# Scottish fishermen warn of crisis as UK-EU trade deal extends EU fleet access



Steering his fishing boat towards Wick, Andrew Bremner's contemplative mood stood in stark contrast to the bright sunlight glimmering on the placid waters of the Pentland Firth. His ten-man crew had just wrapped up a successful 16-day haul, which included cod, haddock, and whiting, yet the joy of their return was overshadowed by the disheartening fallout from a recent trade deal between the UK and the European Union.

For the resilient, tight-knit communities dotting Scotland's rugged coastline, the deal has sparked fear and uncertainty. Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer proclaimed the agreement as a boon for British businesses and a strengthening of borders; however, Bremner and his fellow fishermen felt differently. “Betrayal,” he termed it, reflecting his sentiments regarding the deal, which he first learned about via social media. The announcement, he felt, signalled that the government had once again neglected the vital interests of the fishing industry.

This latest agreement marks a significant post-Brexit realignment between the UK and EU, covering diverse sectors, but it is particularly contentious in the realm of fisheries. At its core, the deal grants EU fishing vessels an additional 12 years of unimpeded access to British waters, a move that the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation heralded as ‘disastrous’. This concession has prompted fears that Scotland's commercial fishing sector, which employed approximately 4,000 individuals and generated £335 million in 2022 alone, may face an existential threat.

While some segments within the fish farming and aquaculture industry welcomed the trimming of bureaucratic barriers, stakeholders like the Scottish Fishermen's Federation have been vociferous in denouncing the agreement. Accusing successive UK governments of prioritising the interests of other sectors over fishermen, the SFF condemned the government’s supposed capitulation to EU demands. In the eyes of political entities like the pro-Brexit Reform UK party, this perceived betrayal could carve out opportunities to attract disenchanted voters ahead of upcoming elections.

Starmer’s assertions at the summit with EU figures, including Ursula von der Leyen, may resonate with broader economic imperatives, as the government hints at reduced prices and improved trade efficiencies. Recent analyses even project potential UK economic gains from the deal amounting to £9 billion annually by 2040. However, these promises stand in stark contradiction to the growing trepidation amongst fishermen like Bremner, who perceive their livelihoods as increasingly jeopardised. As he pointedly noted, the historical mistrust of governmental assurances dating back to Edward Heath’s era reverberates through the fishing community’s psyche.

The spectre of overfishing and the competition for dwindling resources looms large. Bremner's future outlook is grim: with foreign vessels already aggressively fishing Scottish waters, he anticipates a renewed struggle for survival. His apprehension echoes concerns voiced by others in the industry about a possible 'cod war', exacerbated by the presence of foreign fleets employing radically different fishing techniques that disrupt local fishing patterns.

As James Anderson, an experienced fisherman from Shetland, described, the reality of foreign incursions into British waters remains a persistent threat, compounded by historic vulnerabilities in the UK's negotiating stance. Anderson lamented the weakening of the UK fleet, believing it undermines their ability to safeguard domestic fishing interests. He questioned the authenticity of promises from politicians who fail to grasp the complexities and significance of fishing rights and resources.

Despite the despair, some fishermen like Bally Philp view the deal as an opportunity for revival amid post-Brexit challenges. Philp, who has spent 35 years fishing off the West Coast, highlighted the potential benefits for small-scale fishermen—those who have borne the brunt of upheaval from both Brexit and the pandemic. He remains hopeful about better export opportunities, particularly in shellfish, although he is wary of the government's track record in supporting grassroots fishing ventures.

The complexities of the latest agreement illustrate a broader narrative of compromise and coping within the fishing community, teetering between hope for sustainability and the harsh realities of market dynamics. While the government touts a £360 million fund designed to modernise the fleet and bolster coastal communities, skepticism remains palpable, echoing the sentiments from all corners of the industry—from those entrenched in tradition to the burgeoning aquaculture sector.

For fishermen like Bremner and Anderson, the ramifications of this trade deal are not merely economic; they are deeply interwoven with their identities and the fabric of their communities. The path forward remains fraught with uncertainty, as they grapple not only with external competition but also the lapses in government support that have characterised their history. As the tides of trade negotiations ebb and flow, the fate of Scotland’s fishing industry appears to hang in the balance, a poignant reminder of the stakes involved.

## 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), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/ffe9c7ca-52de-457e-ab50-8bc6df5296b0)
* 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), [[4]](https://apnews.com/article/3181228316c3d0cd736ecbf93a1eff43), [[6]](https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/uks-food-sellers-welcome-eu-deal-fishermen-feel-betrayed-2025-05-19/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/7e7f481e-92dd-4d95-b46e-1d6adb911b70), [[5]](https://www.ft.com/content/04bf9ddc-1abf-4641-a4e3-f9b5f2689ebb), [[6]](https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/uks-food-sellers-welcome-eu-deal-fishermen-feel-betrayed-2025-05-19/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[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), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/ffe9c7ca-52de-457e-ab50-8bc6df5296b0), [[4]](https://apnews.com/article/3181228316c3d0cd736ecbf93a1eff43), [[5]](https://www.ft.com/content/04bf9ddc-1abf-4641-a4e3-f9b5f2689ebb)
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* Paragraph 6 – [[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), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/ffe9c7ca-52de-457e-ab50-8bc6df5296b0), [[7]](https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/hold-britain-poised-reset-trade-defence-ties-with-eu-2025-05-18/)
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* Paragraph 8 – , [[4]](https://apnews.com/article/3181228316c3d0cd736ecbf93a1eff43)

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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://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.
5. <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.
6. <https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/uks-food-sellers-welcome-eu-deal-fishermen-feel-betrayed-2025-05-19/> - Britain’s food industry has largely welcomed a new agreement with the European Union that significantly reduces border paperwork and checks for trade in plant and animal products. This move is expected to ease trade and reduce costs while maintaining high food standards. Since the UK left the EU’s single market in 2021, exporters had faced significant delays and rising costs, leading to a one-third drop in UK food and drink exports to the EU. Retailers and small import businesses anticipate improved operations, with some European producers likely to resume trading with the UK. However, the deal came at a cost—Britain granted EU fishing vessels continued access to UK waters for 12 years. This concession has been met with anger from the UK fishing community, with industry leaders calling it a betrayal. While the food and retail sectors expressed relief and optimism, leaders like Elspeth Macdonald of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation condemned the fishing terms as a 'horror show.' Overall, the agreement represents a significant shift in UK-EU relations, balancing eased trade barriers with contentious compromises.
7. <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.