Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative) Click here to watch Sarah speak

It is a pleasure to follow Jim Shannon.

I am proud to represent a fishing constituency where vessels operate all along the coastline from Bantham round to Torbay. The value of the catch to Brixham cannot be overestimated. It is the highest-value catch in England in monetary terms and is worth Â£27 million. The fantastic new Brixham market has a turnover this year of Â£23 million, which has sadly reduced from Â£25 million in the previous year. I hope that the Minister will accept an invitation to visit Brixham and many of the other ports along my constituency’s coastline. He would be most welcome.

We have 25 beam trawlers, 40 day boats and a growing leisure fleet contributing to our tourism sector and 375 people are employed locally as a direct result of the fishing industry in Brixham. That translates to 1,200 wider jobs in our local economy. No one can be in any doubt if they have been on board a commercial fishing vessel that fishing is the most dangerous of occupations in Britain. Those people work courageously and very hard in terrible conditions to put food on our plates.

Since the last debate, Torbay has been mourning the loss of Andrew Westaway. I pay tribute to all those who have given their lives at sea to put food on our plates and, like many other Members, pay tribute to our coastguard. This year in particular, I am thinking of our maritime rescue co-ordination centre in Brixham, which is sadly due for closure. I also pay tribute to the RNLI, to rescue boats such as Hope Cove, to those in the coast watch and to the Fishermen’s Mission, which does such an extraordinary job providing support to families who have lost loved ones and in supporting fishermen who work in or who have retired from the industry. In particular, I am thinking of the contribution of John Anderson in Brixham.

Our fishermen are making great efforts to reduce the environmental impact of what they do. I am grateful to my hon. Friend Peter Aldous for pointing out the work that has been done in Brixham, particularly with Project 50%. I pay tribute to those who have contributed to that. In particular, I am thinking of the extraordinary work of net designers and of those fishermen who have carried out the trials on beam trawlers. They have done extraordinary work and are now extending the use of rollerball technology to reduce the impact of by-catch and the environmental impact on the sea bed.

Our fishermen are under extraordinary pressure. In 2011, 22% of our fishermen’s turnover went on fuel costs. That increased to 27% in 2012. Alongside that, they are under huge pressure from the impact of changes to quota. As the Minister goes into the negotiations “I wish him well” may I ask him to consider the impact of the 75% reduction in the haddock quota? Can he confirm what I am hearing from my local fishermen, which, I gather, is also evidenced on the ICES website “that is, that there has been a significant increase in haddock stocks that is not yet recognised? Although fishermen in my constituency are taking part in the i-logs and completing what they catch while they are on board, they tell me that there is a significant delay in that information being recorded by the Marine Management Organisation. The trouble is that, because it is a mixed fishery, fishermen in my
constituency cannot stop catching haddock. As the discard ban is not coming in this year, they will be forced to discard healthy fish for the whole of this year and into the next. I urge the Minister to consider the evidence that the biomass for haddock has never been higher since we started recording it and to argue that we should roll over the existing TAC.

Western channel Dover sole is iconic to Brixham and we must consider the impact on fishermen of a 7% reduction in that catch and a 17% reduction in channel plaice. As the Minister goes into the negotiations, I ask him to consider the most recent evidence on biomass and argue for a roll-over of existing quotas rather than accept a reduction.

The combined efforts with the Brixham fleet have been effective in reversing the decline, but I want to move on now to what we can do to improve the science of recording catches and, in particular, the use of the EFF. Will the Minister confirm that the EFF fund will be extended into next year and will not now finish in December? When he looks at the EFF, I ask him to recognise that it operates between England and Scotland with the MMO. I have heard that although in Scotland projects can start pending a decision, in England that is not the case. That has had a considerable impact, meaning that the EFF has not been fully spent. Will the Minister confirm how much underspend there has been and what he intends to do to make the EFF easier to access? In particular, what will he do to put more of what the EFF does into supporting the science so that it can be kept up to date when future decisions are being made?

I would also support the use of the EFF for safety equipment, where it has been very valuable. The installation of tipping bars and conveyors on our scalloping fleet has had a significant impact on safety, but there is far more we could do to use the EFF more effectively to support businesses onshore as well as using it on board our vessels and to support sciences.

My final point is about a specific issue for the crabbing fleet. Five crabbing vessels operate in my constituency and they support 30 families. The crabbing fleet is under significant pressures from the effort restrictions and there are historic problems, too. The Minister will know that the French have 2 million kilowatt days whereas the UK has only 545. There is now an increasing threat that that will have to be shared with those who have latent licences. I feel that it is not reasonable to expect the fishermen to negotiate complex swaps with the French. I am grateful that the MMO took that on at the eleventh hour on this occasion, but will the Minister consider specifically whether small groups of families can negotiate such complex agreements? I feel that that is an important role that the MMO should be taking on on their behalf.

As the Minister goes into the negotiations, I hope that he will consider the enormous economic importance of this export industry and do everything he can to support our fishermen as we go forward. I hope that he will come down to visit them in my constituency, where he will have a very warm welcome.

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