

# MPA NEWS



Published on *MPA News* (<https://mpanews.openchannels.org>)

## Perspective | The North Sea Stakeholders Agreement: Participative policy development in the Netherlands

By Ton IJlstra

**Editor's note:** Ton IJlstra served as Programme Manager for the North Sea in the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. He retired this month.

Development of North Sea policy in the Netherlands is characterized by a strong antagonism between conservationists on the one hand and defenders of fisheries' interests on the other. This debate started in the mid-1980s when it became clear that the adverse effects of bottom trawling on the nature of the North Sea were more extensive than previously assumed.

Now, 30 years later, we can assess that many negative trends in marine nature conservation have been reversed. Water quality has considerably improved, cetacean populations have stabilized, and important commercial fish stocks have recovered. But important challenges remain, including the continued decrease of certain bottom-dwelling marine organisms due to bycatch in bottom trawling, and declines in some inshore and coastal species due to invasive species, habitat loss, and other factors.

Meanwhile, there have been two significant developments with regard to spatial use of Dutch waters:

- Marine space has proved to be very attractive for the development of wind energy. This has become necessary as a result of the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change requiring a decrease in carbon dioxide emissions.
- In 2002 the European Union imposed on Member States the obligation to implement the EU Natura 2000 programme for the marine environment. This implies the establishment of marine protected areas.

These two developments (wind energy and nature conservation) each put an important claim on the availability of The Netherlands' marine space. The commercial fishing industry viewed this as detrimental: the sector projected its available fishing area could decrease significantly in the short term and maybe more in the long run. For this reason, the North Sea Foundation (an NGO) called in 2017 for an agreement among stakeholders that would preserve the North Sea ecosystem while enabling sustainable fisheries and the expansion of wind parks.

With an assignment from the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality (responsible for fisheries and nature conservation), the North Sea Foundation organized a series of sessions with representatives of the fishing industry and wind energy industry. One year later, on the request of the North Sea Foundation, the Minister of Infrastructure and Water Management appointed an independent chairman who conducted the negotiations on an agreement for the North Sea.<sup>1</sup> This process started in 2018 and led to the desired agreement in June 2020.

### The North Sea agreement

The main challenge for participants in the negotiations on the agreement was to establish a new balance among three important transitions:

- Use of the Dutch North Sea for wind energy purposes;
- Nature conservation and restoration; and
- Use of the sea for food production, including fisheries.

These three transitions are key to understanding the agreement. Relatedly, the Government was represented by its three main ministries for the North Sea.

Throughout the negotiations it was clear that establishment of wind energy parks was necessary to meet international obligations for CQ reduction, given the Paris Agreement and the need to develop sustainable energy strategies. A governmental paper on developing the nation's offshore wind energy, *Roadmap 2030*, was fully accepted by the negotiators, as was the goal of producing 11.5 gigawatts of wind energy in the Dutch part of the North Sea by 2030. At the same time, conservation obligations under the EU's Natura 2000 program required establishment of more MPAs: although Natura 2000 has no percentage target for MPA coverage, it does require protection of particular habitat types and species, some of which were not yet protected in Dutch waters.

The Dutch fishing fleet was squeezed between these two spatial claims, witnessing a potential loss of space of approximately 20-25% by 2030. The fleet had to be brought into conformity with the new spatial reality, while still allowing the industry to thrive.

The negotiation participants agreed that wind energy areas necessary *after* 2030 should be located more to the north of the Dutch North Sea, far away from the most profitable fishing locations. At the same time, the participating NGOs (including the North Sea Foundation, WWF, and Greenpeace) struck a deal with the fishing industry: the NGOs dropped some of their requests for MPA sites – thus enabling some important fisheries to proceed in traditional fishing areas – in return for an increase in MPAs where bottom trawling would be prohibited. Ultimately this should lead to MPAs covering 15% of the surface of the Dutch North Sea by 2030, a substantial increase to the current 4-6% coverage, depending on the method of calculation. (The question of a potential target of 30% protected area coverage by 2030 – as will be considered under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity – was discussed amongst the parties. The conclusion was that for the time being the national target would remain 15%.)

Bear in mind that if the same number of fishing vessels used a substantially decreased surface area, the fleet's environmental impact would likely increase. In addition, it was concluded that the Dutch fleet must modernize and innovate to meet demands of a sustainable fishing activity. Specialized in demersal fishing, the Dutch fleet uses a beam trawl with tickler chains, which causes substantial damage to seafloor habitats and bottom-dwelling species. Furthermore, only 3.5% of all vessels are younger than 10 years, with an average fleet age of 34 years per vessel (as of 2017) – this means old engines causing various types of air pollution.

In response to the North Sea agreement, the Dutch government has made available 119 million Euros to subsidize a substantial fleet-reduction scheme. It is estimated that the fleet should be reduced by some 20%. The funds will also provide incentives for modernizing remaining vessels, gear, and methods to more sustainable ones by 2030.

Overall, the Dutch government has made available 200 million Euros for the agreement's implementation, including the fleet reduction and modernization. This amount also includes an increased effort in enforcement and control (including development of new techniques), ecological monitoring and research, nature restoration, and improved operational techniques in wind energy parks to increase shipping safety. The agreement covers some 39 pages and it is hard to render justice to all the different components of it.

### Is everybody happy? No

It is important to note that not everybody is happy with the agreement. These negotiations led to a rupture among the various fisheries organizations represented at the table. The fishing industry as a whole was at the negotiating table throughout the process. But after publication of the first chair's proposal of the agreement, the fishing industry split, with 54% of companies wanting to proceed without governmental intervention (no financing, no MPA designations) and 46% wanting to use the fleet reduction scheme to leave the business. It is for this reason that the minister of Agriculture asked a well-known Dutch public administrator to explore the possibility of securing the support of the whole Dutch fishing sector for the agreement. His work will likely be finished at the start of the new parliamentary season (September 2020). If he fails in his task, the agreement will nonetheless enter into force. It will be up to the minister of Agriculture to decide whether the fleet reduction scheme and the innovation subsidies will be put into place.

At the beginning of the parliamentary session we will also know more about the proposed institutionalization of the North Sea forum that was created for this negotiation. It will probably in some form become a permanent forum for open and consensus-oriented discussions on Dutch North Sea issues between Government and stakeholders.

**Footnote:**

<sup>1</sup> The Netherlands' three ministries for the North Sea are Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality; Infrastructure and Water Management; and Economy and Climate Change. The Minister of Infrastructure and Water Management is charged with coordination of North Sea policy amongst all ministries.

**For more information:** Ton IJlstra, The Netherlands. Email: [ton.ijlstra@gmail.com](mailto:ton.ijlstra@gmail.com)

---

**Source URL:** <https://mpanews.openchannels.org/news/mpa-news/perspective-north-sea-stakeholders-agreement-participative-policy-development>