



Department  
for Environment  
Food & Rural Affairs

# Consultation on the proposed Southern North Sea and Channel Skates and Rays Fisheries Management Plan

October 2024

Version: public consultation

We are the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We're responsible for improving and protecting the environment, growing the green economy, sustaining thriving rural communities and supporting our world-class food, farming and fishing industries.

We work closely with our 33 agencies and arm's length bodies on our ambition to make our air purer, our water cleaner, our land greener and our food more sustainable. Our mission is to restore and enhance the environment for the next generation, and to leave the environment in a better state than we found it.



© Crown copyright 2024

This information is licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. To view this licence, visit [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/)

This publication is available at [www.gov.uk/government/publications](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications)

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at [FMPconsultations@defra.gov.uk](mailto:FMPconsultations@defra.gov.uk)

## Contents

Introduction .....	4
The Southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP .....	4
Using and sharing your information .....	5
Background: Fisheries Management Plans .....	5
Why are we publishing FMPs? .....	5
What are FMPs? .....	6
How FMPs work .....	6
FMPs and other coastal states .....	6
Approach to the development of the FMPs .....	7
Summary of Southern North Sea and Channel Skates and Rays FMP .....	7
Evidence .....	8
Goals for the management of southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays fisheries .....	9
Proposed management of southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays fisheries .....	10
Implementation .....	14
Conclusion .....	14
Strategic Environmental Assessment .....	15
What is the Environmental Report and how was it developed? .....	15
Summary of Southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays Environmental Report .....	15
Regulatory Impact Assessments .....	17
How to respond to this consultation .....	17
Duration of the consultation .....	18
Responses .....	18
Enquiries .....	18

# Introduction

The United Kingdom has some of the best wild seafood resources in the world. Our fish stocks are a public asset which generate food and create jobs, and recreational opportunities in a sector with a strong sense of identity and pride for their communities. These fish stocks also form a vital part of our marine ecosystems.

Many of our fish stocks are under a range of pressures such as fishing and climate change. Fishing can also have impacts on our marine environment, for example, through accidental bycatch or the effect of fishing gears on the seabed. It is therefore important to consider both the positive and negative effects of fishing as part of overall management of our fisheries and the marine environment.

The [Environmental Improvement Plan \(EIP\) 2023](#) sets out how we will improve our environment here in the UK and around the world and sets a plan for a decade of delivery with target-led actions towards leaving our environment in a better state than when we inherited it.

The [Joint Fisheries Statement \(JFS\)](#), as required by the Fisheries Act 2020, sets out how the UK fisheries policy authorities (Defra, Scottish Government, Welsh Government and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland) will prepare and publish 43 Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs) by 2028. The plans will bring together the evidence on the state of the stocks and identify measures and actions necessary to improve the evidence base and manage our fisheries in a sustainable way. Policies in an FMP will set out both the short-term actions and longer-term vision for the management of the fishery. The plans must also consider relevant wider legal obligations including the environmental principles under the [Environment Act 2021](#) and the need for strategic environmental assessment under the [Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004](#).

There are opportunities for growth through a profitable and more sustainable fishing and seafood industry. We are keen to continue to work closely with commercial and recreational fishing interests and other stakeholders as we develop our plans for managing fisheries in the UK.

The complete list of FMPs that are being prepared by each of the fisheries authorities is set out in the JFS.

## The Southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP

The proposed southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP covers only English waters.

This consultation is seeking your views on:

- The draft Southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP as required by Schedule 1, Part 3 of the Fisheries Act (2020); prepared by Defra.
- The draft Southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays Environmental Report which describes the likely environmental impacts of the FMP, as required under the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004. This has been drafted by Defra.

A de-minimis regulatory impact assessment has also been developed, which describes the anticipated economic impact of the plan on the fishing sector and associated businesses. We would welcome additional economic evidence to update our assessment.

This consultation is particularly relevant to:

- Individuals, groups, or businesses who are engaged in the fishing, seafood, or aquaculture sectors, including individuals, groups or businesses from the UK or from outside the UK who fish in UK waters;
- Other individuals, groups or businesses who are sea users, for example, marine industries such as offshore renewables and sailing bodies; and
- National and local interest groups such as environmental and recreational non-governmental organisations and industry federations.

## Using and sharing your information

How we use your personal data is set out in the FMP consultation privacy notice which can be found in the related documents section on the consultation page.

