

They Are Such A Headache For Us

^Windfarms and Fishermen: An analysis of the current situation

Relations between the fishing industry and the developers of wind farms do not appear to be the best at the Seafood /Offshore Renewable Energy Working Group.

This was set up by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Darragh O'Brien, last Summer to "facilitate discussion on matters arising from the interaction of the seafood and offshore renewable energy industries, to promote and share best practice and to encourage liaison with other sectors in the marine environment."

The MARINE TIMES has learned that there is disagreement over the way in which the fishing industry is being treated and that developers are perceived as being favoured by Government.

Attempts are now being made to improve communications between both sides. This comes at a time when developers have moved into the planning stage for offshore construction sites.

"We have a situation now where marine area consents were granted by Government to seven or eight wind projects in December. These are now moving into the planning process. They are part of Phase One which will account for up to 43 per cent of the total generation capacity that is targeted for 2030 so it is a meaningful phase of the offshore renewables preparations," said Aodh O'Donnell, Chief Executive of the Irish Fish Producers' Organisation.

"Obviously there is concern in the affected areas that fishermen and local communities should have some say and some form of consultation between

the marine area consents and the planning phase. We still haven't achieved or delivered a standard communications model for the sector. It is a work in progress. It is on-going but we have nothing finalised at this stage."

For those whose fishing livelihoods are focused inshore the development of wind farms is a major issue.

"They are such a headache for us. Any wind farm where there was a planning permission put in for, we had a member affected," says Michael Desmond, Chairman of the National Inshore Fishermen's Association, which has just been given official recognition as an EU Producers' Organisation.

General Public Have No Idea "The general public have no idea how badly fishermen will be affected by wind farms. It is a big imposition on inshoremen who have to take on the issue individually. NIFA does not have the resources to fight on their behalf, so it could cost individuals between ten and twenty thousand Euros to fight for the right to fish where they always fished. It is hard to imagine that men have to fight to be allowed fish where they always fished, for the right to do it and the right to fish where their fathers, grandfathers fished for a hundred years. It is an unbelievable situation to end up in."

"It is very hard to get public opinion in favour of fishing because there is such promotion about renewal of energy, reducing our dependence on fossil fuels which is top of the agenda and is being pushed hard at international, government and ELI level," says John Lynch, CEO of the Irish South and East Fish Producers' Organisation. "It is being pushed so hard

that everything else is being brushed aside. There is no question about climate change and the environmental protection and we all accept that. The industry accepts it, but there is a need to take a hard, realistic look at what is being proposed and not to throw away what we have and that includes the fishing industry and its rights to fish in areas where it always has fished.

"The scale of development is phenomenal. This is a huge issue, a huge step for the fishing industry where the development of offshore wind farms is concerned and piled on top of that there are the proposals for marine protected areas. All of this is going to have an effect limiting fishing.

"There is work being done on a document in relation to the communication issues on this with the developers. Contact and consideration is not at an even level at present. At the Seafood Offshore Renewables Group they come and tell what they are going to do, where they are going to do it, when they are going to do it, They meet regularly, but they never discuss the right of the fishing industry to have an input into the location of sites and that is where we want to get with the Seafood Offshore Working Group. We want an obligation on developers to discuss with the fishing industry where these developments are going and where the least effect will be on the industry, that is our objective and after that then we'll be talking compensation for fisheries which are having to give up so much for this new industry. There should be some benefit accruing to fishing from all of this development in the marine space."

Wind farm developers are being strongly supported by government with heavy lobbying and a State-generated message about climate change which is particularly pushed by the Green Party in Coalition. "Offshore wind generation is an essential contributor to providing enough electricity for the nation in the future", according to Environment Minister and Green Party Leader, Eamon Ryan.

Adequate Information According to Developers
Developers do not accept that the fishing industry is not being adequately informed. Wind farm industry sources pointed out to the MARINE TIMES that leaders of fishing industry representative organisations had been hosted on a visit to a Scottish offshore wind farm to show how development is being done. They also pointed to a planning application for a floating offshore wind farm costing up to €3 billion off the south coast of Donegal, which was announced last September and described as "to be lodged in the next 18 months with the support of Killybegs fishermen, the planned offshore wind farm is a joint venture by Killybegs Fishermen's Organisation (KFO), Sinbad Marine Services and Flexicon, a Swedish firm that specialises in offshore wind farm technology."

It is not only in Ireland that concerns have arisen about wind farms. Fishing industry complaints about the number of offshore farms being built across the North Sea and other EU basins are increasing. It has become apparent, despite undertakings given prior to development, that access to waters around windmills has been closed off.

There are other concerns being raised shipping and marine leisure organisations say that they too have issues to be addressed. The impact of noise and more obstacles underwater to marine species is not fully clear.

The WindEurope industry representative group has claimed, through Chief Executive, Giles Dickson, that "offshore wind farms act as marine preservation areas, fishing and trawling is prohibited, which helps to reduce pressure on fish stocks."

"Fishermen don't like shrinking offshoring areas because it leads to displacement and intensifying fishing in other areas," said Pim Visser, CEO of the Dutch fishermen's organization VisNed. "The industry hasn't noticed any increase in fish numbers even among species supposedly attracted to wind tower foundations such as cod."

