

## Environmental Targets briefing from Wildlife and Countryside Link & Greener UK The Environmental Targets (Marine Protected Areas) (England) Regulations 2022

### Summary

- The target for at least 70% of protected features in MPAs being in favourable condition by 2042 is welcome.
- However, updated proposals for monitoring progress towards meeting this target fall short, focussing on contributors to favourable condition rather than measuring favourable condition itself.
- Defra also needs to clarify how the target will align with existing Good Environmental Status targets, set under the UK Marine Strategy.

This statutory instrument was laid in draft under the affirmative procedure on 15 December 2022 under [Section 1](#) of the Environment Act 2021. It will place a legal duty on the Secretary of State to ensure that by 31 December 2042 at least 70% of protected features in marine protected areas (MPAs) will be in favourable condition, with the remaining protected features to be in a recovering condition. Defra [estimates](#) that currently 44% of protected features in MPAs are favourable condition.

We wish to highlight that:

### Plans for monitoring progress towards the target need to be reconsidered

The Spring 2022 Environment Act targets [consultation](#) stated that progress in delivering the MPA target would be monitored by “*additional reporting on changes in individual feature condition*”. As explained in the [explanatory memorandum](#) for the Statutory Instrument, this commitment has now been removed – “*instead, our 5-year interim targets will report on the extent to which pressures such as damaging fishing or recreational activity are removed from MPAs*”.

The Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee’s [report](#) on Environment Act targets provides the Government’s response to the question we asked about why this change was made. It is a non-answer, which sheds little to no light on the reasoning behind the change: “*We have removed the reference to ‘additional reporting on changes in individual feature condition’ from the target that we consulted on. We will instead be undertaking additional reporting on the extent to which pressures have been removed from MPAs, as part of our assessments into those features in a recovering condition.*”

The underlying reason may be a desire to make the target easier to meet. This monitoring change assumes that the removal of pressures automatically equates to improvement in feature condition. The secondary criterion of removing pressures will be easier to meet than the primary criterion of measurable condition improvements. Defra should consider returning to the more stringent monitoring approach originally proposed, to ensure that the target being met corresponds with an actual improvement in the condition of MPA features. The focus should be on real world environmental outcomes, rather than on contributors to those outcomes.

Defra also needs to set out plans to improve monitoring across the board. [Only 13%](#) of UK MPAs have full monitoring plans in place. This will need to be enhanced if progress towards meeting the target is to be accurately measured.

Defra should also clarify how the MPA 2042 target will interact and align with the proposed achievement of Good Environmental Status targets at the next assessment in 2024 (and targets in assessments of Good Environmental Status going forward) set under the UK Marine Strategy.

### **A blue carbon target should be introduced**

Marine policy documents, including the Joint Fisheries Statement and the Marine Spatial Prioritisation Programme, frequently reference the need to protect and restore marine habitats that store carbon (known as blue carbon). However, there is no central driver towards this goal, and no mechanism to measure progress towards it. A blue carbon target would provide this central impetus, complementing the MPA target to build resilience against climate change and deliver ocean recovery.

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