This consultation is being conducted in line with the Cabinet Office 'Consultation Principles' and can be found at: [Consultation principles: guidance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultation-principles)

If you have any comments or complaints about the consultation process, please send them to [consultation.coordinator@defra.gov.uk](mailto:consultation.coordinator@defra.gov.uk)

## Background: Fisheries Management Plans

### Why are we publishing FMPs?

The Fisheries Act 2020 (the Act) sets out the legal framework to manage fisheries in the UK, including the provision to prepare and publish FMPs. FMPs will protect and recover stocks, support a sustainable fishing industry and safeguard the environment. The JFS lists 43 proposed FMPs tailored to specific stocks and locations, aiming to reform and redefine domestic fisheries management.

## What are FMPs?

FMPs are evidence-based action plans designed to achieve sustainable fisheries. Each FMP outlines short-term actions and long-term visions, aiming to restore or maintain fish stocks at sustainable levels. These plans apply to both commercial and recreational fishing, addressing broader environmental, economic, and social concerns. Where appropriate, FMPs may identify actions to address wider issues identified during their development such as environmental or social and economic considerations.

## How FMPs work

The management of Fisheries is a devolved competency, currently managed through regulation, byelaws, licence conditions and voluntary measures. FMPs may lead to changes to these legal instruments and voluntary agreements.

National Fisheries Authorities (in this case Defra and the Marine Management Organisation) are legally required to act in accordance with the policies set out in the plans and will work with the Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (IFCAs), Centre for Environment, Fisheries, and Aquaculture Science (Cefas), Natural England and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) on implementation.

FMPs identify a range of short and longer-term actions. Plans will be adaptive and develop over time as further evidence is gathered and measures are implemented. Whilst each FMP will focus on specific stock(s), it will also be important to ensure they work together and recognise the needs of fishermen or stakeholders who are affected by more than one FMP.

Each FMP must be reviewed within six years of its publication or sooner, if required. An FMP can also be replaced or amended at any time following a consultation, allowing the plan to be kept up to date.

FMP actions will need to be implemented iteratively over their lifetime to have an impact on how fisheries are managed. It may therefore take some time to show benefits in terms of improving the sustainability of stocks and fisheries.

## FMPs and other coastal states

Whilst having regulatory autonomy over its fisheries, the UK is committed to working with other coastal States to ensure sustainable management of shared fisheries resources and to continuing to build our strong and positive working relationships. Through annual consultations with the European Union (EU) and other coastal states, as well as negotiations in multilateral and bilateral forums, the UK aims to achieve, or contribute to the achievement of the objectives in the Act.

FMPs provide a long-term framework for managing fishing activity, ensuring stock sustainability and a healthy marine environment. These plans will inform multi-year strategies for conservation and management of stocks proposed by the UK and EU under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA).

Regulatory measures to implement FMPs will apply to all vessels fishing in UK waters. The UK will notify the EU of any changes affecting EU vessels.

## Approach to the development of the FMPs

Developed in a collaborative and transparent way, our aim is to ensure that FMPs are relevant to the fishery or fisheries and support a more practical and flexible approach to fisheries management tailored to species, locations, and fishing activities.

The FMPs are being developed in different ways, allowing us to try new approaches and test how best to develop the plans and engage with stakeholders. Delivery partners worked closely with industry groups and other stakeholders, and we will continue to build on this participatory approach and apply it to FMP development and through to implementation stages.

We have learned valuable lessons from the consultation process on the first set of FMPs in 2023. In response to stakeholder feedback Defra has adopted a slightly different approach for the next set of plans, aiming to strike a better balance between the volume of consultation documentation (while also recognising the guidelines for public consultations and our statutory requirements) and ensuring stakeholders have sufficient information to engage meaningfully with the consultation process.

We have reduced the overall volume of material and incorporated evidence directly supporting the proposed goals or measures into each plan. Based on feedback we have also reduced the number of consultation questions. Further background will be published alongside the final FMPs as supporting documentation.

## Summary of Southern North Sea and Channel Skates and Rays FMP

As set out in the JFS, FMPs are to be developed for those stocks that are of social and economic importance, at risk of significant over-exploitation and have an ecosystem significance. Therefore, the southern North Sea and English Channel skates and rays FMP in its first iteration covers the following seven species (11 stocks) of rays within English waters in International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) divisions 4b and 4c (Southern North Sea) and 7d and 7e (English Channel):

- thornback ray (*Raja clavata*)
- blonde ray (*Raja brachyura*)

- undulate ray (*Raja undulata*)
- small-eyed ray (*Raja microocellata*)
- spotted ray (*Raja montagui*)
- cuckoo ray (*Leucoraja naevus*)
- starry ray (*Amblyraja radiata*).

