

Covid related gov assistance to Jersey fishing fleet.

The fishing fleet and our export markets were hit very hard prior even to the lockdown and whereas as an industry, we have always functioned reasonably well with no government support it was clear that assistance was required, if we were to have a fleet post pandemic.

The JFA submitted a document , which was in turn integrated into a broader document by the head of fisheries in the very early stages, outlining the gravity of the situation and highlighting points such as “critical mass”, explaining how if even 10% of the fleet were lost, upstream and downstream businesses, particularly export merchant businesses and infrastructure would likely collapse through lack of sufficient supplies to operate viably.

The paper proposed immediate short term funds to help cover basic costs, rents, supplementary wages for crews, insurance fees ect, but also some longer term assistance to establish facilities to further develop local and (non-continental niche markets), thus removing future dependence on volatile, weak markets.

Early approaches for support in wavering rents and fees to Ports of Jersey (who are effectively our landlords), were not successful, apart from from being offered a couple of extra weeks to pay our accounts which are all quarterly and annually in advance.

There was considerable support in kind from environment minister, Deputy Guida and particularly Deputy Luce, who took a genuine interest in the problem and there seemed to be a positive response, though there was suggestion that a small number of ministers had begun to take critical decisions without consulting with those with responsibility for the sector. Over a period of months we regularly received assurances that support was forthcoming, though in practice the funding had not been signed off. Fishermen may have been able to tap into the more generic income support funds, to help pay bills and feed their family, but most did not as we, as an organisation, were advising that directed assistance was forthcoming.

Around early June we received news that the funding, based not on our proposals, but a reflection of the UK scheme had been signed of by COM. That unfortunately direct some quite generous funding to the 2 specific (over 15m) vessels, but left the major part of the fleet of smaller vessels with minimal support, in fact almost nothing for under 7 m vessels

Bizzarely we then, from the time the support scheme was announced as having been approved, could not get any clarity on what the mechanism to be used, the details, or timescales were and it was at least another 3 or 4 weeks before the funds were released. Jersey was the last jurisdiction in the western world, to our knowledge, to have provided support to the fleet.

Whilst fishermen are and certainly were grateful for the support, it was only grace of the efforts of someone previously not connected to the industry, who set up “Jersey Alternative Fish market” through social media, effectively linking consumers direct with catchers in real time, that saved the fleet from bankruptcy. That social media platform, which is still functioning well, simply helped fishermen effectively tread water and to avoid bankruptcy.

As a foot note, there is serious concern within the industry that our affairs, the future of our international relationships, and the ability to sustainably manage our marine resources are being poorly negotiated by foreign affairs without the inclusion of or consultation with the relevant ministers and without dialogue with the industry..

*It may be a digression from the question at hand, however our industry, though facing hardship, is equally presented with opportunities that will not be repeated in our lifetimes. It is an assumption admittedly, that the foreign affairs minister denies, however it is entirely unacceptable that those opportunities, the future of the resource and the welfare of the industry is being consigned is being compromised, by allowing a minister with scant knowledge of the industry to take decisions and conduct negotiation, rather than the relevant ministers taking the lead.*

The fishing industry, due in part to the lessons learnt from the pandemic, the collapse of already severely weakened traditional markets, as well as the ability to access continental markets per se, is acutely aware of the need for a seismic shift in the way we work, particularly in the context of processing and marketing, both of which provide opportunity for new local employment.

Engagement with government at this point in time, while crucial to achieving those aims, is practically nonexistent and the ability to sustainably manage the resource will underpin the entire principle.