

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT

Fourth Delegated Legislation Committee

## DRAFT SEA FISHERIES (INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION FOR THE CONSERVATION OF ATLANTIC TUNAS) (AMENDMENT) (NO. 2) REGULATIONS 2024

*Wednesday 24 April 2024*

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**The Committee consisted of the following Members:**

*Chair:* DR RUPA HUQ

Abrahams, Debbie ( <i>Oldham East and Saddleworth</i> ) (Lab)	† Jones, Mr Kevan ( <i>North Durham</i> ) (Lab)
Bonnar, Steven ( <i>Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill</i> ) (SNP)	† Khan, Afzal ( <i>Manchester, Gorton</i> ) (Lab)
† Buckland, Sir Robert ( <i>South Swindon</i> ) (Con)	† Pawsey, Mark ( <i>Rugby</i> ) (Con)
† Carter, Andy ( <i>Warrington South</i> ) (Con)	† Pow, Rebecca ( <i>Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs</i> )
† Creasy, Stella ( <i>Walthamstow</i> ) (Lab/Co-op)	† Richardson, Angela ( <i>Guildford</i> ) (Con)
† Elphicke, Mrs Natalie ( <i>Dover</i> ) (Con)	† Smith, Greg ( <i>Buckingham</i> ) (Con)
† Fletcher, Colleen ( <i>Coventry North East</i> ) (Lab)	† Zeichner, Daniel ( <i>Cambridge</i> ) (Lab)
† Harrison, Trudy ( <i>Copeland</i> ) (Con)	Aaron Kulakiewicz, <i>Committee Clerk</i>
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil ( <i>North East Hampshire</i> ) (Con)	
† Jenkinson, Mark ( <i>Workington</i> ) (Con)	† <b>attended the Committee</b>

## Fourth Delegated Legislation Committee

Wednesday 24 April 2024

[DR RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

### Draft Sea Fisheries (International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2024

9.25 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow):** I beg to move,

That the Committee has considered the draft Sea Fisheries (International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2024.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this morning, Dr Huq. The regulations were laid in draft on 14 March 2024.

Atlantic bluefin tuna are present again in UK waters, increasingly in abundance after many years. That stocks have recovered is indeed good news. In 2021, the International Union for Conservation of Nature changed its assessment of bluefin tuna from endangered to least concern, which reflects the improving state of the stock. There is significant demand for recreational fishing access to bluefin tuna, which will boost tourism in coastal communities and deliver social and economic benefits. I am especially aware of that being a south-west MP, and it is particularly pertinent to areas off the coast in the south-west.

Following European Union exit, the UK joined the international convention for the conservation of Atlantic tunas. That is referred to as ICCAT, as is the international organisation that manages Atlantic bluefin tuna, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas. Joining ICCAT enabled the UK to secure a bluefin tuna quota for the first time.

In line with ICCAT rules, this draft statutory instrument will enable UK fisheries Administrations to open catch and release recreational bluefin tuna fisheries. It will permit authorised recreational fishing vessels to target bluefin tuna by rod and line only, and on a catch and release basis. Without the legislation, the UK would be able to run only commercial and scientific bluefin tuna fisheries, preventing us from unlocking the social and economic benefits associated with the recreational fishing of this valuable species.

So far, UK fisheries Administrations have taken a cautious and measured approach to managing the bluefin tuna quota by running scientific catch and release tagging or CHART programmes over the past three years. Under the CHART programme, bluefin tuna were caught and released with a low incidental mortality rate. The programme provided valuable data on the social and economic benefits associated with recreational access to bluefin tuna. A trial commercial fishery for bluefin tuna ran in 2023 in UK waters. For 2024, the UK has been allocated 16 tonnes of bluefin tuna quota for

recreational fishing, which amounts to about 100 tunas—obviously that depends on size. Fish will be caught and released, but the quota is needed to cover any incidental mortality.

The Marine Management Organisation expects to open a recreational fishery in English waters in 2024—this year. The Welsh Government are also considering opening a recreational fishery in Welsh waters. Those fisheries will run alongside further CHART programmes elsewhere in the UK, as well as the continued commercial bluefin tuna trial, which will run for its second year.

ICCAT requires any recreational targeting of bluefin tuna to be authorised. The UK fisheries Administrations currently do not have the appropriate powers to authorise recreational fishing of bluefin tuna. Therefore, the Government wish to proceed with the draft legislation to bring recreational bluefin tuna fishing into line with the ICCAT regulations.