Skates and rays were prioritised for an FMP as they can be vulnerable to overexploitation. This is because, compared to most bony fish, they are long lived, slow-growing, and are late to mature at between 5 and 10 years of age, with the smaller bodied species maturing at an earlier age. Skates and rays are taken as a bycatch in most bottom trawl fisheries, some of which may target skates and rays in certain areas at certain times of the year. They are also a target species or bycatch in gill net, tangle net and long-line fisheries.

Skates and rays are a popular target species for boat-based recreational fishers, although catches from shore-angling also occur. Anglers who target skates and rays will usually practice catch-and-release and so levels of mortality from recreational fisheries are uncertain.

The FMP used the available evidence to assess the status of the stocks, identify existing management measures and set out policies and actions to manage the skate and ray fisheries in the southern North Sea and English Channel.

The overarching aim of the FMP is to deliver sustainable management of FMP species exploitation to a position driven by robust stock assessments, supported by consistent data collection and research programmes. The management measures and actions linked to delivering the goals detailed in the FMP describe the steps towards sustainable management.

The FMP was developed in collaboration with the Marine Management Organisation (MMO), and a working group made up of fisheries stakeholders, including commercial and recreational fishers, and wider engagement with coastal communities, supply chain businesses, scientists and environmental non-governmental organisations.

**Q1. Do you have any comments on the engagement process for developing this FMP? See FMP engagement report for details.**

## Evidence

The species within scope of the FMP are caught across a range of seasonal and gear-specific fishery subsets and otherwise more generally caught in mixed fisheries with other quota stocks.

Commercially, the FMP fisheries averaged £1.483m to UK vessels per annum (from 2016 to 2021), with 98% of this being landed by English vessels. Fisheries landings data show thornback rays to be the most important species in the scope of the FMP by weight and value for both the UK and EU fleets. Blonde rays, spotted rays, cuckoo rays and undulate rays emerge as the second, third, fourth and fifth most important species by weight and



value, respectively. An average of 2,230t of focal species were landed annually from the FMP area (from 2016 to 2021), 54% of which was thornback ray (total accounting for 1,195t; £1.86m), 27% was blonde ray (total accounting for 509t; £997k), 10% spotted ray (total accounting for 211t; £349k) and 8% cuckoo ray (total accounting for 215t; £297k). Skates and rays typically fetch low prices (in comparison to the EU market) in the UK market.

The recreational catch data in respect of the FMP species is limited but existing research has indicated that it is of high economic and social value and may form a key component of coastal community income. Further evidence gathering is required through the implementation of the FMP.

As skate and ray species are caught as mixed-fishery bycatch, by recreational anglers and through targeted seasonal fisheries by a range of gears and vessels, the range of fishing activities that interact with the species is broad. Furthermore, as the ray species assemblage and the availability of other fishing opportunities differs regionally, there is variation in the composition of skate and ray landings by species across the Southern North Sea and English Channel.

There are currently 11 stocks within scope of this FMP. There is sufficient available scientific evidence for five of the stocks in scope of the FMP to be assessed against Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) by ICES and are considered data category two. Three stocks have been assessed against MSY proxy by ICES and are considered data category 3. Three stocks have not been assessed by ICES and are considered data category five. More evidence gathering is required to improve data for these stocks.

Currently there is one stock within scope of this FMP assessed by ICES for which sustainability concerns have been identified; the ICES assessment for Starry ray in the southern North Sea has identified fishing pressure exceeds the FMSY proxy, and the stock size falls below the index trigger so zero catches have been advised up to 2027.

Species-specific sustainability concerns have anecdotally been raised by stakeholders engaged in the development of the FMP. These concerns centred on the state of the stocks for thornback in ICES area 4c, and undulate ray in 7d and 7e.

