# UK fishing industry faces exodus as Starmer’s EU deal fuels discontent



The fishing industry in the UK is facing a critical juncture, characterised by a rising tide of frustration among fishermen and scepticism towards government negotiations with the European Union. Recent comments from seasoned fisherman Tom Parker encapsulate the growing discontent over the state of the sector. Parker, who has spent decades on the water, expressed his intention to leave the UK for Spain, citing less burdensome regulations as a primary motivator. “At the moment it is out of the talking phase,” he stated, revealing his broader ambitions beyond British shores, particularly after being disillusioned with the mounting pressures faced by local fishermen.

The backdrop for Parker’s comments is the recent agreement signed by Sir Keir Starmer, which extends mutual fishing rights between the UK and the EU for another 12 years. Critics, including Parker, view this as a detrimental compromise that perpetuates the decline of the British fishing industry, exacerbating issues tied to an ageing workforce and bureaucratic constraints. Parker lamented that “the whole thing is collapsing anyway,” underscoring the demographic crisis in fishing, where many practitioners are nearing retirement age and fewer younger individuals are entering the profession.

The backdrop to Starmer’s deal is a broader landscape of UK-EU relations, significantly redefined in the wake of Brexit. A recent agreement aims not only to fortify trading ties but also to establish a framework for security and defence cooperation. While Starmer heralded an anticipated economic boost of £9 billion by 2040, dissenting voices argue this comes at the expense of the fishing community, which has been particularly vocal in its disapproval. The deal’s provisions allow EU vessels continued access to fisheries, leading industry leaders to question whether the UK government is prioritising its coastal communities adequately.

As discussions regarding the arrangement progress, commentary from experts highlights the stakes involved in the fishing industry's future. Mike Cohen, from the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations, pointed out that EU fishermen currently extract around £500 million worth of fish annually from UK waters, a situation that has provoked calls for more stringent protections of local fisheries. The negotiations have positioned the fishing industry at the centre of broader economic discussions, affecting the livelihoods of countless British fishermen.

Tom Parker's stark criticism of the government illustrates broader sentiments of betrayal within the fishing community. “They don’t care,” he claimed, alleging that politicians show little understanding of the economic ramifications of their decisions. His frustrations are echoed by others in the industry who feel sidelined in the decision-making processes that directly impact their livelihoods. As Parker noted, “If there is no fisherman, there is no one to be on the boats,” highlighting the existential threats posed by current policies.

Negotiators have an uphill battle as they work to secure a deal that balances economic benefits with national interests, especially in an industry that has historically been a cornerstone of coastal economies. Critics have suggested that any compromises may lead to fatal repercussions for the British fishing industry, potentially undermining years of effort to regain sovereignty over fishing rights post-Brexit. As the industry grapples with these challenges, the urgency for a coherent and future-focused strategy has never been more pronounced.

In the midst of these discussions, the government has announced plans to modernise the fishing sector, presenting an ambitious vision for a sustainable, resilient industry. However, many in the fishing community remain sceptical, questioning whether the reforms will genuinely address the complexities of marine management or simply serve as political posturing.

As the UK prepares for ongoing negotiations with the EU, the fate of its fishing industry hangs in the balance, reflecting a microcosm of the larger struggles faced by sectors grappling with the consequences of Brexit. Fishermen like Tom Parker are not merely expressing discontent; they are signalling the urgent need for transformative action that genuinely supports the industry’s survival and growth.

