

Northumberland IFCA Coquet to St Mary's Marine Conservation Zone Trawling Management Plan 2026

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Summary

This document sets out the intention of the NIFCA Trawling byelaw in managing Coquet to St Mary's Marine Conservation Zone (the MCZ). This document outlines the current measures within the byelaw and explains the conditions under which exemptions to trawl in the MCZ will be granted as well as the circumstances in which exemptions may be revoked.

This document should be read alongside the Trawling byelaw which underpins the management measures in the MCZ. This MCZ management plan will be reviewed annually, information collected throughout the year will feed into the decision making and review process.

The measures under the management plan in 2026:

Exemptions to trawl in the MCZ are granted under the following circumstances:

- A NIFCA trawl permit held which requires vessels to be 12m or under
- A track record of trawling in the site held in 2022
- A functioning vessel tracking system fitted with gear sensors on trawl doors

Exemptions are revoked for the year if:

- The number of hours exceeds 1000 in the calendar year.

Background and Rationale

Northumberland IFCA (NIFCA) is responsible for the management of sea fisheries resources within the inshore area from the Scottish border to the River Tyne and out to 6 nautical miles. NIFCA must seek to ensure exploitation is carried out in a sustainable way while balancing the social and economic benefits with the need to protect the marine environment.

NIFCA also have duties under national legislation to manage fisheries within Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) ensuring the fishing activity does not adversely affect the features designated within MPAs (SACs, SPAs) and to ensure that the conservation objectives are furthered (MCZs). These duties are set out in national legislation including the Marine and Coastal Access Act (MaCAA) and the Conservation of Habitats and Species (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019.

NIFCA have a suite of byelaws in place¹ to manage both commercial and recreational fishing within this area in relation to the duties set out above.

The NIFCA Trawling byelaw

The NIFCA Trawling byelaw was initially made in 2015 as part of the package of work to review and reform all Northumberland Sea Fisheries Committee byelaws.

The byelaw was reviewed and updated in 2021 to extend the requirement for a permit to 6 nautical miles (i.e. the whole of the district area). To be eligible for a permit the vessel length must be 12m or under for

¹ NIFCA Byelaws <https://nifca.gov.uk/byelaws/>

the 0-3 nautical mile area and 18.3m or under for the 3-6 nautical mile area. Gear type is also restricted under this byelaw to a single trawl fitted with a single cod-end and one pair of otter boards, the byelaw also prohibits purse seines.

This review resulted in further measures for trawling within the area of the MCZ (specified area). Gear is restricted to 'light otter trawl' gear only (defined in the byelaw). Trawl permit holders require a further exemption to fish within the specified area of the MCZ and must fill in details of their fishing activity within the site monthly. This update to the byelaw eliminated the interaction between otter trawls and subtidal rock features of the MCZ following the conclusions of the MCZ assessment for bottom towed gear on subtidal rock.

This management plan was implemented in 2025 and further restricts trawling activity within the MCZ. The measures set out in the plan have remained the same as in 2025 and are set out in more detail in the sections below.

The MCZ

NIFCA have a statutory duty to 'seek to ensure that the conservation objectives of any MCZ in the district are furthered'². To carry out this duty NIFCA, working with Natural England, have adapted the Habitats Regulation Assessment process to assess fishing activity in the Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) in the NIFCA district. The MCZ extends from Alnmouth Bay in the north to St Mary's Island in the south and extends out to 3 miles from the shore at its widest part (Figure 1). The MCZ is designated for multiple intertidal and subtidal habitat features. NIFCA have assessed all commercial fishing activity in relation to the protected features of the MCZ.

The assessment of otter trawling on subtidal mud concludes otter trawling activity may be hindering the conservation objectives of the MCZ, particularly in relation to the abrasion and disturbance pressure and the removal of non-target species pressure. Confidence in the conclusion is low to moderate as there is limited information on the specifics of the impacts at this site. Analysis of activity information suggests that trawling within the site is frequent and concentrated in a small area (high intensity). When reviewing the available information on impacts, evidence suggests that at the level of intensity recorded, physical impacts to the seabed and impacts to non-target species composition of the subtidal mud feature cannot be ruled out. The full assessment can be found on the NIFCA website³.

The mud feature has a maintain conservation objective, NIFCA must ensure that the features of the site are maintained based on a number of targets. These targets include, but are not limited to, 'maintain the presence and spatial distribution of the mud communities', 'maintain the species composition of component communities', and 'maintain the total extent and distribution of the mud feature'. There is limited information

² Marine and Coastal Access Act, 2009 s154

³ NIFCA Coquet to St Mary's MCZ Assessment Trawling on Subtidal Sediment Features <https://nifca.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Coquet-to-St-Marys-MCZ-Assessment-FA-004-Subtidal-Soft-Sediment-x-Mobile-Gear.pdf>

available on the condition of the feature when the site was designated, and limited information on the current condition of the site which makes decisions on management and the development of a management plan in relation to furthering the conservation objectives difficult. NIFCA must work under the remit to further the conservation objectives of the MCZ, and so further controls are required. Further research is ongoing to understand the impacts of trawling on the mud feature in relation to the conservation objectives and targets.

