

WEST COAST REGIONAL INSHORE FISHERIES GROUP

Position Statement on the Laying of Subsea Cables

Introduction

This Position Statement provides an overview of the WCRIFG's views on how cable laying operations within inshore waters are undertaken. The Position Statement provides a general overview of the actions the WCRIFG expects during cabling contracts notwithstanding that in some instances site specific issues may mean other or alternative measures may be required in order to protect inshore fishing interests.

Background

The West Coast Regional Inshore Fisheries Group (WCRIFG) was established in April 2016 and its main aim is to improve the management of inshore fisheries out to six nautical miles. WCRIFG is non-statutory but works with inshore fisheries industry representatives, statutory bodies, including Marine Scotland and other parties. Having regard to the Marine Scotland Inshore Fisheries Strategy 2012 and the National Marine Plan, the WCRIFG considers matters with the potential to impact upon or otherwise affect inshore fisheries. In particular the WCRIFG seeks to advance, make recommendations and proposals connected to:

- The development and implementation of regional policies and initiatives relating to the management and conservation of inshore fisheries, and impacts on the marine environment so as to ensure a viable fishing industry in the SWIFG Area as well as in Scotland more generally and, the maintenance of sustainable fishing communities;
- The development and implementation of measures designed to better conserve and sustainably exploit stocks of shellfish and sea fish (including salmon) in WCRIFG waters, and to enable local fishermen, other fishermen who rely on WCRIFG waters for their livelihood, and other persons with an interest to contribute to such development; and,
- The development of proposals for and approaches to Marine Scotland, IFMAC, Marine Planning Regions, other IFGs, and others with an interest in the fishery in relation to inshore fisheries management.

Subsea Cables

Subsea cable laying contracts are increasingly occurring within Scottish inshore waters; it is recognised that the cables are an important part of the country's infrastructure and likely to remain so into the future. However, the installation and presence of subsea cables creates risks to the safety of inshore fishing as well as damage to the marine environment. Laying subsea cables unprotected on the sea bed presents an unacceptable health and safety risk to vessels and their crews in particular if using bottom trawl. The minimum potential problem through snagging or entanglement can be tears or damage to fishing gear whereas more serious events could be the loss of a vessel and its crew.

Cables must be buried using methods appropriate to the exacting requirements of the location where the activity is to be undertaken. Where seabed substrates are unsuitable for burying cables, methods such as armouring, mattresses or rock dumping should take place to secure and make cables safe. Armouring, mattresses or rock dumping must be done in line with best engineering practices and to standards that minimise marine environmental impact and disruption to commercial inshore fishing activities.

The timing of cable laying works should be done when they are least likely to disrupt or displace commercial inshore fishing activities. Cable contracts have a long though relatively narrow footprint; cognisance of potential environmental impacts must be considered and contracts must include best practice mitigation measures to minimise damage to substrates, fauna and flora. Opportunities should be sought to ameliorate damage caused by contracts and indeed seek to improve the environment along the course of the cable, particularly where environmental productivity is poor. Improving seabed substrates or other potential features could serve to complement disturbances caused by cable installations.

Once cables have been laid there should be a programme of inspections, particularly in locations where seabed substrates are known to be unstable. Inspections will help to ensure that if cables become exposed, such as in areas where there is known to be natural seabed mobilisation, action can be taken to avoid potential issues as outlined above.

WCRIFG Position

- All subsea cables should be buried in the seabed using current best engineering guidance and practice
- Where cables cannot be buried because of unsuitable substrates, alternative protective measures such as armouring, mattresses or rock dumping should be applied using current best engineering guidance and practice

- Opportunities should be taken, where practicable and on the advice of statutory bodies, to make improvements to the environment within the footprint of the cable tract
- Cable contracts should be undertaken, where possible, at times when they will create minimum disturbance to inshore fishing activities
- Programmes of inspections should be implemented to ensure that subsea cables do not become exposed leading to potential fishing hazards

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