

Representatives of UK offshore statutory regulators have been working hard to understand the implications of the competing demands of nature conservation and expanding the UK's domestic renewable and traditional energy capacity. These discussions have evolved following the introduction of Statutory Nature Conservation Body (SNCB) guidance on the consideration of underwater noise disturbance in harbour porpoise Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and the proposals to establish a Strategic Advisory Group with central funding secured by Defra. We would like to share our combined thoughts on the work we have been doing.

We are investigating how current sector specific licensing legislation, affecting particularly the Southern North Sea (SNS) harbour porpoise SAC, can be adapted to work together as demand for development increases in the North Sea. We have come to the conclusion that current consenting procedures will not cope with the intended rate of expansion of offshore wind developments in the area and that change is needed to balance the competing demands anticipated and to manage these demands practically. One of the potential options we are investigating is application windows, suitable for all sectors, which would allow combined effects to be adequately and efficiently considered. Application windows could also provide the mechanism to enable projects with long lead times to be consented whilst retaining the opportunity for shorter lead time activity to be consented and not unduly disadvantaged by preceding consents.

The recently published SNCB guidance is a major milestone in HP SAC conservation. Whilst all involved are aware of its importance as a tool for noise management, there remain many scientific uncertainties regarding cetacean conservation and the impacts of sound on the marine environment. In recognition of this, the SNS Regulators have supported the creation of a Strategic Advisory Group to investigate and advise on the knowledge gaps affecting the consideration of conservation issues. Funding for this group has recently been allocated and it will meet in the New Year to begin its work in support of offshore regulation.

This year, the Regulatory Working Group further developed its activity tracker, which documents formal proposals for licensable work for all regulated sectors in and around the SNS SAC. This tracker is now hosted on the BEIS OPRED website (search: Activity Tracker

OPRED) and is intended not only to assist regulators with cumulative impact assessment, but also to enable developers to be aware of others' plans and so work together to consider their combined impacts or deconflict plans, wherever this is an option. We continue to refine the activity tracker with feedback from users and hope that this can be of benefit to all in this increasingly busy part of the North Sea.

## **Southern North Sea Regulatory Working Group (SNS RWG)**

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