**Q2. Do you have any comments on the evidence used in the draft FMP?**

## **Goals for the management of southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays fisheries**

The FMP goals are based around key themes of evidence, social and economics, and sustainable fisheries contributing towards delivering the Fisheries Act objectives. The goals are as follows:

The FMP goals have been grouped into three distinct themes:

### **Sustainable fisheries goals**

- 1) deliver effective management of skate and ray fisheries in the southern North Sea and English Channel.
- 2) deliver effective management to contribute to restoring, increasing or maintaining skate and ray stocks, and where possible identify, minimise and mitigate pressures on skate and ray stocks.
- 3) contribute to improving biological and environmental sustainability by understanding and reducing the wider impacts of skate and ray fishing.

### **Social and economic goals**

- 4) better understand and optimise social and economic benefits.
- 5) develop partnership working to build capacity for industry to be able to input into matters affecting skate and ray fisheries management.

### **Evidence goals**

- 6) better understand the wider skate and ray species evidence gaps.
- 7) develop the skates and rays evidence base.

The quality of data for the FMP species varies, therefore this FMP lays out a suite of goals and measures aimed at improving data collection and understanding of fisheries and species covered by this FMP. In particular these steps aim to facilitate future stock assessments for the species currently lacking ICES assessments. For data limited stocks, the FMP seeks to follow a precautionary approach to domestic fisheries management to improve or maintain stock status, whilst we work to improve evidence on these stocks as a priority to support progress towards MSY assessment.

The FMP sets out a goal for building capacity across the fishing sectors to input into FMP delivery. To support this goal, the FMP proposes creating a skates and rays management group, which will act as a means for addressing management concerns and needs in a participatory manner. The proposed group may include representatives of the commercial fishing sector, the recreational fishing sector, processors and markets, the regulatory authorities, fisheries scientists, policy makers and other interested stakeholders.

In terms of delivering the FMP goals and measures, short-term is considered to be approximately within two years of publication of the FMP, medium to long term is two years or more after publication. Each FMP goal is detailed, providing actions, timeframes and an approach.

**Q3. Do you have any comments on the goals in the draft FMP?**

## **Proposed management of southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays fisheries**

The FMP recognises that the southern North Sea and English Channel fisheries are distinct, given the physical characteristics of these regions that support differing habitats and fish assemblages. Therefore, management interventions will need to take spatial-

temporal variability into consideration. Additionally, the stocks within scope of this FMP are shared with the EU, and relevant joint commitments have been made through the Specialised Committee on Fisheries (SCF). Therefore, the UK will seek to develop measures jointly where appropriate, in recognition of the importance and value of consistent management across shared stocks.

The harvest strategy proposed within this FMP is for fisheries to be managed sustainably. To successfully contribute to the fisheries objectives of the Act, and the goals proposed for the Southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP, these stocks need to be better understood to evaluate the status of each stock, and under the precautionary approach, implement sustainable management as required. Management is considered where these species would benefit from intervention in the short and medium to long term, while additional evidence is collected, and the effectiveness of these management interventions is monitored.

In the short term there will be a focus on gathering data to contribute to the future assessment of the three ICES data category three stocks and the three ICES data category five stocks. Commitments for the medium to long-term will look to close the data gaps on all FMP species, in order to progress towards managing all stocks through MSY assessment.

In addition, the FMP management strategy has identified seven proposed areas of priority management intervention for consideration. These have been developed through evidence gathering and engagement with stakeholders, who recognised that change is required to improve the sustainability of the stocks and fisheries. Further work and consultation will need to be undertaken to determine the applicability of each of these measures and refine before the potential measures are introduced. These are:

**1. Minimum Conservation Reference Sizes (MCRS)** – the FMP proposes to consider the implementation of a MCRS as a method for protecting stock health and promoting population growth, through affording protection to juvenile skates and rays.

Currently 2 IFCAs (Kent and Essex IFCA and Southern IFCA) within the FMP's spatial jurisdiction have active, non-species-specific MCRS regulations for skates and rays. The MCRS for Kent and Essex IFCA is 40cm for whole rays, 19cm for a wing; and for Southern IFCA this is 40cm for whole rays and 20cm for a wing. However, there is no national MCRS beyond the 6nm boundary (except for undulate ray). Outside of the FMP area, there are different MCRS for skates and rays around the UK, including the waters of Guernsey (36cm), North-Western IFCA (45cm) and parts of Wales (45cm). There is also a voluntary code agreed by the North Devon Fishermen's Association (45cm).

This FMP proposes to gather further evidence to understand the potential effectiveness of MCRS as a method for protecting stock health and promoting population growth, through affording protection to juvenile skates and rays in English waters of ICES divisions 4b, 4c, 7d and 7e.

