

Through a combination of Net Limitation Orders (NLOs) limiting the number of net licences available and a buyout funded by the government and private parties, the number of drift nets operating has reduced from over 140 in the early 1990s to just over a dozen today. The most recent NLO (put in place in 2012) continues the progressive phase-out of drift net fishing on the North East coast, acknowledging that this particular fishery exploits fish from a number of river stocks including some that are not performing well (national policy has for some years been to phase out 'mixed stock' fisheries which cannot be effectively managed to protect the weakest stock).

The NLO will also reduce T and J net fishing in the region as current netsmen leave the fishery as it prevents new netsmen from entering it. As such, current netsmen can continue to buy a licence but new netsmen cannot join the fishery. A number of other controls are in place, for example on times when fishing can take place and the types of gear that can be used. In this way, commercial fishing in the region is being carefully managed without the measures in place creating undue hardship for the netsmen.

As you have noted, in 2012 the then Fisheries Minister instructed the Environment Agency that the drift net fishery must be closed in 2022. He also confirmed that there should be a formal review of the NLO in five years' time (i.e. in 2017) advising on the potential of maintaining some T and J or estuary nets, that will conform to national policy and North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation guidance, to further inform decisions on the longer-term future of this component of the fishery. The review goes beyond simply reassessing levels of regulation and requires further data, evidence and proper deliberation.

Given the extent of the work required to undertake an appropriately thorough review, amendments to the timetable are not being considered at present. It should be noted however that in 2012 the Environment Agency was also instructed to investigate the possibility of using catch limits to restrict the number of fish caught in the net fishery and is expected to report findings at the end of 2014. I expect that the Environment Agency's report will take into account the trends in catches and the need to secure sustainable fisheries of salmon and sea trout in the contributing rivers. Furthermore, the Environment Agency is able to consider, on an annual basis, whether changes to the management of any fishery are required in light of the results of annual stock assessments.

I hope you find this information helpful. If you are interested in discussing the management of the fishery further, please liaise directly with Jonathan Shelley at the Environment Agency who can be contacted on 0191 203 4151 or by email at: jonathan.shelley@environment-agency.gov.uk.



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