Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee

It is a pleasure to serve under your expert chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I thank and pay tribute to my hon. Friend Mrs Murray, who spoke on a complex subject with her customary expertise and set out the difficulties faced by the fisheries industry. I join her in paying tribute to our fishermen, who put their lives on the line by taking to sea to put food on our plates. Likewise, I pay tribute to all those in the rescue services and those who raise money for charitable causes throughout our fishing industry and beyond.

I have the great honour of representing Brixham, Dartmouth and Salcombe. The fishing industry’s contribution to our local economy cannot be overestimated. Brixham lands the highest-value catch in England, and has added an extraordinary amount to our economy. Although the catch has increased by 5% since last year—largely because this year we have not had the appalling winter storms that we suffered in 2014—we still have not recovered to the level we were at five years ago, and much of the uplift in fishermen’s income has come because of factors such as falling oil prices, rather than because the challenges they face at sea are being addressed.

It is not just the fishermen themselves who contribute to our local economy; the wider industry on land does too. There is not only the processing sector but the engineers, electricians, painters, riggers and marine scientists, so the impact on our wider economy cannot be overestimated. It is not just about the value of the catch, which this year alone was £21.441 million; we need to bear in mind the effect across the wider economy rather than focus only on the fishing industry.

I do not want to repeat the points about the quotas that my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall made so eloquently, but will the Minister bear in mind the fact that in a mixed fishery the implementation of the discard ban has unintended consequences? Everyone recognises that there can be no morality in discarding perfectly good dead fish at sea. We have to be careful that implementing the policy does not just equate to discarding on land, and that discarding does not continue in the run-up to the introduction of the total ban.

In our mixed fisheries, particularly where species are recovering, if changes along the lines of those that my hon. Friend suggested are not made, we will see considerable, completely wasteful discarding this year. Will the Minister look into that? I hope that he will make the point very strongly that if we expect our fishermen to support changes that sometimes demand reductions in catches, we expect the same rigour to be applied when there is a clear increase in biomass and a compelling case to send things in the other direction. My hon. Friend’s point about the arbitrary 15% limit on the maximum uplift is right—surely that is wholly unacceptable. Will the Minister set out the points he will make at the Fisheries Council to try to get things to work in the other direction?

We should be going further on the issue of bass. No one in this Chamber is unconcerned about bass stocks. Although it was difficult for some sectors, the important change that was made to bring to an end pair trawling and increase the minimum landing size has received
widespread support. Nevertheless, closing the fishery entirely for six months appears draconian, and it will have huge unintended consequences for other species. Fishermen will be forced to switch their effort to other species, and we are likely to see an increase in wreck netting, for example. There are also implications for the spawning stock of fish such as pollock.

We need to look at the bigger picture. Fishermen make a strong case that we risk seeing the destruction of our sustainable under-10 metre fleet, which includes many rod-and-line fishermen who face becoming entirely unsustainable. That case has been put forcibly by a number of fishermen from the under-10 metre fleet. Rather than agreeing to conditions that will effectively put them out of business forever, will the Minister consider asking whether we can have a little more time to see the impact of important measures that have not yet been given a chance to take effect? Might there be a compromise that addresses the fact that such fishermen will be changing their effort?

We must also consider the fact that some fishermen in small vessels will be put at personal risk if they are driven further out to sea in dangerous conditions in order to sustain a livelihood. Will the Minister give us more detail about the measures he is going to put in place? The difficulty in trying to impose a one fish per angler bag limit on recreational anglers is that it is likely to be ignored. We want to carry recreational anglers with us. We must at least ask how the limit is going to be policed, because it is not clear at the moment.

On the science of our seas, we all know that we are in challenging times financially, but the importance of good science to guide the decisions made in Europe cannot be overstated. Will the Minister set out what he is doing to support the science behind our fisheries to ensure that future decisions are based on the best possible science? Peter Aldous Conservative, Waveney

My hon. Friend is spot on about the importance of science. Hidden away in last week’s autumn statement was the announcement of a significant £5 million investment in the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, which is the marine science arm of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, to be spent on refurbishing its premises in Lowestoft. That will give it the opportunity to work up exciting plans to carry forward its great work.

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee

I am delighted to hear that that is happening in my hon. Friend’s area. We would like to see that kind of investment around the UK, and we would like more scientists out on boats with our fishermen to collect the evidence that they need in real time. We should focus on basic marine science as well. My hon. Friend will know, for example, that the AstraZeneca premises in my constituency were taken over by Plymouth University. I hope that there will be a strong focus on everything we can do to improve our knowledge of marine science.

I know that many Members wish to speak, so I will bring my remarks to a close. I say again that I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will stress as firmly as he can that in a mixed fishery, particularly as biomass is increasing, the proposed quotas will not save a single fish unless we see the right level of uplift for some species. The fish will still be discarded at sea, perfectly healthy to eat, but dead. No one in this Chamber or beyond would support that.

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee
Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge, though, that there is a value attached to these quotas, and that there should be full compensation if they are removed unilaterally? As my hon. Friend Mrs Murray said, we need to recognise that the bulk of the fish on our plates must come from the large fleet.

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