# Scottish fishermen decry UK-EU trade deal as a betrayal amid fears for industry’s future



Steering his fishing boat towards his home port of Wick, Andrew Bremner's mood darkened despite the calm waters of the Pentland Firth glistening in the sun. His ten-man crew had just completed a successful 16-day stint at sea, bringing in cod, haddock, and whiting. Yet, as they returned to shore, there was little joy among the fishermen. The announcement of a new trade deal between the UK and the European Union cast a shadow over their return.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer proclaimed the agreement as a means to "support British businesses" and "back British jobs." However, for Bremner and his fellow Scottish fishermen, the deal felt like a “betrayal.” Bremner expressed his dismay upon learning about the agreement through social media, lamenting that the government seemed indifferent to the challenges facing the fishing industry. This sentiment resonates deeply in communities along Scotland's rugged coastline, where hope for a thriving fishing sector now feels misplaced.

The agreement represents the first substantial post-Brexit reset of UK-EU relations, covering various areas including trade, defence, energy, and notably, fishing rights. A central feature of the deal allows European fishing fleets to retain access to British waters for an additional 12 years. In exchange, the UK government has promised to ease trade logistics, significantly reducing paperwork and checks that have hindered exports. Yet, many in the Scottish fishing industry, including the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation (SFF), have labelled the deal "disastrous," claiming it threatens the very existence of Scotland’s commercial fishing sector, which, in 2022, supported 4,000 jobs and contributed £335 million to the economy.

While some sectors within the broader fishing industry welcome the easing of trade restrictions, the SFF's outrage has been indicative of a deeper frustration rooted in a history of perceived government betrayals. The federation has accused successive UK administrations of neglecting the fishing industry and failing to safeguard its interests against powerful European fishing lobbies. Notably, the prospect of returning to annual negotiations post-2026 raises fears among fishermen that they may lose even more crucial access to their traditional waters.

Bremner's worries are echoed by James Anderson, chairman of the Shetland Fishermen’s Association, who reflects on the historical context where UK fishermen were deemed "expendable" in the pursuit of broader national benefits. Anderson points out that the operational numbers of British vessels have dwindled due to EU-imposed quota cuts aimed at sustaining fish stocks, leaving the Scottish fleet struggling to maintain its position against foreign boats that encroach into British waters. This ongoing encroachment, particularly from Spanish and French vessels, represents a stark threat to local fishermen like Bremner, who feel they face increasing competition under conditions that allow foreign fleets to exploit resources without adequate safeguards for their livelihoods.

Parallel to this, there is a growing concern about sustainability and the long-term implications for Scotland's marine environment. Overfishing has already begun to strip marine resources bare, and local fishermen like Bremner are acutely aware of the risks associated with unchecked foreign access. He recounted instances of aggressive encounters with foreign vessels that have threatened both his boat and livelihood, arguing that the government's promises of support ring hollow against these daily realities.

In contrast, some industry segments, particularly in aquaculture, have welcomed the deal for aiming to cut red tape that has restricted exports. Creel fisherman Bally Philp explained how small-scale fishermen were disproportionately affected by previous Brexit arrangements and highlighted that while some might see temporary benefits in exporting shellfish more easily, the overarching concern remains the sustainability of fishing practices and the future of their communities.

The debate extends to the political landscape, where parties like Reform UK are seizing moments of discontent, with their leaders accusing the government of abandoning the fishing industry. Richard Tice, a prominent figure within the Reform party, has pledged that if elected, they would repeal the recent agreement. In contrast, political analysts suggest that such promises might resonate differently across fishermen depending on their unique circumstances, particularly given the mixed implications of the deal for various segments of the fishing industry.