In the short term, this will include initiating demographic modelling to better understand the potential benefits of minimum and maximum sizes. It will focus on exploring the efficacy of MCRSs on skates and rays by reducing uncertainties around selection patterns, quota availability and discard survivability.

Given each of the FMP species exhibits a differing maturity size, a universal MCRS is less effective than more species-specific measures, therefore the evidence gathered in the short term should help to determine the most appropriate approach to introducing a MCRS in the medium to long term, with options including, but not limited to, a universal MCRS, a species-specific MCRS, brigading MCRS for smaller-bodied and larger-bodied species.

**2. Maximum Conservation Reference Sizes (MaxCRS)** – maximum sizes offer protection to larger, more fecund individuals which are important as brood stock. There is a biological rationale in protecting the largest individuals (in general, larger females are more fecund and produce larger eggs, and these may be laid over a more protracted spawning season), though empirical evidence to demonstrate this is lacking, as fecundity-at-length data is unavailable.

This FMP will look to build on existing evidence on skates and rays' maturation and fecundity at length/width to inform the potential use of MaxCRS as a future management tool. Evidence gathering of MaxCRS for prioritised FMP species is proposed for the short term, and implementation of MaxCRS for FMP species in English waters of ICES areas 4b, 4c, 7d and 7e will be considered in the medium to long term, if appropriate. These measures will aim to collect the necessary evidence to support an economic impact assessment of measures set against different maturity sizes.

**3. Voluntary guidelines** – in the short term the FMP proposes to introduce handling guidelines for recreational and commercial fishers to ensure skates and rays not intended to be retained can be released in the best possible condition, improving discard survival rates. Guidelines will also serve as an educational tool to help with compliance for managing the stock.

In the medium term, utilising these guidelines to aid in species identification, training workshops and data recording will support the development of future measures under this FMP.

**4. Establish sentinel fishery for small eyed ray in 7e** – this FMP considers the merits of establishing a sentinel fishery (to collect fisheries-based data) for small-eyed ray in ICES Area 7e, in order to facilitate a sustainable local fishery. In the [negotiations between the UK and the EU for the 2024](#) fishing year, a joint ambition was agreed to lift the non-retention regulation in favour of a scientific fishery for small-eyed ray in 7e, with the aim to improve the availability of data and therefore the quality of the 7de assessment. This measure is being explored in the short term, with a medium-term intention to consider seeking to reopen the 7e small-eyed ray fishery, if appropriate, based on the outcome of monitoring the sentinel fishery.

**5. Alternative approaches to current group Total Allowable Catches (TACs)** – it is recognised that the current TAC management approach for skates and rays provides limited protection for vulnerable stocks and for possible under-exploitation of healthy stocks.

The indicative roadmap for skates and rays<sup>1</sup> that was jointly developed with the EU in the SCF sets out key next steps and considerations towards addressing the concerns that the current group TAC management provides limited protection for vulnerable stocks and for possible under-exploitation of healthy stocks. It recommends exploring potential alternatives to the group TACs for those species. The FMP recognises this and has identified some priority areas that could be considered as part of that work. This includes exploring the possible introduction of single species/stock TACs as recommended in the ICES advice, noting the differing conservation status of the species' and that they exhibit differing biological traits. More evidence is required to better understand the impact of this, including the possible choke risks. Therefore, in the short to medium term this FMP proposes evidence gathering to explore these alternative approaches.

**6. Seasonal and spatial closures** – In the medium to long-term the FMP proposes to explore and where appropriate implement spatial and temporal closures as a means to protect essential habitats for skate and ray species. This will be contingent on developing a robust evidence base identifying habitats important for skate and ray recruitment and affording appropriate protections which encourage stock health. It will build evidence on the effectiveness of spatial-temporal management such as closed seasons and 'Ray Boxes' for protecting breeding and juvenile assemblages, including investigating the association between areas of 7d and undulate ray reproduction. It will also seek opportunities to align protections with MPA closures to maximise sustainability impact for skates and rays, while minimising impact on fishers.

**7. Sector support measures** – as a long-term measure, the FMP proposes options to explore for providing support to the fishing sector, dependent on evidence gathering. While this approach is a non-statutory requirement, and the associated actions and measures go beyond the legal obligations for FMPs in section 6 of the Fisheries Act, Defra welcomes these industry commitments to complement and support the delivery of the FMPs and objectives in the Act.

