger scale fleet. There is plenty to go around but without laying the foundations through the Heritage Bill, I fear, and experience has shown that there will be little effective change to the downward spiral for your island communities and the fishermen therein.

Jeremy Percy