Seabed User & DEVELOPER GROUP

ISSUE 2

Sustainable Seas

NEWS FROM THE SEABED USER & DEVELOPER GROUP NOVEMBER 2014

WELCOME

One of the main aims of our newsletter is to share best practice in the management and protection of the marine environment by its industrial users. Sharing what we learn from our work is very important if we are to play our part in achieving a sustainable future for our seas.

The progress we make in a mature industry can be of great value to emerging sectors such as renewable energy. The potential for not just ideas but hard-earned and costly environmental data to flow between the different businesses is substantial.

In the space available we can provide just a few examples of a great deal of good work. Increasingly, industry is expected to do this work without assistance from Government and without the support that was possible via initiatives such as the former Marine Aggregate Levy Sustainability Fund.

We also, of course, use this newsletter to make our voice heard on the crucial issues including the need for guidance from Government and regulators. New and existing legislation to protect the marine environment is welcome but often complex. Without clear guidance from those who develop the legislation and determine its implementation, there is a real danger that we will not see the development – sustainable or otherwise – that is critical to meeting Government policies on growth and the environment.

Mick Borwell, Chairman, Seabed User & Developer Group

Guidance needed

THE industries of the seabed are continuing to press the UK Government to build on its commitment to sustainable seas by accelerating progress on the drive towards a network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and providing the raft of guidance needed to manage the sites effectively.

It is now a year since Defra announced 27 new Marine Conservation Zones. In doing so, it put in place a major long-awaited building block in an overall programme designed not just to protect nature but to provide developers with clarity to ensure that essential development can continue to contribute to every aspect of good marine management.

Operators are, however, still waiting for publication of a wide range of management measures needed to support the new environmental designations. Without it they often cannot properly assess risks and make important investment decisions for the future as part of their business planning.

Seabed User & Developer Group facilitator Peter Barham stresses that the informal grouping of industries that makes up SUDG remains highly committed to the cause of marine conservation and to working in partnership with Government and its advisors.

"We support the need to protect the marine environment," he says. " We have a big role to play in that and are increasingly developing better ways of doing so. But a sustainable future for our seas also depends upon clearly defining how we as industries interact with the environment and how we can meet the needs of ever more complex legislation.

"We need clarity over the processes and timetable that are still to be put in place to deliver the guidance that is so vital to our future and to the future of the sea."

Vital industries of the sea - marine aggregates and shipping

He adds: "SUDG industries are highly regulated and we have been asking Government and regulators for several years to provide guidance on how to work within existing legislation. While there have been some good examples, much remains to be learnt. One example is the widely publicised Habitats Regulations Review where, some two-and-a-half years on, only a handful of 28 actions have been achieved."

Operators and developers are also waiting to assess the effectiveness of newly introduced 'smarter' guidance and are urging Government to listen to feedback to ensure that it really does benefit industry. The early outputs, such as that used in developing Natural England's advice on conservation and evidence, should be valuable in assessing the value of the guidance to industry.

WHO WE ARE

SUDG is an informal grouping representing:

- Oil and gas
- Renewable energy
- Marine aggregates
- Ports
- Cables
- Leisure boating
- Carbon capture and storage

Fact: The industries of the seabed represent 4.2% of gross domestic product and support around 900,000 jobs.

FUND CREATES HARMONY

THE owners of several offshore wind farms off the coast of Lancashire have set up a not-for-profit company to help fund community projects that are of direct benefit to fishermen operating in the same marine space.

West of Morecambe Fisheries (WOMF) is an initiative from DONG Energy in collaboration with SSE, Scottish Power Renewables (SPR) and Vattenfall designed to help the two industries co-exist more effectively.

WOMF already successfully manages initiatives in relation to the winds farms known as West of Duddon Sands, Walney 1 & 2, Ormonde and Westermost Rough, and can readily expand its operations to include further offshore installations.

Projects to benefit include a new ice plant for the Barrow & Furness Fishermen's Association (pictured) which was 50% funded. Previously, fishermen had to buy ice from a third party to ensure freshness during the fishing and transportation process to Fleetwood Fish Market. The new plant produces up to 750kg of ice a day, reducing the risk of losses and ensuring compliance with food hygiene regulations.

