# British fishermen warn post-Brexit deals risk betraying vital industry and heritage



Matty Smith gazes out at the serene expanse of the Thames Estuary in Essex, where his love for fishing began at the tender age of 12. With a four-decade career as a skipper, he embodies a longstanding tradition in Leigh-on-Sea, a town with nearly a millennium of fishing heritage. Yet, the landscape of this proud industry is shifting perilously. "It's quite bad at the moment," Matty declares, citing declining fortunes for local ports like Rye and his own home. The British fishing industry, once a cornerstone of coastal communities, now faces existential threats.

The post-Brexit reality has been harsh for many fishermen who, like Matty, voted to leave the European Union in search of greater control over British waters. Nevertheless, the promise of reclaiming those waters appears increasingly hollow. Despite Brexit, European fishing boats continue to exploit British marine resources, with access guaranteed until June 2026 under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, albeit with a gradual 25% reduction in quotas. This has not quelled concerns; rather, it has amplified fears that fishing access may be negotiated away in broader discussions, such as those concerning defence and food trade with the EU.

The current negotiations led by Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer have raised hackles in the fishing community. While the Labour government insists that fishing concessions will not be tied to other agreements, industry leaders warn that the value of their marine assets risks being realised far too late. Mike Cohen, Chief Executive of the National Federation of Fishermen’s Organisations, resonates with Matty’s concerns over potential betrayals. He asserts that the historic fishing rights represent a vital national resource, vital for food security and community livelihoods.

Fishing rights negotiations are intensifying as EU member states urge the UK to grant longer-term access to its waters. The EU's strategy seems increasingly predicated on establishing a "fish for food" exchange—greater fishing access for concessions on veterinary agreements that would facilitate smoother food trade. This situation is compounded by the wider UK-EU relationship, particularly in light of recent agreements intended to reset diplomatic ties. Starmer has been proactive, engaging in high-level talks with key European leaders. However, the reception by conservative factions within the UK government remains critically sceptical, viewing any compromises as detrimental to national sovereignty.

Cohen highlights the stark economic imbalance between EU and UK fisheries, noting that EU boats currently harvest £450 million to £500 million annually from UK waters, while British boats only recover £75 million from European fishing grounds. This disparity reflects a dependency that many fishermen feel is fundamentally flawed and predicated on unfair practices by foreign fleets. Both Matty and Mike Cohen have voiced deep apprehensions over the industry's future, particularly as the ageing workforce faces dwindling prospects for younger recruits. Without viable economic incentives, a generation may choose to abandon the trade, dooming fishing ports to decline.

As the summit approaches, both sides remain entangled in a web of interconnected agreements, including youth mobility and food trade facilitation. British supermarkets support a potential veterinary agreement, despite its implication that the UK might have to align with EU standards—a concept fiercely contested by many UK politicians. Indeed, the complexities of these negotiations signal a potential realignment of fishing access and regulatory oversight, with decisions looming in high-stakes talks set against a backdrop of heightened geopolitical tensions.

The upcoming discussions appear pivotal not just for the fishing industry, but for the broader British identity post-Brexit. As Matty Smith poignantly points out, the rippling effects of fishing policy extend far beyond economic statistics; they touch on the very fabric of British coastal communities, echoing a call to ensure that the benefits of their natural resources remain within the nation’s grasp. The stakes are high, and for many, failure to secure favourable outcomes could represent the ultimate betrayal—one that jeopardises both industry and heritage.

