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Sustainable Water Network (SWAN) response to [‘Visionary 20-year plan to ensure future of Irish marine resources’](#) sponsored article written by Peter Burke, Minister of State with responsibility for Planning and Local Government. Published in the Irish Examiner, 31 July 2020. Word count: 578

VISIONARY 20-YEAR MARINE PLAN – A LOT CAN HIDE BEHIND AN ASTERISK

- Cormac Nolan, Policy Officer, the Sustainable Water Network (SWAN)

An indescribably important part of the responsibilities of new Minister of State for Planning and Local Government, Peter Burke, is the production of Ireland’s first marine spatial plan. The National Marine Planning Framework (NMPF) promises to transform how we as a country plan and manage human activities in our ocean, and we at the Sustainable Water Network (SWAN) fully support most of the ambitions the Minister outlined in his [Irish Examiner article on the 31st of July 2020](#).

We agree that the right balance is needed between the three pillars of sustainable development – “protecting the health of the ocean, enhancing our social engagement with the sea; developing a thriving maritime economy”. Of course without a healthy ocean most of the benefits we enjoy under the social and economic pillars would cease to be, so if we are to discuss balance then it should be heavily weighted in favour of environmental protection. The draft plan showed some promise in this regard with high level objectives for ocean health so we eagerly await a planning framework and legislation that will indeed “enshrine a system in law and in practice that will protect Ireland’s greatest resource” as the Minister stated.

However, in conflict with the promotion of this promising plan, the Minister’s article included one HUGE caveat hidden in a footnote, the significance of which is likely to go unnoticed by all except close observers of this process. On the subject of the Marine Planning and Development Management Bill (long-awaited legislation meant to modernise marine licensing which will also underpin the new marine spatial plan) a small asterisk denotes: *“*The 1933 Foreshore Act will still apply to fisheries related consent i.e. aquaculture and fisheries harbours”*.

This postscript essentially means that commercial fisheries and aquaculture are being excluded completely from the new licencing system, despite being two of the most important, impactful and widespread marine activities in the country. They are included in the National Marine Planning Framework yes, but the draft legislation which will give legal effect to the plan will not apply to either industry. The draft Marine Planning and Development Management Bill states: *“The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine is the appropriate Minister for foreshore functions relating to aquaculture, sea-fisheries related development and fishery harbour centres under Section 1B of the Foreshore Act. Those activities and any other development within the functional remit of the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (MAFM) are excluded from the scope of the Bill.”*

This intentional omission has come under intense criticism from environmental groups and aquaculture representatives alike. Addressing the subject in December 2019 during a public consultation meeting, previous Minister of State, Damien English, said that “the situation with the Department of Agriculture is not finished yet”.

It is SWAN’s opinion that the inclusion of commercial fisheries and aquaculture in the Marine Planning and Development Bill is of utmost priority, not just for the protection of the environment but for the viability of the businesses who must currently endure a dysfunctional and outdated licensing system. Resolving this unfinished matter with the Department of Agriculture will be key to

the success or failure of the marine plan and we urge Minister Burke to do so with great urgency. To leave fisheries and aquaculture out of the Bill would allow the fragmented marine management system in this country to persist to the detriment of the health of our ocean and the livelihoods of those who depend on the 'blue economy'.

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NOTES TO EDITOR

The Sustainable Water Network (SWAN) is an umbrella network of twenty four of Ireland's leading environmental NGOs, national and regional, working together to protect and enhance Ireland's aquatic environment. SWAN is a member of the [National Marine Planning Framework Stakeholder Advisory Group](#).