### Reference Map

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

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2057619/fisherman-blasts-keir-starmer> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/hold-britain-poised-reset-trade-defence-ties-with-eu-2025-05-18/> - On May 19, 2025, the UK and the EU reached a landmark agreement to reset trade and defence relations, marking the most significant development since Brexit. The deal includes a new security and defence pact, reduced trade barriers for UK food exporters, eased travel for UK citizens, and a 12-year mutual fishing arrangement. Prompted by global instability and shifts in U.S. foreign policy under President Trump, the agreement signals a move towards European unity and cooperation. Prime Minister Keir Starmer, a pro-remain advocate, emphasized the economic benefits, including an anticipated £9 billion boost by 2040 and reduced food prices. The deal paves the way for UK participation in major EU defence procurements and potential reintegration into Erasmus+. Critics, including Nigel Farage and the Conservative Party, denounced the concessions, particularly in fishing rights. While this agreement stops short of rejoining the EU single market, it addresses post-Brexit economic challenges, aiming to renew business confidence and improve UK-EU relations without fully reversing Brexit.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/78f17b34-996d-4003-b031-4800f4e16918> - At a landmark summit in London, the UK and EU agreed to a comprehensive reset of post-Brexit relations. The deal includes a defence and security partnership, streamlined processes for British farm exports, energy trade, and a veterinary agreement that aligns UK food regulations with EU standards. Prime Minister Keir Starmer hailed the agreement, estimating it will bring £9 billion in economic benefits to the UK, including a projected 20% increase in agrifood exports to the EU. However, the agreement faced criticism for extending EU access to British fishing waters by 12 years, with detractors, including Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch and Reform UK leader Nigel Farage, accusing Starmer of compromising national interests. The UK will also fund EU food and animal safety initiatives and accepted continued dynamic alignment with EU food standards. A related communique signals deeper economic cooperation, and discussions continue on youth mobility and rejoining the Erasmus program. Additionally, the EU will ease steel tariffs for the UK, providing a £15 million annual boost. The deal aims to improve cross-border food trade, facilitate holiday travel via EU e-gates, and support Northern Ireland’s unique post-Brexit arrangements.
4. <https://www.ft.com/content/18283f89-e213-4e17-9edf-8c52123f7527> - As UK-EU negotiations approach a crucial summit in London on Monday, 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.
5. <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.
6. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-government-seizes-post-brexit-freedoms-for-fishing-industry> - The UK Government has announced new measures to support a thriving fishing industry and a healthier marine environment. These reforms mark a clear departure from the Common Fisheries Policy and aim to deliver the UK's ambition to build a modern, resilient, and profitable fishing industry underpinned by sustainable fish stocks and a healthy marine environment for the future. The government has also announced a new approach to managing discards in England, consulting on the establishment of a licensed recreational bluefin catch and release tuna fishery, awarding a further £45.6 million from the UK Seafood Fund to modernise infrastructure across the UK seafood sector, responding to a consultation on flyseining to provide some immediate protection for squid stocks and wider demersal non-quota species, and publishing a summary of responses to a consultation on spatial management of sandeels, with a majority of respondents being in favour of the option to fully close industrial sandeel fishing in English waters of the North Sea. These reforms will play a crucial role in achieving the goals in the Environmental Improvement Plan and the UK Government’s Food Strategy, helping to improve food security as well as levelling up some of our much-loved coastal towns and communities.
7. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1912942/Keir-Starmer-Labour-fisheries-UK-EU-deal> - Mike Park, CEO of the Scottish White Fish Producers Association, suggested that the EU could demand to fish between six and 12 miles off the UK’s coast. Mr Park added: “These are contentious issues, and the six and 12-mile limit issue was like a red rag to a bull. They can come into British waters 365 days a year; how much more access do you need?” A Labour spokesperson denied claims that it would "sell out" the industry, and criticised the Tories for subjecting them to “heavy handed bureaucracy.” The spokesperson said: “A Labour government will always back our great British fishing industry. We will seek to tear down unnecessary trade barriers and push for more fish to be caught in British waters by British boats, supporting jobs across our coastal communities.” This comes as Environment Secretary Steve Barclay warned this week that Labour’s plans to “unravel” Brexit could cost British fishermen around £775million. British fisherman said that any compromises on Brexit fishing freedoms would be a death blow (Image: Getty) The Conservatives secured fishing quotas worth over £970million in 2024. But, Mr Barclay warned said that Labour could give up these hard-won victories when Sir Keir has the chance to negotiate a new deal for British fishermen in 2026 under the terms of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement. The Tories said Labour’s proposals to “unravel” Brexit would cost British fishermen up to 600,000 tonnes of quota. Mr Barclay said it was “nothing short of an embarrassment” that Labour failed to mention the fishing industry in their manifesto. Meanwhile, during the launch of Reform UK's manifesto on Monday, Nigel Farage vowed to kick EU fishermen out of British waters. The party leader pledged to stop EU fleets from taking British quotas and ban massive supertrawlers such as the Dutch-flagged Margeris from plundering UK waters.