The fund has achieved overwhelming support from local fishing communities. "It is an exemplary approach of how marine developers can work together with existing fishing communities," says Dale Rodmell of the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations.

Monitoring on a big scale

A MAJOR programme of regional seabed sampling surveys in the southern North Sea and English Channel has been commissioned by the marine aggregate industry to obtain baseline environmental data against which the formal monitoring conditions for a series of new marine licences can be assessed.

Each Regional Seabed Monitoring Plan (RSMP) comprises an array of sample stations that cover all licensed dredging areas in a defined region. The data will allow the direct and indirect effects of marine aggregate extraction activity on seabed sediment type and the benthic communities they support to be monitored over time.

Further context and reference sample stations across the region will enable any local changes that may be associated with areas of marine aggregate activity to be considered against wider natural environmental variability that may be occurring across the region. While this approach is being applied to the suite of marine licence renewals issued over the last 12 months, the industry has also agreed to extend it to all licences in the regions being sampled.

The RSMP concept was developed by the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS) through a project jointly funded by Defra, the Marine Management Organisation, The Crown Estate and the marine aggregate industry. It builds on the findings of previous research funded through a range of sources, including the Marine Aggregate Levy Sustainability Fund.

Says Mark Russell of the British Marine Aggregate Producers Association: "The evidence from this new work will allow compliance requirements to shift towards the conditions necessary for the marine environment to recover once production operations have ended. In turn, this will lead to monitoring effort moving away from the traditional analysis of benthic communities, to focus instead upon changes in seabed sediment type over time."

CONSERVATION ADVICE COMING

NATURAL ENGLAND has set out a programme for updating conservation advice which it says "needs improving to meet customer expectations, improve business certainty and better support environmental outcomes".

This Marine Protected Area Conservation Advice Project aims to deliver new conservation advice packages for all Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) by December 2016, with packages being published through a staggered approach from March 2015.

The project recognises NE's statutory duty to provide clear information including:

- Information of the designated features including interactive site and feature maps.
- The current condition and conservation objectives for the designated features within the MPA. conservation objectives.
- Operator-focused advice setting out the pressures and activities likely to affect the designated features.

Further information: mcaproject@naturalengland.org.uk

Progress on Welsh plan

THE Welsh Government has made a strong commitment to the sustainable management of its marine environment and is welcoming comment as it progresses.

The aim is to have a Welsh National Marine Plan (WNMP), covering both inshore and offshore waters and taking a 20-year outlook, in place in 2015.

The plan will provide important information and guidance to those who wish to use or undertake development in Welsh waters and will also guide the decision-makers who will assess proposals as they come forward.

A short animation explaining the approach being taken can be accessed here. The Welsh Government has also set up a Marine Planning Portal showing the distribution of marine natural resources and the uses currently being made of its seas.

"We will do all we can to help users access and understand the marine evidence that will be used to inform the development of the Welsh National Marine Plan," said a Welsh Government spokesman.

"We have been working with the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS) and others to undertake a strategic review of marine evidence that will underpin the plan. This strategic scoping exercise will help us identify key issues and understand where any evidence gaps may be.

Comment on the draft scoping exercise and wider vision should be made by 10 November 2014 via the online resource or to marineplanning@wales.gsi.gov.uk.

Sharing knowledge

AS a relatively young industry, offshore renewables requires extensive research and environmental study before starting new projects.

Recognising the potential benefits of capturing and sharing the vast volume of information being gathered, The Crown Estate, as manager of the UK seabed, now includes a 'data clause' in offshore leases. The aim is to ensure that knowledge coming out of industries such as wind, wave and tidal energy, is captured for the long term and can be made publicly available for wider use.

With more than 100 offshore developments already issued with agreements that include the data clause, The Crown Estate has recognised the need to securely store vast quantities of data. It has as a result built a Marine Data Exchange to manage, publish and disseminate such information.