There is a vast industry around offshore wind development. Many companies with hundreds of employees are involved, from construction to technology and ancillary businesses. Billions of Euros are being invested as development companies perceive huge profits to be made.

Maritime Spatial Planning has become the new mantra, but the science of fish and the relationship to wind power is still not clear.

Why Is Housing Department In Charge of Maritime Matters?

The Irish Government has given responsibility for marine planning to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Why it allocated this to a landbased Department rather than the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has not been adequately explained.

One opinion voiced in the fishing industry is that "it shows the Cabinet's disregard for fishing."

Irish Fish Producers' Organisation CEO, Aodh O'Donnell, says every industry needs to co-operate to reduce fossil fuels but co-operation must work both ways "and we are not being properly consulted. Fishing interests are affected by both the location and operation of wind farms. Charts indicate that most of the rich Irish Sea fishing area is targeted for turbine development. Fishing vessels could be displaced if there is an untrammelled development of offshore wind turbines. Our industry has already taken too many hits, but proper consultation could allow us all to co-exist."

The new Maritime Area Regulatory Authority (MARA) is also under the aegis of the Department of Housing, again ignoring the maritime department by government. The Irish Farmers' Association, representing aquaculture/fish farmers has protested that they have been excluded from inclusion or consideration under MARA's responsibilities.

In December Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Eamon Ryan, issued Maritime Area Consents (MACs) to the first phase of seven offshore renewable energy projects. "This represents a significant milestone in the delivery of offshore wind in Ireland," he said.

"Rushed and without much consideration shown to our views," came the fishing industry response.

Fish and Wind Science As mentioned, the science of fish and wind still requires research and definition.

Researchers have found that marine mammals and fish tend to avoid areas of offshore wind farm construction. Underwater noise by pile drivers that are used to pound holes into the seabed before installing the turbines, impacts on them. Increasingly there have been concerns expressed, the latest in the USA, about mammals washing up dead on coastlines where this had not been previously experienced. Scientists have found evidence that loud noises cause marine mammals to avoid certain areas, while causing tissue damage and even killing them and fish.

Marine researchers in the UK have reported that once an offshore wind farm is operational, the seabed is protected from the impact of fishing and marine habitats regenerate, including algae and invertebrates that are eaten by fish flourish.

But there is still not clear evidence how or if this translates into larger fish populations.

The effectiveness of financial and strategic environmental assessment in the development of offshore wind farms has also been raised.

"There are issues around marine interests and socio-economic or environmental impact assessments. But there are also huge questions about foreign ownership of Irish energy sources, which could affect future energy security," an expert in the

sphere told the MARINE TIMES. "Strict, strong controls, before farms are built are necessary."

"Where wind farm developments are concerned, the environmental impact, what will the disturbance to the environment do and how will that cause effects is not clearly known," according to Patrick Murphy, Chief Executive of the South West Fish Producers 'Organisation in Castletownbere. "How will they alter what has been there, the spawning grounds and so on? They will be altering the environment they are going into. There are aspects of this that are not known and, while there is need for energy renewal, there is no indication known how this development will affect the overall marine environment.

Interaction Between All Sectors Not Looked At Mark Healy is an engineer who worked in maritime renewable energy before he became a ship's deck officer. For his qualification for a B.Sc. at the National Maritime College in Ringaskiddy, Cork Harbour, he undertook a research thesis which looked at the potential interaction between planned Irish offshore wind farms cumulatively and commercial shipping routes - how they might affect each other and the benefits of effective planning now to ensure that neither sector impinges negatively on the other, so that both can develop to their full potential, even potentially harnessing some mutual benefits and opportunities.

"This interaction does not appear to have been looked at in any great detail up to this point. The study was facilitated with the co-operation of the Commissioners of Irish Lights, with additional permissions/ data from the Irish Coast Guard, UK MCA, UKHO and European Marine Observation and Data Network. Both the Department of Transport and Department of Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC) have shown interest in the study and I have presented the findings to them. DECC are currently working on the Offshore Renewable Energy

Development Plan II, a sectoral spatial plan to inform how the State transitions to a more plan-led approach to the development of offshore renewable energy.

This is considering shipping amongst many other aspects and a draft is expected to be published towards the end of the year."

"While the study concentrated on shipping because most data is available in that sector, he made the point that fishing and leisure interests are major sectors that also need to be considered and their needs, concerns, evaluated and responded to.

"This is a bit more difficult because the data is not as readily available, although there are ways to accumulate it by observation and talking to the various sectors.

"The scope of developer's wind farm boundaries cover greater areas in the planning phases than will exist in reality once turbines get installed in the water. The build-out areas are usually a subset of the licensing areas, so their planned footprints can look 'worse' on paper. Nonetheless, the proximity of shipping to planned offshore wind farms needs to be considered and planned-for in general from a State perspective.

"How best to use space and share it out equally and co-ordinate that interaction between all the various, different sectors, windfarms, shipping, fishing, aquaculture, leisure, these are the essential, major issues and my study will hopefully facilitate that conversation."

You can hear more from Mark Healy on the February edition of the MARITIME IRELAND PODCAST and read more about what the Fish Producer Organisations have to say about offshore windfarms in The CEOs Pages on pages 8 & 9 in this edition of the MARINE TIMES.

