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## **JOINT NATURE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE**

### **UPDATE ON THE REGIONAL SEAS PILOT PROJECT**

#### **Paper by Malcolm Vincent**

#### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 As part of its current Review of Marine Nature Conservation, in which JNCC and the country agencies have been participating fully, Government intends to trial a proposed marine nature conservation framework on one of the Regional Seas tentatively identified during the course of the Review, namely the Irish Sea.
- 1.2 This Irish Sea Pilot Project was formally announced by Margaret Beckett, Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs at the launch of the Marine Stewardship Report (entitled *Safeguarding our Seas: A Strategy for the Conservation and sustainable Development of our Marine Environment*) on 1 May 2002.
- 1.3 The issue of the Regional Seas approach to marine nature conservation was considered by the Joint Committee at its strategy session in June 2001, in its discussion on current initiatives in the development of marine environmental strategies at its September 2001 meeting, and was included in the JNCC Corporate Plan for 2002/03 to 2005/06 approved at the Committee meeting March 2002.
- 1.4 This paper summarises the purpose of the Irish Sea trial, and the role which JNCC play in it over the next 2 years.

#### **2. Proposed marine nature conservation framework**

- 2.1 The proposed marine nature conservation framework to be trialled considers the sea in terms of four main components. These can be summarised as:
  - i. ensuring that the whole area of the sea from high watermark to the limits of UK<sup>1</sup> jurisdiction, is maintained in a healthy and environmentally-safe state;
  - ii. sub-dividing this whole sea area into a number of ecologically-distinct Regional Seas. The Irish Sea would be one such Regional Sea<sup>1</sup>;

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<sup>1</sup> Including, where appropriate, and through negotiation with other countries, also adjacent sea areas.

- iii. identifying the main ecological units of each Regional Sea (in terms of areas of discrete seabed landform, substrate type or water feature);
  - iv. identifying areas of national importance for the maintenance of marine biodiversity within each Regional Sea; in particular areas necessary to sustain nationally-important habitats or species populations.
- 2.2 For each of the above four components, the framework proposes that objectives will be set, and that authorities responsible for regulating marine activities will endeavour to achieve these objectives as they carry out their functions.
- 2.3 The proposed marine nature conservation framework is set within the wider context of the Government's policies on sustainable development, and, in particular, the Marine Stewardship Report. In consequence, objectives set under the framework should aim to be compatible with other objectives which aim to meet the needs of people for food, employment, energy, minerals, transport, recreation and enjoyment (and *vice versa*), both now and in the future. This means having due regard to the needs of a range of national stakeholders and local communities.

### 3. Irish Sea Pilot Project

- 3.1 The trial of the proposed marine nature conservation framework on the Irish Sea will involve the following principal activities:
- i. bringing together and mapping essential information on the physical and biological character of the Irish Sea;
  - ii. bringing together essential information on the use of natural marine resources by human communities dependent on the Irish Sea for food, employment, energy, transport, minerals, recreation and enjoyment;
  - iii. formulating appropriate marine nature conservation objectives for the Irish Sea as a whole, its component ecological units, and its nationally-important areas for biodiversity;
  - iv. considering whether the current mechanisms of regulation, regulatory responsibility and enforcement in the marine environment are adequate to deliver these objectives and, if not, recommending measures that could be taken to achieve this.
- 3.2 A crucial component of the trial is the appropriate involvement of national and local stakeholders in the process, including communities dependent on the Irish Sea. To achieve this a communications strategy will be developed and implemented as part of the trial. The purpose of this is to:
- i. inform people who are likely to have an interest in the trial about its purpose, timescale, progress and conclusions;

- ii. identify sources of information essential to the successful operation of the trial;
  - iii. ascertain the views of stakeholders in order to help refine objectives formulated as part of the proposed marine nature conservation strategy, both to ensure that they are the most appropriate objectives for nature conservation, and also to help ensure they are compatible with meeting the wider needs of people for the Irish Sea;
  - iv. helping to refine conclusions as to the measures necessary to enable the objectives to be met, including in relation to effective regulation, regulatory responsibility and enforcement.
- 3.3 The Irish Sea Pilot Project will be managed by JNCC on behalf of DEFRA through a Service Level Agreement, with DEFRA providing the funding for the project, expected to be nearly £400,000 spread over two years.
- 3.4 The project will be overseen by a Steering Group chaired by DEFRA and involving representatives of key government departments, devolved administrations, country agencies and sectoral interests.
- 3.5 JNCC will carry out the project in close collaboration with the country agencies, with the major part of the work being undertaken by a small Project Team expected to be made up of staff seconded from the country agencies and located in offices close to the Irish Sea. The work of the Project Team will be supplemented by a number of specialist tasks undertaken by JNCC, the country agencies or under contract.
- 3.6 Work on the project commenced in May 2002 and a final report and recommendations will be published by the end of March 2004.