### Reference Map

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Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2056369/keir-starmer-brexit-betrayal-fishing> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/18283f89-e213-4e17-9edf-8c52123f7527> - As UK-EU negotiations approach a crucial summit in London, Britain's fishing industry leaders are urging Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer to resist EU pressure for long-term access to British waters. Mike Cohen, head of the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations, emphasized that EU fishermen currently extract £500 million worth of fish annually from UK waters under the post-Brexit agreement set to expire in 2026. The talks aim to resolve disagreements on fisheries, an agrifood trade deal, and a youth mobility scheme. Starmer, optimistic about reaching a favorable agreement, framed the discussions in the context of improving UK international trade relationships, including recent deals with India and the US. However, political tensions remain, with Conservatives accusing Starmer of conceding too much to Brussels. EU negotiators are linking any long-term fisheries agreement to progress on a veterinary deal to facilitate food and animal trade, which would also benefit UK fishermen. The summit is expected to launch a new UK-EU security and defence partnership and possibly signal willingness on a future youth mobility agreement. Final decisions may come from a rare Sunday meeting of EU ambassadors in Brussels.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/200c1a5d-5a5c-4b98-8868-004c753d7dc7> - At a pivotal UK-EU summit scheduled for Monday, European leaders are urging Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer to enhance the UK's offer on youth mobility and fisheries in order to clinch a broader agreement with the EU. In return, Brussels is offering improved arrangements for UK touring artists and a long-term sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) deal to ease food trade barriers. Current negotiations are focused on a "fish for food" swap, where the EU seeks extended access to UK fishing waters—aiming for seven years beyond 2026 versus the UK's offer of four. The proposed agreement also includes provisions for an easier youth mobility scheme for EU nationals and regulatory alignment in food and electricity markets. Starmer has been engaging with top EU officials, including French President Emmanuel Macron and Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, in preparatory talks in Tirana. The potential deal, which could also include a security and defence pact, would follow recent agreements with India and the US, underscoring UK diplomatic efforts. However, Conservative opposition leader Kemi Badenoch criticized the concessions as threats to UK sovereignty, a claim Starmer dismissed, emphasizing the strategic value of the deal.
4. <https://www.ft.com/content/b377d11a-c6cd-4b33-84d3-8cf00b447e08> - Efforts to reset post-Brexit UK-EU relations have hit a roadblock ahead of a critical summit, as EU member states demand further UK concessions, particularly on fishing rights and youth mobility. A finalized EU communiqué outlining a renewed partnership is now delayed as member states push for long-term access to British fishing waters and favorable tuition fees for EU students in the UK. The EU is also advocating for a strong link between a veterinary agreement easing food exports and access to UK fisheries. British supermarkets support this veterinary deal for lasting cost benefits, but it requires the UK to accept EU standards and a financial contribution. Meanwhile, UK ministers face political pressure over perceived Brexit reversals, including alignment with EU regulations and oversight by the European Court of Justice (ECJ). A youth mobility scheme is also in discussion, with visa caps and no pathway to permanent residency. Disagreement persists over equal university fees, with Labour officials unwilling to match them due to financial constraints. The proposed deal includes a dispute resolution mechanism with the ECJ as the final arbiter on EU law. Both sides continue to negotiate, with UK officials emphasizing that no final agreement has been reached.
5. <https://www.ft.com/content/706810a8-1d62-4ac6-85a8-888e036f46e3> - UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer is set to negotiate a major food trade agreement with the EU during a summit in London. The proposed veterinary deal aims to streamline food trade, lower supermarket costs, and reset UK-EU relations. However, the agreement is likely to require the UK to "dynamically align" with evolving EU regulations on food safety and animal welfare, without having voting rights on the rules. The pact may also include a financial contribution from the UK to support EU policy areas. The deal forms part of a broader initiative that includes a new security and defence partnership. Prime Minister Starmer discussed the agreement with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in Albania ahead of the summit. There are political risks involved, especially criticisms from Conservatives accusing the government of surrendering Brexit-won sovereignty. Additionally, the summit may address youth mobility and access for EU students to UK universities. Despite expected concessions, Starmer has emphasized the economic and consumer benefits, asserting the deal will not re-enter the customs union or single market, but will reduce trade friction and improve border efficiency.
6. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/what-britain-eu-may-discuss-monday-summit-2025-05-16/> - At the upcoming summit in London, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and EU leaders aim to reset relations and explore cooperation in several strategic areas. Key topics on the agenda include establishing a defence and security pact to enhance European collaboration in response to threats like Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The UK may seek access to EU defence projects through the SAFE loan scheme, though agreements may hinge on fisheries negotiations. Discussions may involve a veterinary agreement to streamline border checks for agricultural goods, with the EU pushing for regulatory alignment and judicial oversight. Youth mobility is another priority, with potential for limited travel and work schemes for under-30s, and possible re-entry into Erasmus+. Fisheries and energy trading will be discussed, especially as current agreements expire in 2026. There is also interest in linking the UK and EU carbon markets, which could affect emissions pricing but improve market efficiency. Additional topics may include professional qualification recognition, travel for artists, and data-sharing. The summit is expected to lay groundwork for future negotiations rather than finalize comprehensive deals.
7. <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/brexit-beyond-newsletters/issue-165--11-november-20242/> - Daniel Zeichner MP, Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs, informed Members that "2026 is the year when the temporary adjustment period for fisheries access ends." He explained that a full implementation of the fisheries section of the trade and cooperation agreement will make access for EU vessels to the UK zone a matter for annual negotiation, alongside annual consultations on catch limits with various coastal states and international forums on fishing opportunities. Minister Zeichner emphasized that the future of UK fisheries will be driven by domestic policies, including the Fisheries Act, joint fisheries statements, and fisheries management plans, marking a departure from the EU's Common Fisheries Policy.