

Financial support for England's fishing businesses unveiled

More than 1,000 fishing and aquaculture businesses in England will receive direct cash grants through a fisheries support scheme announced today by Environment Secretary George Eustice and Chief Secretary to the Treasury Steve Barclay.

In the latest step to protect businesses affected by coronavirus, plans unveiled today mean that up to £9 million will be available for grants to eligible fishing and aquaculture businesses.

A further £1 million will be made available to support projects to assist fishermen to sell their catch in their local communities. This money will help fishing businesses find new ways to market and sell their catch while traditional markets are restricted, not only supporting the sector but also the local communities that depend on the industry.

Because the majority of fish they catch is usually destined for export, the English fishing fleet which catches fish stocks such as hake, scallops and crab has been hit by the closure of traditional export markets and the reduction in demand from the hospitality sector.

The support scheme – which will run for up to three months – takes action to meet the immediate needs of the industry by helping English fishing and aquaculture businesses with their fixed costs such as insurance, equipment hire and port costs.

The measures will support the English industry, in particular smaller fishing businesses, during this challenging time and follow an unprecedented package of financial support already announced for small firms.

The main features of the scheme are:

- For the catching sector, the fund will be open to under-24m vessel owners with fishing licences registered in England who recorded sales of £10,000 or more in 2019.
- Grants will be made to help cover fixed business costs. For the catching sector this will be calculated from the average business costs for the size of the vessel, as surveyed by the industry annually.
- Details of the eligibility criteria, including the criteria for the aquaculture sector and support for local projects, will be announced in due course by the Marine Management Organisation (MMO).
- The MMO will administer the fund, contacting eligible registered owners and licence holders directly in stages with details of how to apply, starting on Monday April 20 through to early May.
- Payments will be made for up to three months.

Environment Secretary George Eustice said:

This £10 million scheme will provide a lifeline for more than 1,000 fishing businesses so they can continue to maintain and operate their boats during this challenging time, which has seen falling prices and lack of demand for fish from the restaurant industry.

We are continuing to work closely with the fishing and aquaculture industry to ensure that they are supported and can get back to their vital role of providing fish for the table while contributing to the economy of many of our coastal communities.

Chief Secretary to the Treasury Steve Barclay MP said:

Fishing is at the heart of many of England's coastal communities – providing local jobs as well as valued produce to their communities and through exports around the world.

Given the loss of trade particularly to restaurants as a result of Covid-19, this support will help fishing businesses weather the current challenges they face, and facilitate new growth in retail markets through innovative local distribution.

Tom McCormack, Chief Executive of the Marine Management Organisation, said:

We've continued to stay closely engaged with the fishing industry and are very much aware of the difficulties many fishing businesses have been facing with the downturn in markets for fish and shellfish. We absolutely acknowledge the importance of our fishing industries and share concerns about these current impacts – it is our problem too.

The data we collect from the fishing industry has proved timely and incredibly valuable in helping to quickly evidence the current situation and to target where financial support is most needed.

We will be reviewing as we go, and will continue to engage with and listen to industry to ensure we're supporting our fishing industry in the right ways.

The seafood and fisheries sectors are encouraged to apply for the existing support available for businesses, including the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme and the Coronavirus Jobs Retention Scheme.

The government has been working closely with the fishing industry to support the industry through this challenging period. Together with national fisheries authorities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland the Government is also exploring methods to reduce the regulatory burden on the fishing fleet. These measures will be agreed jointly by the fisheries administrations and announced in due course.

Any measures will take into account the need to ensure the long term health of fisheries and the industry and will not include measures that would be detrimental to the long-term health of the sustainability of the sector, health of fish stocks and the wider marine environment.

The Marine Management Organisation (MMO), the marine manager and regulator for England and an arm's length body of Defra, will administer the fund and pay grants targeted at those most in need. The MMO has successfully delivered over £100m through funds for fisheries and coastal communities in five years and currently operates the UK's Maritime and Fisheries Fund (MFF).

MMO will continue to make payments on existing grants and process outstanding applications to the MFF within the agreed timescale.

As a result of this announcement, the devolved administrations will receive over £900,000 in Barnett consequentials.