Management measures are being recommended where concerns have been identified in the development of the FMP. These concerns were identified through assessment of the stock status, risk identification of the key environmental considerations associated with fishing for skates and rays, literature reviews of global skate and ray management, through engagement with stakeholders and through the FMP working group. The proposed measures will look to restore, increase or maintain stock levels for the species managed under this FMP where suitable.

This FMP will seek to harmonise introduction of new measures with the Celtic Seas FMP currently under development, where management of western Channel stocks of skates and rays overlap.

**Q4. Do you have any comments on the measures and actions in the draft FMP?**

**Q5. Would you support the introduction of a MCRS for some or all of the stocks covered in the FMP?**

**Please consider and include your opinion on appropriate reference sizes (including measurement in cm, whole/winged), species/stocks that could benefit from a MCRS (either stock/species specific or brigaded) and the location where an MCRS would be beneficial (all FMP area or specific areas).**

## Implementation

Once formally published, the plan will need to be implemented. This will be an iterative process, and Defra will be working closely with the commercial and recreational fishing sector and wider stakeholders to develop implementation plans. Publishing the FMP is the start of a multi-year cycle, and we will ensure that the plans strike the balance between building momentum for short-term actions and setting direction for the longer term. This can be further iterated as the evidence base is improved. The plans must be reviewed at least every six years.

Cross-regulator, government and industry groups have been central to the development of the draft FMPs. Stakeholder involvement and ongoing collaboration underpins successful delivery of the FMPs will continue beyond their publication.

## Conclusion

In summary, the southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP describes existing management measures and the available science and evidence, highlighting where gaps exist, to assess the status of seven species/11 stocks (thornback ray, blonde ray, undulate ray, small-eyed ray, spotted ray, cuckoo ray and starry ray) around England in 2024 to determine a sustainable level of exploitation.

The FMP sets out the policies and proposed steps to build the evidence base while restoring, maintaining or increasing stock levels. To protect the stocks that are at risk of not being fished sustainably at present, the FMP proposes some precautionary management measures in the short term, while more evidence is gathered. Impact assessments will be carried out in parallel to the development of management measures to predict the impacts on the fishery.

**Q6. Do you have any additional comments on the draft FMP?**

## Strategic Environmental Assessment

Defra is legally required to consider the environmental impact of policies, plans and programmes. The Environment Act 2021 sets out environmental principles to guide policy making. The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 (SEA Regulations 2004) require any qualifying public plans, programmes and strategies to undergo Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) during their preparation and prior to publication if they are likely to have a significant effect on a European marine site (either positively or negatively). FMPs are plans or programmes for the purposes of the SEA Regulations 2004. Defra has determined that the draft Southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP may have a likely significant effect (either positive or negative) on a European site or a European offshore marine site and, therefore, has completed a SEA. Our initial results are documented in the draft southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP Environmental Report (ER) included within the current consultation. A final version will be published alongside the southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP, revised to account for comments and/or further information provided during the consultation and to reflect the final published FMP.

## What is the Environmental Report and how was it developed?

The SEA considers the likely significant environmental effects of implementing the policies and actions set out in the draft southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP. The ER sets out the findings of this process. The report describes the current state of the environment (the baseline) and the likely significant effects of proposals in the draft southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP to the baseline.

The assessment identifies where the draft southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP could make a positive impact on the baseline and hence our marine environment. Where the FMP may have negative effects on the baseline, the report suggests actions to mitigate and/or monitor these effects. Defra developed the ER for the draft southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP. The scope and level of detail was informed through an early consultation with our statutory Consultation Bodies: Natural England, Environment Agency and Historic England together with further advice from the JNCC, as an advisor to the UK Government and devolved administrations on UK-wide nature conservation. We drew on published information on the state of the environment and the potential impact of fishing on environmental features.

## Summary of Southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays Environmental Report

The southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays ER has been produced in accordance with the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations

2004. The following issues (from Schedule 2 paragraph 6 of the SEA Regulations 2004) were scoped into the assessment: biodiversity, fauna, flora, geology and sediments (soil), water, climatic factors, cultural heritage, landscape and seascape. This report assesses the likely significant effects of the draft southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP on these issues.

The assessment was conducted against a baseline that primarily used existing evidence on the state of the marine environment set out in the updated [UK Marine Strategy Part 1](#) published in 2019. Additional sources of evidence were used to establish the current status of the marine environment in relation to issues, such as climatic factors, not covered by the UK Marine Strategy (UK MS). The historical impact of fishing activity on the marine environment has been considered part of the baseline. The assessment has been undertaken using the best available evidence to reach a suitable judgement on the environmental effects of the draft southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP.

