

Background to the matrix

Ministers have agreed to revise our approach to management of commercial fishing activity in European marine sites (EMSs) **in England**¹.

Under this revised approach, all commercial fishing activities that can currently legally be carried out in EMSs (licensed or not) will require an assessment to ensure that they are compatible with our obligations to protect sites under the European Union (EU) directives².

We intend to proceed on the basis of assessments through a matrix type approach which shows, at a high generic level, gear types and their effect on relevant features, for which EMSs have been designated or classified under EU Habitats Directive and Wild Birds Directive, achieving their conservation objectives.

This generic matrix (the matrix) should provide regulators with an indicator as to whether the activity requires priority management measures to be introduced to protect that feature without further site level assessment on the impacts of that activity on that feature or whether a further assessment may be necessary.

The first stage of this work will be to agree and finalise the generic matrix based on existing information to highlight the vulnerability of EMSs features to different gear types, to be grouped into 'red', 'amber', 'green' and 'blue' categories, as follows:

- **Red:** Where it is clear that the conservation objectives for a feature (or sub-feature) will not be achieved because of its sensitivity to a type of fishing – **irrespective of feature condition, level of pressure, or background environmental conditions in all EMSs where that feature occurs** – suitable management measures will be identified and introduced as a priority to protect those features from that fishing activity or activities.
- **Amber:** Where there is doubt as to whether conservation objectives for a feature (or sub-feature) will be achieved because of its sensitivity to a type of fishing, **in all EMSs where that feature occurs**, the effect of that activity or activities on such features will need to be assessed in detail at a site specific level. Appropriate management action should then be taken based on that assessment.
- **Green:** Where it is clear that the achievement of the conservation objectives for a feature is highly unlikely³ to be affected by a type of fishing activity or activities, in all EMSs where that feature occurs, further action is not likely to be required, unless there is the potential for in combination effects⁴.
- **Blue:** For gear types where there can be no feasible interaction⁵ between the gear types and habitat features, a fourth categorisation of blue is used, and no management action should be necessary.

¹ England, in this context, includes English inshore waters, and offshore waters not in the Scottish Zone.

² Fishery operations that have already been assessed as a plan or project (such as Regulating Orders) will not be subject to the revised approach.

³ In theory, green and amber categories exist along a continuum of risk, for example it is theoretically possible for what is widely recognised to be a benign activity to cause a significant impact on a feature, if carried out at extremely high levels. As result an assumption has been made that activities categorised as green are assumed to have no impact on the feature or sub-feature at current maximum levels of commercial fishing effort, to be re-evaluated if conditions change.

⁴ "In combination effects": where a type of fishing activity which on its own would not affect the achievement of conservation objectives for the feature, but which in combination with other activities might do so.

⁵ On this basis – where there is a feasible (even if unlikely) interaction, activities will be categorised as red, amber or green.