

## Stakeholder engagement – Information or Assessment ?

Criteria	Assessment or Information	Approach
Stakeholder Engagement	Information only	Short statements required from applicants

In the *Offshore Renewable Energy, Maritime Area Consent Assessment for Relevant Projects, Consultation Document (January 2022)* the proposed approach to Stakeholder Engagement sees the topic relegated to an *information only* category in Table 2 (page 15) of the proposed assessment criteria. With this approach, all that is required of applicants at the MAC stage are “Short statements”

*It is our strong contention that the current failure to adequately prioritise the importance of the fishing industry may bring about significant and unnecessary delays as Ireland seeks to address its climate change targets through the development of offshore wind projects. These delays could be reduced, minimised or eliminated altogether if stakeholder engagement, in particular with fishermen, is given appropriate priority from the very start of all offshore wind projects.*

To that end we advocate an assessment of stakeholder engagement at the MAC stage of every project, to include a pass/fail approach based on appropriate information furnished by every applicant.

### Rationale for proposed change.

Commercial fishermen have been working off the Irish coast for longer than the country has existed, and particularly in the Northwest—where offshore wind is at its strongest—fishermen have, in the past, faced little in the way of offshore development that would conflict with their work. But this is quickly changing, and a series of proposed wind farms now stretch from the north Irish Sea, down the length of the east coast, along much of the south coast, with more proposed for the south west, west and north coasts.



Given the scale of proposed development, not just off the Irish coast but along the entire coast line of Europe and in the north Sea, it is not altogether surprising that a (January 2020 ) meeting in the European Parliament, to discuss fisheries and offshore wind, heard EU fishermen call for a freeze on the further development of offshore wind capacity. The meeting '*Can Fisheries and Offshore Wind Farms Coexist*' brought together a large spectrum of stakeholders, including scientists, wind industry representatives, NGOs, legislators, and small-scale fishermen impacted by or exposed to existing or planned offshore wind farms.

Nor is this solely a European problem; a paper published as part of Harvard Law School's *Environmental & Energy Law Programme*<sup>1</sup> noted that fishermen have multiple concerns about offshore wind farms, including:

- concerns that turbine spacing can make it difficult to fish in wind farm areas, displacing them from historical fishing grounds and potentially forcing them into conflict with other fishermen.
- concerns about safe navigation around wind farms, especially at times of low visibility. Many fishermen point out that if the proposed development go ahead, they will be forced to travel around wind farms when steaming to and from their traditional fishing grounds, increasing fuel costs and decreasing time for fishing. With the thin margins fishermen operate on, these inconveniences may be enough to seriously damage their business.

The Harvard paper further notes that this conflict '*can easily be framed as a David-and-Goliath struggle between the small, independent fishermen and the large corporations taking over what has long been theirs*'.

But it does not have to be this way. If the State's aim is to consolidate decision making (as evidenced by the Marine Area Planning Act) and make it more efficient then it is essential that this process better incorporate fishermen's voices from the outset.

The approach currently proposed – short statements on stakeholder engagement for information purposes only – with public comments for siting *coming after* the award of a MAC, is anathema to most fishermen and consequently is almost certainly doomed to fail. Fishermen will see it as too little too late, too complicated to effectively participate in for many, and will inevitable feel that their voices are not being heard.

The alternative – appropriate stakeholder engagement from the outset – leads naturally to a governance model that is collaborative, and provides the structured environment where developers,

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<sup>1</sup> The Problems and Opportunities of Offshore Wind. Cole Jermyn (JD 2021).

fishermen, scientists, and government representatives can collaborate, build trust, and reach consensus around solutions that allow both the fishing industry and offshore wind industry to thrive.

If there is one lesson from the deeply contentious development of the Corrib gas field that still resonates today, it is surely the importance and central role that stakeholder engagement must play in projects like offshore wind development. If we choose not to then it is only a matter of time before dispute turns to conflict.