This draft instrument updates and amends assimilated law, namely EU regulation 2016/1627, to provide a legal framework for the UK fisheries Administrations to authorise permitting regimes in their waters should they choose to do so, and to prohibit explicitly the unauthorised recreational targeting of bluefin tuna. The amendments are distinct from licensing requirements under section 14 of the Fisheries Act 2020, which apply only to commercial vessels.

The instrument will support the delivery of the sustainability and scientific evidence objectives of the 2020 Act. It also amends the Sea Fishing (Enforcement) Regulations 2018 to confer enforcement powers on the Marine Management Organisation and the inshore fisheries and conservation authorities. With an annual allocation of 16 tonnes of quota, bluefin tuna recreational fisheries are expected to generate about £25 million in charter fees and significant additional spend over the next 10 years in deprived, rural and coastal communities. That spend will increase if quota allocations increase, so this is obviously very important for many of our coastal areas. Fisheries will also contribute to our knowledge of the abundance of bluefin tuna in UK waters.

The devolved Administrations are supportive of the amendments made by the instrument. If it is not passed, there will not be enough time to open the bluefin tuna fisheries for the full 2024 season—the aim is to open them in early August—charter businesses will lose revenue, and there will be an increased risk of illegal fishing.

I hope I have reassured Members about the purpose and aims of the instrument, which will deliver socioeconomic opportunities to coastal communities. For the reasons I set out, I commend it to the Committee.

9.31 am

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a particular pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Huq, and it is always a pleasure to see the Minister in her place. I have to say that I was rather expecting to see the fisheries Minister this morning, and I suspect that yesterday afternoon he was expecting to be here. I hope he is in good health.

I should say at the outset that the Whips need not worry: we will not oppose the instrument, as we welcome it. Only a few weeks ago, we discussed the Sea Fisheries (International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas) (Amendment) Regulations 2024, and I was going to ask the fisheries Minister why the two

instruments could not have been considered together. Perhaps the Minister can give us some insight into what is going on at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs at the moment, because it is a puzzle to some of us.

The Minister's introduction was, as ever, thorough. We absolutely agree that the return of the magnificent bluefin tuna to British waters in recent years after a long period of absence is welcome. It is not entirely clear why stocks have been replenished so significantly. A range of environmental factors has been cited, such as the warming of waters around the UK, which has perhaps led to an increase in the supply of the fish that the tuna feed upon. Credit should also go to the international interventions, through the international convention for the conservation of Atlantic tunas, which the Minister mentioned, to ensure careful management of the number of bluefin tuna. That is particularly impressive, given that they are highly migratory and mobile.

We must learn the lesson from the absence of those important fish from our waters for so long, and take every appropriate measure to prevent a reversal of the successful interventions, perhaps through overfishing, and facilitate a continuing revival of the stock. Given the interest in fisheries management of pressured stocks in the south-west—particularly pollack—this should give us confidence that, when fisheries management is done well, it can be successful.

We recognise that it is very important for the UK to comply with rules and obligations relating to our membership of the international convention for the conservation of Atlantic tunas. We support the primary purpose of this SI, which is to ensure that the UK has in place a proper legislative framework and enforcement powers with regard to recreational fishing. As I say, we discussed commercial fishing a few weeks ago.

The UK Administrations apparently do not currently have the power to comply with the ICCAT requirement to prohibit any recreational targeting of bluefin tuna unless specially authorised. We agree that this legislative deficit should be rectified for several reasons, including safeguarding the return of bluefin tuna and ensuring that the fishing stock is sustainable. Stocks need to be carefully monitored.

The SI also allows recreational fisheries to open—the Minister referred to their social and economic benefits. I recognise that the fisheries are welcomed by many fishers. I appreciate the economic benefits that they bring, particularly to coastal areas that have been struggling, and also the valuable data collection that they facilitate, but I have some questions.

Will the Minister explain how the Department has arrived at the number of permits it has decided to grant? Can she reveal any future plans to modify the number of permits and the rationale for doing so? It is important that a robust structure is in place for managing the fisheries, enforcing the rules and preventing illegal fishing. Will she provide assurances that a robust management regime will be in place before the fisheries are opened?

Similarly, what plans does the Department have for a smooth transition from the CHART programme to the full catch and release recreational fishery, ensuring that the transition does not impact fish welfare and mortality

rates? As several stakeholders have stated, targeting bluefin tuna needs preparation, the right gear, and a high level of skill in handling a large pelagic fish. It is not a simple matter.

Numerous responses to the consultation exercise expressed a desire for more guidance and training in catch and release techniques, which is not surprising as tuna can be a very big fish and it is sometimes extremely challenging to perform a catch and release operation properly. It is important that we do not damage the fish in the process of releasing them. I fear that without clear instructions and possibly training, that could happen. Does the Minister have statistics on survival rates in catch and release? Are there plans to issue clearer guidance and/or training on the catch and release of bluefin tuna?

I note that the introduction of charges for permits has been postponed. Can the Minister provide an explanation for the postponement and an update on any work that has been undertaken to determine the scope and scale of future charges, as well as how any charging income would be used? Perhaps she could shed some light on the overarching issue of how she and her colleagues arrived at the distribution of the UK's quota between commercial and recreational fishing. I appreciate that she might not be in a position to answer everything today, so I will be happy if she writes to me later.

We greatly welcome the fact that now the stocks of bluefin tuna are sufficiently replenished we are permitted a quota and we are in a position to open the fisheries. We will not oppose the legislation and will look for it to be successful in ensuring that the numbers of bluefin tuna continue to rise and that the new fisheries thrive.

9.37 am

**Rebecca Pow:** I welcome the shadow Minister's support. I hoped he would support the regulations given his interest and background in coastal issues, so that is positive. He and I agree that this legislation been much called for, is extremely welcome and will make a big difference to our coastal communities, which face many challenges. Anything we can do to help them is welcome.

I will make my best effort to answer the shadow Minister's questions. I am standing in for the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, so if I fail to answer any of the questions, my team will make a note of them and we will get back to the hon. Gentleman, but I shall do my best.

The shadow Minister asked why this instrument was not combined with the Sea Fisheries (International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas) (Amendment) Regulations 2024. This instrument needed its own time. It is very important, and to include it with another instrument was not appropriate. We wanted this instrument to be fully dealt with because so much research, as the hon. Gentleman knows, has gone into it. We have had trials and a lot of people have fed into this, so it is important to give it its own time. The other regulations dealt with an administrative amendment, as he knows, to bring bluefin tuna management into line with ICCAT requirements. It was not appropriate to combine the two instruments.

The shadow Minister asked about the number of permits. Those are based on a fisheries model used to forecast tuna mortality for a given length of season and

[Rebecca Pow]

number of permits. The whole model has been developed with the industry and a lot of discussion has taken place with the MMO, Cefas—the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science—the Angling Trust and fishermen themselves, so I hope that that answer satisfies him.

The hon. Gentleman and I agree that it is really good news that the stocks have recovered. That demonstrates—this relates to matters that I particularly dealt with as the previous marine Minister—that if the right science is involved, so that we know what our fish stocks are, and then the right management is put in place, it is possible for our seas to recover. We know that from our marine protected areas—that is why they are so important—and our highly protected marine areas. This situation is a good demonstration of it, because taking the right action has allowed the stocks to recover, although there will be an impact, which we do not quite know yet, in relation to climate change and warming seas. Much of the food for the tunas—the herring and mackerel that they eat—has moved, which probably has some link to climate change or change in currents. That is why it is so important to monitor our stocks and keep an eye on what is happening.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned welfare. Obviously, that issue has been carefully considered. Natural England has been involved in the code of conduct on welfare, and a lot of consultation has occurred to ensure that we have the right measures in place, in relation to the fishing, to reduce any mortality. The evidence from the trials shows that having the right training and advice for the skippers and those who will be taking part in the recreational fishing can really reduce the

mortality rates. That is why the training programmes are so important and everyone is being encouraged to go on them. It is so that when they apply for and get their permit, we know that the whole industry will be conducted responsibly, with the best welfare in mind.

Consideration has included the type of hooks used. The advice is to use circular hooks, which do not go as far down the fish's throat and cause less damage. All that was researched very closely. Interestingly—I asked this question about the tuna—the fishermen do not even pull them right out of the water; they have to remain alongside the boat. All those matters were taken into account in the debates and discussions about welfare, so I hope that I have reassured the hon. Gentleman about that. There is a very clear code of conduct and guidance, but all of it will still be up for review. There will be further trials, and the system can be tweaked and changed, if necessary, as the scheme goes along.

I hope that my comments give the hon. Gentleman assurances about many of the questions that he asked. I reiterate the need for this instrument in order to enable the UK fisheries Administrations to establish recreational bluefin tuna fisheries in their waters. I stress that the regulations will bring social and economic benefits to the fishing industry and our coastal communities, which need that so much. They have also been devised with the codes of conduct and so on, so that the whole industry will be sustainable. This is sustainable management of bluefin tuna. Again, I commend the instrument to the Committee.

*Question put and agreed to.*

9.44 am

*Committee rose.*