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FISHERIES

SUPPORT FOR THE FISHING INDUSTRY

In a Statement to the House of Commons last night, the Rt Hon Michael Jopling, MP, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, gave details of a major package of support for the United Kingdom fishing industry. The Government expects expenditure in the United Kingdom of almost £43 million arising directly from the European Commission Structures package, and has allocated a further £45 million over the next three years for vessel building grants and loans to be administered by the Sea Fish Industry Authority.

During the course of his Statement, the Minister said:

"Altogether we are budgeting for almost £43 million for expenditure in the United Kingdom arising directly from the implementation of the Community Structures package. We have allocated a further £45 million over the next 3 years to the vessel building grants and loans administered by the SFIA. Together these provisions represent a major package of support for the fishing industry from public funds.

"This shows our determination, at a time when Government expenditure must be tightly controlled, to give every possible encouragement to the process of renewal and improvement which is necessary if we are to develop and maintain an efficient fleet capable of effectively exploiting the fishing opportunities which are open to us.

"The FEOGA scheme for building and modernisation grants is already open. The new schemes for decommissioning grants, laying up grants and aids for joint ventures and exploratory voyages will be opened as soon as possible after we have made the necessary Statutory Instrument. This we aim to do before Christmas.

"Making that Order will mark a very important stage in the development of fisheries policy. It represents a key element in the full implementation of the Common Fisheries Policy and is to be welcomed as such. It is even more to be welcomed because I believe it will bring real benefits to our industry.



Speaking first about the decommissioning grants under the Commission's Structures package the Minister said:

"May I remind the House what is in the structures package. There is provision for decommissioning grants. The aim here is to reduce capacity in those sections of the fleet where total capacity exceeds our fishing opportunities. This makes sense for those who have been trying to operate vessels which were built for another era when we had access to grounds which are now closed to us. It could also provide help for the owners of vessels which are simply not viable in modern circumstances for any one of a number of possible reasons and whose owners now wish to leave the industry. The benefit to the rest of the fleet will come from there being less pressure on our share of the stock if we have rather fewer vessels chasing any given amount of fish.

"First, the grant will be £400 per Gross Registered Ton. Second, the Community will help to fund payments only for vessels down to 12 metres long.

"Our own industry pressed us to widen the coverage of the scheme and we have decided to make the grant available to any vessels over 10 metres long.

"There is one thing I want to make quite clear. No-one is being forced out of the industry. The decision whether to stay in the fleet or whether to apply for a grant and leave is for the owner of the vessel to take. No-one else. All we are doing is easing what will, for many, remain a difficult choice.

Turning to the subject of laying up grants and support for exploratory voyages and joint ventures the Minister commented:

"The second main element of the package comprises new grants to assist the industry by providing laying up grants and support for exploratory voyages and joint ventures. These go together because they are aids for vessels which have a future, which their owners want to keep in the fleet, but which may need some short term help.

"There is one important point which I want to make here. We propose to implement these schemes on the lines laid down in the EC legislation with one important exception. Our laying up grant schemes will cover not just the larger and newer vessels covered by the Community scheme, but any vessel over 10 metres irrespective of age. This was a point on which the industry organisations were very keen. I know they will welcome our decision.



Most importantly, the Minister then spoke about aid for vessel building and modernisation:

"The third piece of the jigsaw, and for many the most important, is the scheme of FEOGA aid for vessel building and modernisation. The same EC Scheme also provides for the continuation of grants for fish farming. We have had interim schemes of FEOGA aid for some years. But now we have agreement that the scheme will be open in both 1984 and 1985 at least. Fishermen have welcomed the fact that there will no longer be a need to reopen the scheme every year with all that has meant in delays in being able to make applications between the end of one scheme and the beginning of the next.

"It has been clearly established that priority under the Community vessel scheme will go to the replacement or modernisation of vessels over 12 years old. This is very much our priority. Aid will be available to vessels between 9 metres and 33 metres. The lower limit is an improvement on the 12 metres originally proposed.

"The House should also know that our own 25% grants will continue to be available through the Sea Fish Industry Authority in addition to FEOGA grants."