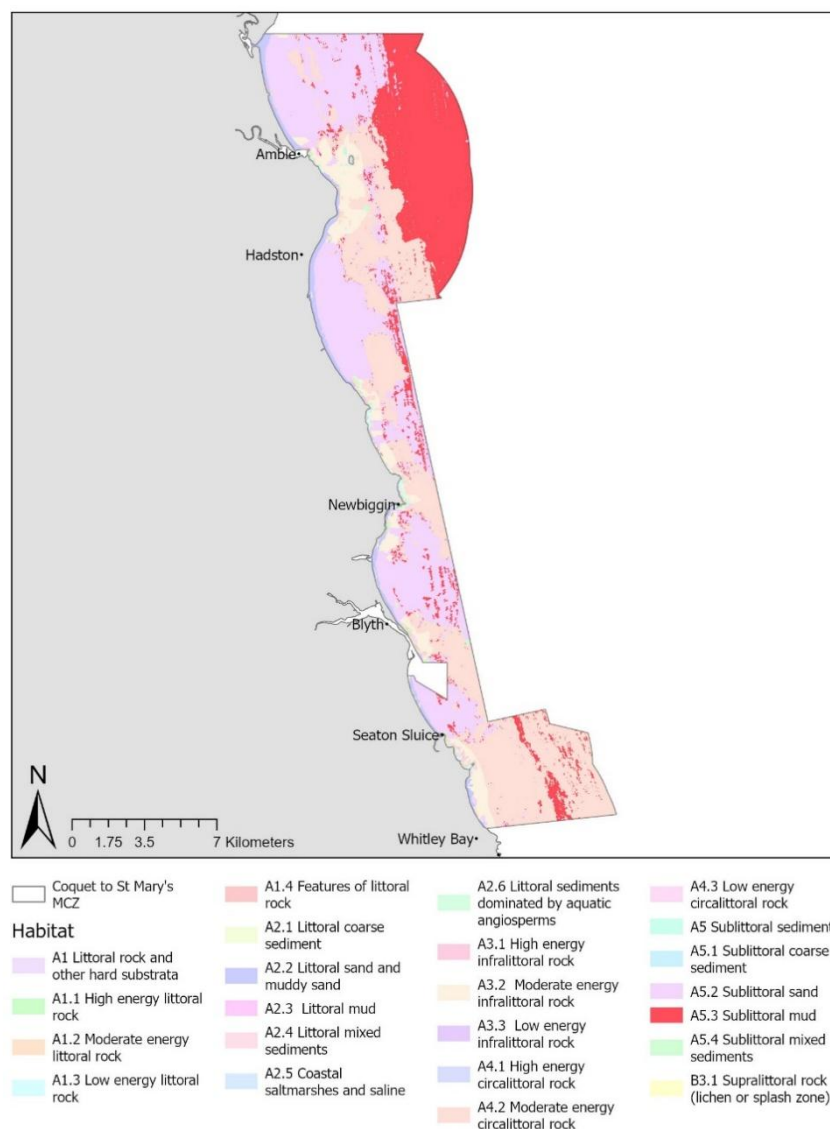


Figure 1 Coquet to St Mary's MCZ boundary and feature locations, subtidal mud feature in red.

Management objectives

To manage light otter trawl gear within the MCZ in relation to the protected features to ensure the conservation objectives of the site are met and furthered.

Controls

Exemptions to access Coquet to St Mary's MCZ

The number of exemptions granted per year will be limited and subject to requirements as set out below. The limit was decided on by NIFCA members due to the acknowledgement of the relative reliance on the site and, with a limit on activity shared between exemption holders, it would allow those who rely on the site to continue to fish within it.

Requirements to be eligible for an exemption:

- A NIFCA trawl permit which requires vessels to be 12m or under
- Track record of trawling in the site in 2022 either through exemption returns submitted to NIFCA or iVMS data
- A functioning vessel tracking system with gear sensors on trawl doors

NIFCA has information from permit returns and iVMS data from 2022 which corroborates the permit returns from this year. Any person who has submitted an active return in 2022, and/or who has actively trawled in the site and this can be verified using available iVMS data is eligible for an exemption in 2025. An exemption to trawl in the MCZ is limited to a person in respect of one vessel only.

