



Clean Catch

Joint Action on Sensitive Species Bycatch

Co-designed seabird bycatch trial in the North Sea hits first milestone

27 January 2026

Monitoring to gather vital baseline data has begun on vessels in the North Sea whitefish fishery, as part of a fully co-designed trial built on a partnership between the East of England Fish Producers Organisation and bycatch initiative Clean Catch.

When Defra-funded programme Clean Catch put out a call for a fishery to partner with for a new bycatch monitoring and mitigation trial, the timing was perfect for the East of England Fish Producers Organisation (EEFPO). Under the leadership of chief executive Dale Rodmell, the EEFPO had already bought and started testing ‘bird-scaring lines’. These are designed to prevent seabirds from striking or becoming caught in fishing gear during haul-outs.

Rodmell explained: ‘*We don’t have data to say that we have a lot of seabird bycatch, but we wanted to be proactive as part of our commitment to sustainability. Joining forces with Clean Catch now means we can carry out a full scientific trial.*’

Collaboration has formed the core of the trial since its first day of design. Building on learning from an ongoing pinger trial with fishermen in Cornwall, the Clean Catch team has focused first on meeting with EEFPO vessel owners and pair trawl skippers in Peterhead, to carefully co-plan the trial and ensure a fuller understanding of the fishermen’s working environment. This has included employing a local Fisheries Liaison Officer to provide on-the-ground support to those involved in the trial, and speaking with skippers about their encounters with seabirds.

‘*The trial, for us, is a genuine example of co-design. We and our skippers have been actively involved in shaping it, and we’ve seen how our knowledge and experience is being considered alongside scientific input. The open collaboration between industry and science means that not only will the trial design be better, it’ll be built on stronger relationships,*’ said vessel owner Mark Dougal of Peter & J Johnstone, a comment echoed by Rebecca Bennett of Lockers Trawlers.

The trial has just hit its first milestone: the launch of a monitoring phase, with Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) cameras now operational on seven vessels – with the final vessel due for installation – and an additional skipper providing self-reported data. Sensors have also been added to onboard conveyor belts to provide timestamps for when offal discharge takes place. Data gathered during the monitoring phase will be essential to establish a baseline for the frequency of interactions with seabirds. This will allow the Clean Catch team to see whether the use later in the trial of bird-scaring lines, potentially in combination with other mitigation measures, has an impact.

One skipper involved in the trial said ‘*Clean Catch asks for, and listens, to what I know about seabird interactions, so our day-to-day experience at sea is always feeding into the trial*’; while

another noted that their '*suggestions on ways to simplify self-reporting have been taken on board, making reporting easier without sacrificing important details*'.

In designing the trial Clean Catch has been able to tap into the experiences and expertise not only of the EEFPO fishermen, but also a wider network including Hooktone, the Aberdeen Fish Producers Organisation, the University of St Andrews, and members of Clean Catch's National Advisory Board which includes fishermen, eNGOs, scientists, policymakers, and others. The Scottish Government has also pitched in with funding for the trial's eighth pair trawl – involving two Scottish vessels – to take part.

Mike Dowell, Deputy Director in Marine and Fisheries at Defra, commented: '*We are delighted to see the progress of the trial, which marks a cross-border, cross-sector effort to improve our ability to address seabird bycatch.*'

The mitigation phase of the trial is expected to commence in early spring 2026, with results by autumn of the same year. As well as adding to knowledge of seabird bycatch mitigation, Clean Catch and the EEFPO hope that the process of designing the trial will serve as an example of collaboration that can be drawn on by sustainability and co-management initiatives across the UK.

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Notes to editors

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About Clean Catch:

- Clean Catch champions collaborative working to help monitor and minimise the bycatch of sensitive marine species (marine mammals, seabirds, and sharks, skates, and rays) in UK commercial fisheries, and to exchange knowledge globally.
- The programme works directly with fishermen in England to develop and test ways to address bycatch that are both effective in protecting sensitive marine species and practical to use during fishing operations. Clean Catch also acts as an engine for knowledge exchange on bycatch monitoring and mitigation within and beyond the UK.
- The programme is funded by Defra to help the UK Government meet its ambitions to minimise and – where possible – eliminate bycatch of sensitive marine species, as set out in the ecosystem objective of the Fisheries Act and elaborated in the UK Marine Wildlife Bycatch Mitigation Initiative (BMI). Clean Catch was established in 2020 and is currently in its “expansion phase” which runs from 2024 to 2026.
- More information can be found at: <https://www.cleancatchuk.com/>

About the East of England Fish Producers Organisation:

- The Eastern England Fish Producers Organisation (EEFPO) is an officially recognised representative body for fishermen. Formed in 1981 originally as the Grimsby FPO, but

now based in East Yorkshire, it represents members of predominantly east coast fishing businesses operating in the North Sea and West of Scotland.

- EEFPO members' vessels range in size from under 10 metre coastal vessels to over 35 metres operating in offshore waters and catch a variety of species including cod, haddock, whiting, saithe, monk, hake, megrim, ling, Nephrops, crab and lobster.
- EEFPO is one of 9 officially recognised Fish Producer Organisations in England and is a trusted and respected partner and conduit between industry and government, scientific and regulatory authorities at a national and international level.
- More information can be found at: <https://eefpo.org.uk/>