Existing environmental effects of skates and rays fishing on those issues scoped into this assessment have been acknowledged and considered in this reporting, relating to Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), the UK MS descriptors and the wider environment. The potential positive and negative environmental effects of the draft southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP's policies and proposed measures alone and in-combination have also been assessed.

The SEA concluded that beyond the direct impact on targeted stocks, the fishery has an impact on the wider marine environment primarily through seabed disturbance (from mobile demersal gears) and bycatch of unwanted / protected species (mainly from drift and fixed nets). Actions have been proposed to investigate these impacts and use this evidence to develop robust mitigation strategies.

The impact of skates and ray fishing in MPAs is managed in the 0 to 12 nautical miles (nm) zone in English waters. Management in MPAs beyond the 12nm limit is being considered and implemented where necessary. Further work is required to reduce the impact of skate and ray fishing on habitats beyond MPAs to ensure GES targets for seabed integrity (D6) can be achieved. The contribution of skate and ray fishing to climate change related issues and cultural heritage through structural damage for example, was also identified as a potential impact.

The draft southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP has considered these impacts and sets out proposals to monitor, and where required, introduce mitigation to address these impacts.

The assessment of likely negative effects identified a low risk of significant adverse effects on the environment from implementing individual policies, measures, and actions. The policies, measures, and actions, will, where appropriate, be developed to avoid any potential negative effects identified by the assessment progress. The environmental effects of implementing the southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP



policies and measures will also be monitored to identify unforeseen adverse effects at an early stage, so appropriate remedial action can be undertaken.

**Q7. Do you have any comments on the assessment of the environmental effects of the draft FMP, as set out in the environmental report?**

## Regulatory Impact Assessments

Defra is completing regulatory impact assessments to assess the economic impacts of FMPs on businesses and the fishing sector.

For the purposes of the southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP consultation, we have drafted a de-minimis assessment (DMA) that outlines our rationale and approach to assessing the potential impact of the plan on business. This DMA is a supporting document.

Whilst the southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP identifies measures that could be introduced post-consultation, these proposed measures will be developed further and do not currently have sufficient detail for any economic analysis to be done. These proposed measures could be regulatory or deregulatory, and positive or negative to business, hence it is not possible to estimate impacts.

When individual measures are implemented, the statutory or non-statutory mechanism through which these will be implemented will have their own impacts assessed in the appropriate manner.

## How to respond to this consultation

The consultation will run primarily via the Citizen Space online portal. However, we will accept email and hard copy responses for those unable to access the online survey.

The consultation questions are in bold throughout this document and in the online survey.

Large print and braille versions of this document are available on request.

Defra has a statutory requirement to seek public views on the proposed FMP and its accompanying Environment Report.

The consultation survey has three parts:

1. Personal details and confidentiality (required)
2. Questions on the Southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP, Environmental Report and engagement report.
3. Consultee feedback on the online survey (required)

You only need to respond to the questions that you wish to. However, all respondents must complete the required 'Consultee feedback on the online survey' and 'personal details and confidentiality' sections before you are able submit your response to the online survey.

## Duration of the consultation

This consultation will run for 14 weeks, closing at 23:59 on 19 January 2025. Responses must be received by 23:59 on 19 January 2025.

## Responses

Responses can be:

- Submitted via the [Citizen Space online portal](#).
- Sent via email to: [FMPconsultations@defra.gov.uk](mailto:FMPconsultations@defra.gov.uk). If responding via email, please structure your response around the questions in bold throughout this document.
- Sent via post to:

Consultation – Southern North Sea and Channel skates and rays FMP  
FMP team – Marine and Fisheries  
Seacole Building, 2 Marsham St  
London  
SW1P 4DF

At the end of the consultation period, we will summarise the responses and place the summary on the UK Government's website.

## Enquiries

If you want to submit a consultation response, please contact:

[FMPconsultations@defra.gov.uk](mailto:FMPconsultations@defra.gov.uk)

If you have any general enquiries, please contact: [FMPs@defra.gov.uk](mailto:FMPs@defra.gov.uk)

The JFS can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/joint-fisheries-statement-jfs>

The Act can be found here: [Fisheries Act 2020 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)