Due consideration was given to the consultation responses from industry in 2024 and 2025 with concerns raised about capping the exemptions granted based on a track record which were considered by the NIFCA members. The criteria for issuing exemptions has been reviewed in 2025, with a decision made to keep the limit on exemptions in place.

Threshold for trawling in the site

An annual cap on activity levels is set with a maximum number of hours fished in the site per year.

The cap has been set based on the activity data from 2022. This represents the best available evidence as in 2022 NIFCA had both exemption returns information and access to iVMS data. Analysis of the data available suggest there was 1104 hours spent fishing in the MCZ in 2022. NIFCA members agreed to use the 2022 information as a baseline and the estimate number of hours fished in the site in 2022 as a guide to set the threshold level for the amount of trawling in the site for 2025, and that this level would remain in place for 2026.

The amount of hours available for trawling in the MCZ in 2026 is 1000 hours.

This activity threshold will be available for use by any vessel with an exemption to fish within the MCZ. In order to manage the allocation, the annual cap of 1000 hours will be divided evenly into each of the four quarters of the year which will then be monitored and reviewed quarterly. If at the end of quarter one trawling activity has not exceeded the quarterly threshold, it will roll over to the next quarter. If it has exceeded the quarterly threshold, exemption holders will be advised, and the time will be taken from the next quarter. This approach aims to take into account the importance of the winter season for the prawn trawl fishery and increased bad weather limiting fishing further offshore with the aim that the area can

remain open for the important times of year. Once the threshold cap for the year is reached all exemptions will be revoked for the remainder of the year.

Vessel tracking system

For this management plan to function effectively it requires a vessel tracking system in order to continuously calculate the amount of time spent trawling within the site. There are uncertainties with calculating the time spent fishing from vessel tracking data alone as analysis filters datasets for speed and heading to give inferred fishing activity only. There are inherent errors in this, as it is inferred activity, and some tracks will be categorised as trawling inaccurately. To avoid doubt in calculating the total number of hours trawled in the site, sensors fitted to trawl doors will also be required. The sensors communicate with the vessel tracking unit and communication breaks when the doors go underwater, therefore it is possible to track when the vessel has gear deployed. The time the connection is broken will be recorded to calculate the time spent actively trawling.

It is important to note that this vessel tracking unit and sensor system has not been used before for the management of fisheries within the NIFCA district, therefore 2025 will be a trial of the effectiveness of this system to monitor the time spent actively trawling in the site. The use of the system will be evaluated throughout 2025 and will be reviewed after one year of data collection to determine whether to continue to use this system for years thereafter or to modify the setup.

NIFCA will cover all costs associated with the vessel tracking and sensor systems. This includes initial purchase and installation costs, airtime, and any other costs as required. Any ongoing payments associated with this will be reviewed annually in line with the review of the management plan. Tracking systems will be purchased from Rewire and such systems are already in use in other IFCA districts around the country. If a device is not functioning, exemption holders must notify NIFCA as soon as possible and NIFCA will work with the exemption holder to organise a fix or solution. Currently the byelaw still requires monthly returns to be submitted detailing effort within the MCZ, exemption holders must continue to submit returns so that effort in the site can be monitored. Following a review of the tracker and sensor trial, the option to remove the requirement to submit an effort return for the MCZ could be considered but this would require a statutory consultation and byelaw change.

NIFCA only require data for trawling within the area of the MCZ, but NIFCA will have access to all data when the device is turned on. If the system is not functioning the exemption holder must inform NIFCA as soon as practicable and must take a detailed log of the time spent fishing in the MCZ and record this on the NIFCA monthly catch return for the specified area in the usual way. Data will be recorded and stored in dedicated software and fishermen will have access to their own data. While data is only required when actively fishing in the MCZ, data will be continuously reporting for the time the unit is powered.

A fitted and functioning vessel tracking system will be required to grant an exemption. Cognizant of the national iVMS programme with the ambition to make it a statutory requirement to have a functioning iVMS unit on all vessels fishing in English waters, NIFCA propose to remove the exemption requirement for a

vessel tracking system when the requirement for iVMS is implemented. However, the trial for the use of gear sensor in 2025 was effective, there is no cost to the fishers for the system, and iVMS is not currently (as of the end of 2025) under a national statutory instrument, therefore this measure will remain in the plan for 2026.

Review

The Trawling byelaw sets out the review period of no less than once every three years with consideration of data collected by permit holders, scientific or survey data, advice provided by relevant organisations (e.g. Cefas or Natural England), or any other information from a relevant source.

The management set out within this document will be reviewed annually with any changes decided on by the membership of NIFCA, updated in this document, and communicated with relevant stakeholders. The next review is due in 2027.