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Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Environmental Audit Committee on Monday, 5 November, to discuss the important issue of sustainable seas. During that session I undertook to follow up with further details on some issues.

Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs)

The use of Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) has been progressively restricted since the 1970s and their supply and use in new products was banned in the UK in 1986. In the 25 Year Environment Plan the Government has committed to seeking to eliminate the use of all PCBs by 2025, in line with our commitments under the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants. This commitment refers to PCBs in legacy materials and equipment including transformers, capacitors or other repositories containing liquid stocks.

Marine Stewardship Council

The UK Government is committed to the sustainable exploitation of our fisheries resources. We support the development of traceable supply chains, where businesses and users can ascertain the legality and sustainability of their products. Through the legislation of the Common Organisation of the Markets (CMO), we lay down uniform characteristics for fishery products sold in the EU, whatever their origin. These characteristics are applied in accordance with conservation measures and help to ensure a transparent internal market that supplies high-quality products. The labelling requirements, in particular, provide clarity in the origin and quality of products that reach the consumer, so that the public is well-informed about how, where and when their food is caught, thereby helping consumers make informed choices.

We believe certification is one of the solutions to tackling the challenge of unsustainable fishing. For example, cod stocks in the North Sea have recovered thanks to better management over the last decade, resulting from close adherence to scientific advice, incentivising of measures that improve selectivity, and involving industry in managing the recovery. Stocks have now risen to safe levels.

We do recognise the importance of certification in helping UK fisheries to demonstrate their increasing sustainability. We welcome the decision by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) Board to further strengthen the MSC Standard by creating the requirement for MSC certified seafood to come from fishing trips on which all activities on the target stock are certified. The Government is not in a position to comment specifically on the overall effectiveness of the MSC.

Fishmeal/Fish-oil ingredients

Feed supply and continued sustainability is an issue shared with other food sectors and all those which rely on the fisheries. The fishmeal and fish oils that are used in feedstuffs by the Scottish salmon farming industry are 100 per cent sourced from the IFFO responsible fishing scheme or by the Marine Stewardship Council certified fisheries. IFFO is an international trade organisation that represents and promotes member companies in the fishmeal and fish oil industry worldwide.

The Scottish Government is supportive of the exploration of alternative feed sources. In 2014, the Scottish Government provided £11.1 million to establish the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre (match funded by industry). Sustainable feed is a key area for the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre, which is leading research on feed development with the aim of optimising fish health and nutrition. This includes projects exploring alternative protein sources for fish feed, for example exploring the use of avian proteins in salmon feeds.

The Scottish Salmon Producers' Organisation (SSPO) has a publicly stated policy of opposing the use of GM in salmon production. According to the SSPO "there is currently no such activity on Scottish farms and we can foresee no circumstance under which there would be in the future." (<http://scottishsalmon.co.uk/position-statement-transgenics/>). While the Scottish Government has said it will ban the cultivation of GM crops in the open environment, it is up to the industry to decide whether or not to use EU approved GM feed. GM feed has to be labelled as such so that the industry can make informed choices. Feed research trials are taking place in Scotland which uses GM fish feed where marine algae have been added to the camelina plant as a source of Omega 3.

The Scottish Government has taken a longstanding precautionary approach to GM. Scotland's decision, as provided for by EU rules which allow the opt out of cultivation of the EU approved GM crops, is in tune with two thirds of Europe. The Scottish Government's position recognises and supports the cutting-edge GM science that is undertaken in research laboratories across Scotland but remains focused on preventing the cultivation of GM crops in the open air. The Scottish Government supports the use of GM as a research tool and the development of modern genomics-based plant breeding tools which enable new conventional crop varieties to be developed more quickly and efficiently. However, it does not fund research aimed directly at the production of GM crops.

With respect to krill, the UK is a proactive member of the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, which is responsible for developing and implementing measures for the conservation of the marine life in the Southern Ocean surrounding Antarctica. Krill harvesting is managed in a very precautionary manner based on robust scientific data. The current annual catch is around 0.3% of the unexploited biomass of the krill population in this region, ensuring there is a healthy breeding population and enough for predators such as penguins and whales.

The use of krill in the aquaculture industry is not an issue that has been directly raised with the FCO in the context of the development of the International Ocean Strategy. One of the aims of the strategy is to ensure that the Government looks holistically at these interconnected economic and environmental issues such as how we can promote sustainable aquaculture that helps wild fish stocks recover from overfishing, but without causing other environmental impacts.

Blue Belt

During the hearing, the Committee asked about the enforcement of the Blue Belt. There is limited information available on the biodiversity of the UK Overseas Territories' (UKOT) marine environments, particularly offshore species and habitats. The Blue Belt Programme has undertaken a background review of the UKOT's marine environments and compiled available biological, physical and chemical data to establish baselines. Research surveys have been undertaken in Ascension, St Helena, Tristan da Cunha and South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands to collect biological samples and physical evidence to further inform baseline information.

Fish stock assessments have been undertaken in Tristan da Cunha to inform future decisions on sustainable fisheries management. Tagging programmes (for both fish stock assessment and wider ecosystem understanding) have been established in Ascension, Tristan da Cunha and St Helena.

Detecting and preventing Illegal Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fishing within the UKOT's maritime zones is a fundamental part of the Blue Belt Programme. To date the Blue Belt programme has established an end-to-end enforcement strategies to combat IUU fishing/ This includes:

- Developing and implementing IUU risk assessment profiles for individual UKOTs;
- Establishment of a UKOT intelligence hub in the National Maritime Information Centre , allowing analyse, develop and disseminate intelligence across the UKOTs in accordance with the National Intelligence Model and in a coordinated manner between UKOTs;
- Satellite surveillance coverage using Automatic Information System (AIS) and Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) to identify IUU vessels in UKOT waters. Satellite coverage is being tasked on a risk and intelligence-led basis across the programme to target the times and areas that represent the highest risk for each of the UKOTs. This process permits higher intensity surveillance in the most active areas, whilst maintaining the ability to react to dynamic threats as they arise;
- Review of other technological solutions, which could provide cost effective monitoring and compliance data in remote UKOTs. Trials include unmanned aerial and surface vehicles;
- Comprehensive training packages developed for UKOTs based on UK and internationally recognised best practices. Delivery platforms for the training are in-situ training and the MMO's Learning Management System;
- Supporting UKOTs in their engagement with Regional Fisheries Management Organisations

I have included a copy of the Blue Belt Annual Review with this letter.

Finally, as discussed during the hearing, I enclose a copy of the International Ocean Strategy concept note, which has been circulated to a wide range of stakeholders for views

LORD (TARIQ) AHMAD OF WIMBLEDON

Minister of State for the Commonwealth and the UN

Prime Minister's Special Representative for Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict

Prime Minister's Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief