Agriculture and Fishing

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee

Time is short, so I will congratulate my hon. Friend Scott Mann on bringing forward this debate, and endorse the many comments he and others have made about the importance of our farming industry. I would like to touch on: issues for our fishing industry, particularly fairness, markets, support and sustainability; our coastal communities—the Minister, whom I welcome to her post, will understand that, as she represents a coastal community—marine science; and the importance of talking to fishermen and farmers as policies go forward.

First is the issue of fairness—that is what fishermen are looking for. When 73 million of the channel fishing quota goes to British fishermen and 211 million goes to French fishermen, clearly that is out of balance. Fishermen tell me that they are unable to access waters within France’s 12-mile limit, but others are able to access waters within our 12-mile limit, so that again is an area in which we have an opportunity to make significant changes. Also, will the Minister also comment on the issue of quota hopping? That has long been a source of concern to our fishermen.

This is not just about our fishing communities and fishermen; it is about the onshore sector, markets and access to those markets. Will the Minister join me in congratulating Brixham market and Brixham Trawler Agents? Last week, Mike Shaw and his team topped the £1 million-mark for the value of the catch landed through Brixham market. That market was worth more than £23 million to our local economy in the past year. However, the majority of the produce that goes through that market is for export, principally to the European Union. Clearly, it is absolutely vital that we protect those markets, and that we do not drive the producer sector away from Brixham and other areas in the south-west to the European Union. I hope that the Minister will focus on that, as well as access for the important workers in that industry.

Many hon. Members have touched on support for our coastal communities, our fishermen and, indeed, for Brixham market and others. Although many grants have come from the European Union, we all accept that the money is recycled from our own resources. It will be terrific if we have more flexibility to use that money in a way that is right for our businesses and communities. Will the Minister comment on whether those processes will speed up, and become more transparent and less bureaucratic? We have a huge opportunity to do that.

There is also the important issue of sustainability. We will exit the common fisheries policy at a time when it finally seems to be getting its act together; the 2014 reforms have really started to make a difference. Continuing to look at this by sea basin area will be important. Clearly, under the United Nations arrangements, we will still rightly be bound to liaise with our neighbours when coming to these agreements; we cannot just unilaterally make changes. It is important that the Minister acknowledges the importance of having a commitment to a maximum sustainable yield and to protecting our marine environment.

We must also look at pollution controls and safety at sea. Those who put their lives on the
line for us to put fish on our plate deserve an absolute assurance that safety will be foremost in the Government's mind going forward.

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