Working closely with a network of offshore tenants, over 60 terabytes of data have so far been collected, including valuable surveys into wildlife populations and wind speeds across the entire life cycle of a project. The data is freely available at www.marinedataexchange.co.uk.

The project also ensures that the wealth of information gathered from projects that have not made it through to the development phase is not lost. One notable example is the Atlantic Array offshore wind farm in the Bristol Channel where environmental assessments, bird population studies, seabed surveys, and tidal current data has all been secured.

"A wealth of information is now available to the public on the Marine Data Exchange," says The Crown Estate's Senior Marine Policy & Planning Manager, David Tudor. "Access to this data and information enables greater understanding of the area whilst ensuring that, as a responsible steward of the seabed, we can help deliver long-term value."

BUILDING A DIALOGUE

PORT authorities are working closely with Natural England to ensure the successful management of a proposed Special Protected Area (SPA) at Falmouth.

A ground-breaking agreement prepared by the Falmouth Harbour Commissioners and Natural England commits the two organisations to work closely together over the designation and management of the proposed SPA which includes much of the sea area used by the busy commercial port.

The agreement was drawn up by Peter Barham Environment Ltd (working in association with Marine Planning Consultants), and creates a clear strategy for the two organisations in determining which port activities could impact on the SPA and how they should be monitored.

An important aspect of the agreement is that it builds on the assessments carried out by NE staff of the potential impacts of port activities and uses them as a baseline for determining whether further work is required.

FHC Chief Executive Mark Sansom says: "Port activity is often seen as damaging to the environment.But this agreement shows that most of our activities are not having an impact and this has been acknowledged in a way that allows us to work closely with NE to manage the SPA once it is designated."

FACING A FISH ISSUE

ENSURING that migrating fish are not harmed by vital dredging work is key to Associated British Ports' planned expansion of the Port of Southampton.

A dredging operation involving some four million cubic metres of material is needed to increase the depth of water available for the world's largest container vessels. Recognising the potential threat to migrating fish, ABP carried out extensive work that resulted in the project's marine licence incorporating a water quality monitoring system across Southampton Water as a whole.

Using the extensive studies carried out by the port, ABP and the Environment Agency agreed an Adaptive Management Strategy (AMS) that includes thresholds for the concentration of dissolved oxygen and suspended sediment levels within the water column. The primary objective is to ensure that high water quality standards are maintained so that there is no barrier to fish migration, particularly Atlantic Salmon.

ABP awarded the dredge contract to Boskalis Westminster.. The AMS comprises nine strategically located monitoring buoys

Connecting our world

WE take for granted the fact that we can make phone calls across the world. And we don't really worry where our energy comes from - as long as it is there. But the reality is that both rely heavily on cables that run across the seabed.

Ensuring that those cables do their job effectively and safely but with minimal impact on the marine environment places a big responsibility on owners, operators and suppliers who work together as Subsea Cables UK. All parties are working closely with The Crown Estate to develop best practice.

While the least environmentally damaging way of laying cables is to place them on the seabed, that leaves them open to abrasion and to damage from anchors and towed fishing gear. Where appropriate, the preferred approach is, therefore, is to bury them using a range of different techniques.

While burying cables is more intrusive, studies show that the impact of cables on seabed habitats is generally low and that the seabed recovers rapidly, largely due to the small footprint of cables.

"It is nonetheless important that any environmental impact is addressed," says Peter Jamieson, Chair of SCUK. "We work closely with regulators such as the Marine Management Organisation and also with Natural England, to identify mitigations that cable operators can build into their work and make them part of future applications. This should reduce the risk of environmental impact of work and, as a consequence, the scale of EIA required and the time needed for applications to be prepared and processed."

Seabed User & DEVELOPER GROUP

Organisations involved in the Seabed User & Developer Group include British Ports Association, United Kingdom Major Ports Group, British Marine Aggregate Producers Association, British Marine Federation, Oil & Gas UK, Renewable Energy Association, Renewable UK, Subsea Cables UK and Carbon Capture and Storage Association.

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www.sudg.org.uk