Dear Luke,

Thank you for welcoming me into my new Ministerial role during the 13 March debate in Westminster Hall on Fisheries and the UK leaving the EU. I look forward to working together on this important area of Defra’s work.

I promised to write in response to the issues you raised, and to which I did not have the chance to respond in full during the debate.

**Fisheries Bill progress**

The date for Report will be announced by the Leader of the House of Commons in the usual way. The Government are considering that the points made at Committee and the amendments already tabled for Report. We are keen to improve the Bill, but are mindful of making changes that will undermine our negotiations with the EU or future international agreements with other coastal states. Fisheries policy is also littered with the legacy of unintended consequences, and so we are keen to learn those lessons and not act rashly.

**Sustainability of fishing**

I welcome and support the emphasis which you placed on the importance of sustainability during the debate on 13 March. Following the Fisheries White Paper and the 25 Year Environment Plan, the Fisheries Bill confirms the government’s commitment to sustainable fisheries and the conservation of the marine environment. Indeed the Bill opens with our commitment to sustainable fisheries by enacting several sustainability objectives, one of which is to restore fish stocks to levels capable of producing MSY.

The Bill further places a binding duty on the UK Government, Scottish Government, Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Department to work in partnership and produce a Joint Fisheries Statement, which must include policies for the achievement of the sustainability objectives. The Joint Fisheries Statement will be subject to consultation and parliamentary scrutiny. The Fisheries Bill also extends marine conservation powers of the four Fisheries Administrations to help protect our valuable marine ecosystems.
Safety at sea

I share your concerns about safety at sea, as did my predecessor. I am acutely aware of the devastating impact that a lost vessel and a lost fisherman can have on coastal communities. We cannot eliminate the risk to life or fishing assets but as George Eustice set out in his letter to you in January, we are working with the Department for Transport, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and interested partners to put in place safeguards for our fishermen.

I was particularly pleased therefore that you referenced the lifejacket project delivered by Plymouth City Council for Plymouth fishermen. Defra supported this project with £77,000 funding from the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) to help fund the purchase of 250 Personal Flotation Devices fitted with Personal Locator Beacons, along with training on their deployment. I am pleased that the project is currently being extended, and that the EMFF support has been instrumental in the project’s success.

You asked about funding for safety equipment for fishermen. The UK has an allocation of approximately £2.75 million for Health and Safety projects through the EMFF for the duration of the programme (2014-2020). Up to the end of September 2018, 412 projects had been approved by the MMO with a combined value of £2.664 million.

The Chancellor announced a further £2 million spend in the Autumn Budget to promote the safety of vessels at sea across the UK. This will be managed in line with the existing EMFF scheme to support a wide range of measures, including personal locator beacon devices which can be integrated into lifejackets and the working clothes of fishermen.

Quota management

You raised the issue of redistribution of quota, in particular to support smaller scale fleets. The Government’s approach to quota management was set out within the Fisheries White Paper. We intend to maintain the existing allocation system for current shares of quota in order to provide the industry with the necessary stability that it needs. However, in designing future approaches for distributing additional quota, we will consult widely and consider how this can be used to benefit seafood industries, the marine environment and, of course, coastal communities.

Pulse fishing

You also raised concerns about electric pulse beam trawling. As you know, a Statutory Instrument (SI) was laid on 13 January to provide continuity for the fishing industry by ensuring that EU law on technical conservation is operable in the UK. The UK operability adjustment has the effect of ensuring that EU vessels will not be able to conduct pulse trawling in UK waters.

You noted in the debate your calculation that the Statutory Instrument would allow 5% of the UK fleet, or 200 vessels, to use electric pulse beam trawling. I want to correct that assumption. The current derogation applies only to the beam trawl fleet, rather than to the entire fishing fleet. This means that rather than two hundred vessels, this would only equate to around twelve vessels which might be eligible for authorisation to use electric pulse beam trawling from within the UK fleet.
However, I should also make clear our clear intention to end pulse trawling in English waters, which means that the few current UK authorisations are being reviewed with a view to withdrawal.

**Strengthening the economic link**

Leaving the EU provides us with the opportunity to reconsider the economic link. It is a complex area and we are currently reviewing the impact and effectiveness of the economic link criteria in England and developing options for reform. This will conclude in due course at which point we intend to consult on any proposals for strengthening the economic link resulting from the review. We continue to believe that flexible licence conditions are the most effective way of ensuring an economic link as they allow us to react more quickly to changing factors within fisheries than primary legislation would allow. We are hopeful of working with the other Fisheries Administrations toward maintaining a consistent UK approach to setting economic link criteria.

Finally, I also noted your promotion of fishing cooperatives during the debate. I share your view that fishing cooperatives have made a very welcome contribution to delivering the benefits of UK fisheries to our coastal communities. I am sure that you will understand that it is not appropriate for government to promote one business ownership model over another. It is very much the case, however, that the Government is committed to helping all parts of the fishing to make the most of the opportunities that leaving the EU and the CFP presents.

I look forward to working productively with you on all aspects of fishing policy.

I am copying this letter to Graham Stringer who was in the Chair for the debate and I am placing a copy in the Libraries of the House.

Best wishes,

ROBERT GOODWILL MP