



Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

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From the Chair of the Committee

Thérèse Coffey

Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

2 Marsham Street

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Sealife Mortality off the North East Coast

1 November 2022

Dear Secretary of State

On Tuesday 25 October, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee heard a powerful testimony about the mass deaths of crustaceans off the North East Coast, including its potential causes, and the profound and long lasting impact that it is having on fishing communities.

Two scientific theories regarding the possible cause were presented to the Committee: the consequences of the breakdown of an algal bloom or the impact of chemicals (pyridine toxicity) from maintenance dredging of shipping channels.

Following this session, the Committee would like to draw your attention to its interim conclusions on this topic.

- There is clearly a need for further data and research on the causes of the mass die-off. This must include urgent investigation of the potential sources of pyridine that Dr Gary Caldwell of Newcastle University identified in his oral evidence including more extensive sampling of the sediments in the bed of the Tees Estuary to create a map of potential sources of pyridine in proximity to maintenance dredging and the wider area.
- This research must be done in an open and collaborative way between Government Agencies and the wider scientific communities, including the independent verification of testing. We hope this would also include Dr Caldwell sharing his research data with all interested parties. A collaborative approach is essential to start the process of

rebuilding trust between Government Agencies and the local fishing communities which has been badly damaged.

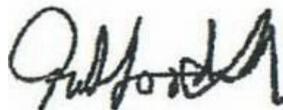
- We also recommend that the Government Chief Scientific Adviser should urgently appoint an expert independent scientific panel (“the expert panel”) to review the evidence for both theories. The expert panel should conduct its work as quickly as possible and report back its findings as soon as possible.
- The Marine Management Organisation (MMO) must urgently review the dredging activity in the Tees. Maintenance dredging, we were told, removes material recently deposited in the shipping channels. This will include sand that has washed in from the North Sea but it also includes silt washed down the river. Dr Caldwell suggested that this could have been contaminated with historic material that may have entered the channel. Further detailed surveys may quantify the extent to which this has happened and the future potential risks.
- There are already controls on both capital and maintenance dredging. We note that only routine maintenance dredging took place ahead of the crustacean mortality event in Autumn 2021, although some maintenance dredging took place at a quicker pace than usual. We recommend that the MMO explore, in line with the precautionary principle, what steps could be taken to reduce the risk associated with capital and maintenance dredging such as improved techniques to prevent dredged sediment escaping into the wider environment during excavation. This should include consideration of whether there should be changes to the depth and intensity of dredging, whether changes should be made to dredging techniques, and where and how dredged material is disposed of.
- The MMO must also ensure that all the current conditions on its licence are met and should include pyridine in the testing as part of any future licence approval process. We also believe that all dredged material should be tested for pyridine and any that is found to have dangerous levels of pyridine should not be disposed of at sea. This, and dredging techniques, should be reviewed in light of the expert panel’s findings
- A complete moratorium on maintenance dredging would eventually close the port and its associated industries, causing further economic damage. We believe that maintenance dredging should be kept to the minimum level needed to keep the port operational until the expert panel’s investigation is completed. We believe this, together with the consideration of the factors we mentioned earlier, are sensible,

proportionate steps that could be taken to help manage the risk while further investigations are undertaken.

- Until the cause of the mass die-off is known, we also believe that the MMO should routinely check for pyridine as part of the testing and approval process for any new capital dredging works. Any current capital dredging work and new licences issued after the conclusion of the expert panel's investigation must take account of the outcome of that investigation.
- The Government should reconsider its position on providing financial support to affected communities. The UK Seafood Fund is not an appropriate vehicle for responding to this incident. A dedicated, separate fund should be set up to support affected fishers and potters and the regeneration of crab and lobster stocks.

We would appreciate an urgent response to this letter in advance of your appearance before the Committee in November.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R Goodwill', is centered on the page.

Rt Hon Sir Robert Goodwill MP
Chair, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee