

Fishing and aquaculture gear waste: problems and policy solutions

21st February 2025

This briefing is on behalf of nature and animal welfare coalition Wildlife and Countryside Link ([Link](#)) and explores solutions to the effects of waste fishing and aquaculture gear on nature.

The issue of fishing and aquaculture gear waste

Every year around 4,500 tonnes of fishing gear becomes waste in the UK, along with 7,000 tonnes of gear from aquaculture (seafood farming).¹ Although this is relatively low in terms of overall tonnage, the effects fishing and aquaculture gear waste have on people and nature are disproportionately harmful:

- Abandoned, lost, or otherwise discarded fishing gear (ALDFG) is mostly made of plastic and so persists in the marine environment and continues to catch and kill marine life (“ghost fishing”). A study in Washington State, USA found 32,000 animals trapped in 870 derelict nets, including 514 birds and 23 mammals.² This also has negative effects on fishers through reduced fish stocks.³ It is estimated 5.7% of all fishing nets, 8.6% of all traps, and 29% of all lines are lost around the world each year.⁴
- In European seas, ALDFG accounts for roughly a third of marine litter, estimated to be over 11,000 tonnes per year.⁵ This contributes to plastic pollution in the oceans, which kills marine life through ingestion and build-up of toxic chemicals in their bodies.⁶
- Lost or discarded fishing and aquaculture gear affects the wellbeing of coastal communities with large amounts of gear ending up on beaches. In some areas almost half of beach litter originates from fishing and aquaculture.⁷
- Even if fishing and aquaculture gear makes it back to shore, it often ends up in landfill or is incinerated, adding to resource waste and greenhouse gas emissions.

The policy gap

¹ <https://randd.defra.gov.uk/ProjectDetails?ProjectId=20655>

² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0025326X09003713>

³ <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/420301ff-2fb2-473c-98f5-a28ff6106861/content>

⁴ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/faf.12407>

⁵ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/ES/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018SC0254>

⁶ https://wwfint.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/wwf_impacts_of_plastic_pollution_on_biodiversity.pdf

⁷ <https://www.sifmarinelitter.co.uk/about-4>

Despite the damaging effects of improperly disposed of fishing and aquaculture gear waste, only 61% of harbours provide free disposal, and many exclude end-of-life gear. Where harbours do accept fishing gear waste, only 31% send it for recycling.⁸ This undermines delivery of a circular economy for fishing gear.

Inadequate waste infrastructure creates logistical or cost barriers for fishers, incentivising improper disposal. Although the Government previously committed to introduce extended producer responsibility, requiring manufacturers to contribute to disposal and recycling costs, this has not been implemented.

Policy solutions

All UK ports and harbours must provide free, standardised waste reception facilities to reduce cost and logistical barriers to proper disposal of fishing and aquaculture gear.

Responsibility for collection and disposal of fishing and aquaculture gear is currently unclear, with some ports and harbours leaving fishers to arrange and pay for their own waste services. The UK Government and devolved governments should work together to require all ports and harbours to provide free waste collection, ensuring gear is recycled where possible. Suitable free disposal facilities must also be provided for aquaculture gear brought ashore not at ports or harbours. This would make proper disposal easy and free for fishing and aquaculture businesses, reducing intentional discards or abandonment at sea and supporting the transition to a circular economy. Provision of reception facilities is a recommendation of the Global Ghost Gear Initiative, of which the UK Government is a member.⁹

This goal could be achieved by amending The Merchant Shipping and Fishing Vessels (Port Waste Reception Facilities) Regulations 2003 to mandate free collection and disposal. Larger harbours' waste collection could become financially self-sustaining by tapping into established markets for waste materials.¹⁰ Private initiatives to recycle gear for profit have already been established and could be expanded to service harbours.¹¹ For smaller harbours, financial support should be provided to establish waste collection facilities.

How you can take action in Parliament

We would be grateful if you could ask the following as a written or oral questions:

⁸ <https://uk.whales.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2024/11/WDC-Ghost-Gear-report.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.ghostgear.org/resources/#best-practice>

¹⁰ <https://randd.defra.gov.uk/ProjectDetails?ProjectId=20655>

¹¹ [brixham-trawl-makers-working-locally-to-make-fishing-gear-more-sustainable/](https://www.brixham-trawl-makers-working-locally-to-make-fishing-gear-more-sustainable/)

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, whether he will make it his policy to require all ports and harbours to provide free fishing and aquaculture gear waste collection and disposal.

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which government department or agency is responsible for fishing and aquaculture gear waste collection and disposal at ports and harbours.

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, if the Circular Economy Taskforce is planning to include policies addressing fishing and aquaculture gear waste in its recommendations for the Circular Economy Strategy.

Case study

The Anglers National Line Recycling Scheme (ANLRS) is an initiative created by Local Independent Sea Anglers (LISA) to support more sustainable, circular practices. Old line, spool and other small marine plastic debris are sent to the UK company ReWorked to be turned into new products, including rod stands. The initiative has currently recycled 140 million metres of line, equivalent to 17 tonnes (Nov 2024).

Anglers can return old line by post, or drop it off at recycling points around the country. This prevents line from going to landfill where it can take over 600 years for heavy monofilaments to break down – and this is just into smaller microplastics. There are currently over 800 recycling locations, which includes recycling points at ports and harbours, as well as angling tackle shops. This initiative has expanded to also collect marine litter that is washed onto shore.

This initiative is volunteer led and donation or bid funded but requires long term infrastructure and support to secure its longevity. It demonstrates what would be possible with a standardised, free collection scheme.

Another voluntary scheme is [Fishing For Litter](#), where fishing boats collect ghost gear that gathers in their nets during normal fishing activities and then dispose of it for free at participating harbours. We need to enable similar free disposal for all fishers.

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 86 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world and animals.

For questions or further information please contact:

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The following organisations support this briefing:

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