As fishermen navigate the uncertainties ahead, the challenge remains whether the £360 million fund announced by the government—intended to modernise fleets and invigorate coastal communities—will lead to substantial benefits or merely serve as a palliative for deeper systemic issues. For Andrew Bremner and his crew, the weight of history and the pressures of the present continue to loom large, as they brace for a future where the lifeblood of their industry may be at stake.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14744393/Fishermen-pushed-brink-cod-war-destroy-livelihoods.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[4]](https://www.ft.com/content/36f02ca9-9692-49e2-b84a-17cf86fc1062)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14744393/Fishermen-pushed-brink-cod-war-destroy-livelihoods.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[5]](https://apnews.com/article/3181228316c3d0cd736ecbf93a1eff43)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/ffe9c7ca-52de-457e-ab50-8bc6df5296b0), [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/7e7f481e-92dd-4d95-b46e-1d6adb911b70)
* Paragraph 4 – [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/7e7f481e-92dd-4d95-b46e-1d6adb911b70), [[6]](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/what-britain-eu-may-discuss-monday-summit-2025-05-18/)
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* Paragraph 8 – [[6]](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/what-britain-eu-may-discuss-monday-summit-2025-05-18/), [[7]](https://www.ft.com/content/04bf9ddc-1abf-4641-a4e3-f9b5f2689ebb)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14744393/Fishermen-pushed-brink-cod-war-destroy-livelihoods.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/ffe9c7ca-52de-457e-ab50-8bc6df5296b0> - The Financial Times' 'Political Fix' podcast discusses Labour leader Keir Starmer's post-Brexit EU deal and its political implications. The deal re-establishes trade and diplomatic ties, including a defense partnership and restored electricity market cooperation. A veterinary agreement easing food trade and a contentious 12-year fisheries access compromise are key elements. While Starmer markets the deal as economical and pragmatic, critics like Kemi Badenoch label it a surrender due to dynamic alignment with EU rules. Public and political response has been muted, reflecting Brexit fatigue, though concerns about sovereignty and immigration persist.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/7e7f481e-92dd-4d95-b46e-1d6adb911b70> - The UK and EU have announced a reset of their post-Brexit relationship through a three-part agreement aimed at improving economic ties, security cooperation, and energy integration. Key components include a new security and defence partnership, improved trade in agrifoods and electricity, and a veterinary agreement reducing red tape on agricultural exports. While Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer claims a potential £9bn annual economic boost by 2040, analysts note the gains would only marginally offset Brexit’s 4% long-term GDP impact. The agreement includes a controversial 12-year extension of EU fishing access to UK waters, a trade-off for securing improvements in food trade. The UK will also work towards rejoining the EU's internal energy market, which could save consumers €44bn annually. The security pact reestablishes institutional cooperation, including regular high-level meetings and potential UK involvement in the EU’s €150bn arms fund. Gains in youth and professional mobility remain uncertain, with limited commitments on work exchanges and no progress on touring artist visas. Despite some economic and diplomatic progress, the reset does not reverse the fundamental Brexit trade and regulatory realignments.
4. <https://www.ft.com/content/36f02ca9-9692-49e2-b84a-17cf86fc1062> - Rupert Rogers, writing from Dubai, addresses the criticism surrounding the EU-UK agreement allowing EU fishing fleets access to UK waters for an additional 12 years. Contrary to claims of a 'sellout,' Rogers highlights historical precedents that justify such access. He references the 1964 London Fisheries Convention, which granted fishing rights to European nations based on traditional fishing activities between 1953 and 1962. These 'grandfather rights' affirmed mutual access within six to 12 nautical miles of each country's coasts. Additionally, he cites a much older precedent from 1666, when Charles II granted 50 Flemish fishermen perpetual fishing rights in English waters. Rogers argues that in the context of these longstanding historical arrangements, a 12-year extension is minor and consistent with past practices of shared use of maritime resources.
5. <https://apnews.com/article/3181228316c3d0cd736ecbf93a1eff43> - Five years after Brexit, the UK and EU have signed new agreements marking a renewed chapter in bilateral relations. During the first formal summit since the UK's departure from the EU, Prime Minister Keir Starmer and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen celebrated deals focused on trade, defense, and youth mobility. Key developments include easing trade barriers by cutting border checks and aligning food standards, which aim to revive crimped exports and benefit the UK economy. A defense pact allows UK access to a €150 billion EU loan program for military procurement, partly to support Ukraine. Other agreements involve extending EU fishing rights in UK waters until 2038, enhanced youth mobility for temporary work and study exchanges, and expedited airport procedures for UK travelers via EU e-gates. While the British government touts the deals as economically and diplomatically beneficial, opposition parties criticize them as undermining Brexit, with complaints of becoming a 'rule-taker' again. Starmer maintains the UK will not rejoin the single market or customs union. Analysts suggest a pragmatic approach to EU alignment is necessary given the UK’s trade dependencies. The agreements follow recent UK deals with the US and India, aiming to re-establish the UK’s global presence.
6. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/what-britain-eu-may-discuss-monday-summit-2025-05-18/> - At the upcoming summit in London on Monday, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and European Union leaders aim to reset UK-EU relations with progress on key issues. Discussions may focus on a defence and security pact, prompted by Russia's aggression and NATO burden-sharing concerns. The UK seeks access to EU defence projects, while EU leaders may link agreements to fisheries. Sanitary and phytosanitary measures are critical to easing border checks, with potential EU demands for rule alignment and oversight by the European Court of Justice. A youth mobility scheme for under-30s to travel and work across borders is a priority, though it will be controlled, not a return to freedom of movement. Other possible topics include fisheries, as key agreements expire in 2026, electricity trading efficiency post-Brexit, linking carbon markets to improve cost and efficiency, and cooperation in professional qualifications, touring artists’ travel, and data sharing. Although no final agreements are expected at this summit, both sides hope to establish frameworks to guide future negotiations.
7. <https://www.ft.com/content/04bf9ddc-1abf-4641-a4e3-f9b5f2689ebb> - Nine years after the Brexit referendum, the UK’s new agreement with the EU under the Labour government marks a modest but symbolically significant step towards closer cooperation. The centerpiece is a security and defence pact that formalizes collaboration in military training, cyber and space security, infrastructure resilience, and hybrid threats. This agreement also opens the door for UK participation in the EU's €150bn Security Action for Europe procurement fund. Economically, the deal includes a veterinary agreement to ease agrifood exports and aligns emissions trading systems, potentially adding £9bn to the UK economy by 2040. However, the UK has accepted dynamic alignment with EU rules in certain areas and extended EU fishing access to UK waters for 12 years, prompting criticism from rightwing parties as a loss of sovereignty and a betrayal of the fishing industry. While the Labour government has maintained red lines against rejoining the single market or customs union, the deal reflects a shift towards more pragmatic relations. With Europe facing rising security challenges, the agreement serves as a foundation for a deeper realignment, recognizing the UK's need to foster stronger ties with its principal trade and security partner.