

Secretary of State for the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
2 Marsham Street
SW1 1PD

Dear Secretary of State,

Re: Government Response to Efra Committee Marine Mammal Inquiry

I write as the Chair of Wildlife and Countryside Link's Marine Mammal Working group, to ask you to reconsider the recommendations of the Efra Committee's recent report 'Protecting Marine Mammals in the UK and Abroad'.

The Efra Committee report offered a robust plan of action to recover declining marine mammal species. Stronger legislation to provide marine mammal protection is sorely needed in the UK. While we recognise that time remaining in Parliament is short, we would encourage the identification of a route to legislation, similar to the excellent example of the Marine Mammal Protection Act in the United States to reach our international 30 X 30 target at sea.

We strongly endorse the JNCC's quick and cost-effective recommendation for seals to be added to the list of species in Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act. In Cornwall, 68% of seals are disturbed when people are present causing unnecessary stress to hundreds of individual mammals per year. A 2021 Parliamentary Petition 'Strengthen laws protecting seals' gained signatures from every single UK constituency and this easily implementable measure will protect all native and vagrant species from increased disturbance.

Another huge opportunity to improve marine mammal protection would be better monitoring. While we support the innovative approaches outlined in the Government's response to the Efra Committee, we urge a greater focus on existing, effective solutions such as a well-designed, Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) with cameras. If made mandatory on all fishing vessels, with timebound implementation, it would enable a better understanding of one of the biggest threats to marine mammal populations and a suitable fishing industry, bycatch in fishing gear. We welcome the announcement that the Government will respond to the REM consultation within the next month and welcome the opportunity to engage with the England-specific work plan for implementation of the Bycatch Mitigation Initiative (BMI). The delivery of a coordinated, cross-taxa (species) approach to mitigation for bycatch reduction is essential for implementing effective measures and trials. We urge immediate action on REM in known high risk fisheries.

More widely, we support the Government's current research programmes on marine mammal conservation and encourage further practical, implementable outputs by the end of the financial year, particularly from Clean Catch 2.0 and the marine Natural Capital Assessment Programme. We also remain grateful for your work on Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs) and hope to see a rapid roll out of accompanying bylaws by early 2024, and quick progress on effective HPMAs management and new site designations.

The Wildlife and Countryside Link remains keen to work with you and your team to implement our shared goals to recover marine mammal populations. We hope that you will agree to reconsider Defra's response to the Efra committee recommendations and would be happy to provide any evidence to assist with this reappraisal. We look forward to hearing from you soon.

Yours sincerely,

Lucy Babey
Chair of the Wildlife and Countryside Link Marine Mammals Group

Please send replies to cassie@wcl.org.uk

This letter is supported by the following members of the Wildlife & Countryside Link Marine Mammal Group.



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