

To: 1. Julia Williams [Ref]
2. Minister for Environment, CC: Viv Collins
Sustainability and Housing

From: Louise George
Marine Branch
Ext 1258

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Marine Conservation Zones

1. You have received a letter from Chris Franks AM who has been contacted by the RSPB in response to the MCZ Site Selection Guidance that was published for a period of public comment during October and November 2010.
2. The RSPB has highlighted its concerns with the MCZ Site Selection Guidance and has taken the view that it presents an inadequate approach to protecting the Welsh marine environment and fulfilling our contribution towards a UK network of ecological coherent marine protected areas.

MCZ Site Selection Guidance

3. The Guidance outlines that the decision to designate highly protected MCZs in Wales as areas where there can be no damage to or removal or deposition of flora or fauna of any kind (commercial or otherwise), is based on the fact that such areas in Wales will be recognised as important for ecosystem function, recovery and resilience. It recognises that our understanding of highly protected sites and the true benefits of such sites in waters similar to Wales' is developing and for that reason, in the first instance, the number of sites to be designated will be limited to no more than 3 to 4 MCZs.
4. There is strong scientific opinion both internationally and domestically (including our statutory advisers CCW) that highly protected sites are an important part of any marine protected area network because of the role they play in terms of supporting recovery, enhancing resilience and improving our understanding of the marine environment. There is however, as yet, limited empirical evidence of these benefits in waters similar to Wales'. When developing the Guidance it was recognised that given the developmental nature of these sites it would be difficult to justify with some key sectors such as fishing and energy interests, a more radical approach without first gaining a better understanding of the benefits to the marine ecosystem.
5. We have received 133 responses to the MCZ Site Selection Guidance period of public comment. An early analysis of the responses indicates that environmental NGOs and many with a conservation interest are unhappy with the approach of limiting designations to 3 to 4 sites. We are continuing to analyse the responses, which includes a comprehensive response from the RSPB, and will provide you with further briefing and advice on how to proceed in due course. Early indications are that there might be a misinterpretation of what constitutes a 'network' – with many of the responses from the environment sector seeing it as a self-contained network of highly protected MCZs in Welsh inshore waters. This is not the case – not only is the network on a UK seas scale but it also consists of all marine protected areas, not just those designated using the MCZ powers. It is understandable that respondents are not happy with designating only 3-4 MCZs initially if they are interpreting 'network' incorrectly.

Louise George
Marine Branch