

Marine and Coastal Access Bill

The Government has been working towards a marine bill for a number of years and the Marine and Coastal Access Bill (MACAB) was introduced in the House of Lords on 4 December 2008. It has reached the Lords' Committee stage during its passage through Parliament, and is likely to take a further 3-4 months before gaining royal assent. Based on that timescale, one or more elements of the Bill are likely to become law from October 2009.

In summary, MACAB:

- introduces a new system of marine management, covering new planning processes to implement the Government's strategic objectives for the marine environment
- changes the licensing of marine activities
- alters how marine fisheries are to be managed
- provides for the designation of marine conservation areas
- enables greater recreational access to the English and Welsh coasts

These provisions are described in more detail below.

1. Marine Management

MACAB proposes a new Marine Management Organisation as a centre of expertise and to provide a consistent and unified approach to all aspects of marine management. Its functions will include:

- making decisions according to the Marine Policy Statement on marine development. Decisions on electricity generation and renewable energy installations will come within its scope
- licensing fishing activity under the EU Common Fisheries policy
- licensing marine environmental activities
- operating the harbours regime
- undertaking nature and conservation activities

2. Marine Planning

Long-term objectives relating to the sustainable development of the marine area are to be set out in a Marine Policy Statement (MPS). A series of marine plans will then be produced, identifying how the policies and objectives in the MPS will apply at local level.

3. Marine Licensing

MACAB seeks to simplify the current system for licensing marine activities such as coastal engineering works, works to harbours, dredging and renewable electricity projects

4. Marine Nature Conservation

The Sec of State may designate a network of marine ecosystems to be known as Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) in order to protect sensitive habitats and species

5. Management of Fisheries

In place of the existing Sea Fisheries Committee, there will be new Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (IFCAs) with duties relating to the operation of inshore fisheries and nature conservation. The Environment Agency will have new powers to conserve and manage migratory fish, in response to depleting fish stocks.

6. Coastal Access

The Sec of State and Natural England will be required to secure public access to a new route around the whole English coast, accessible by foot or ferry; and to provide a margin of land along the length of the coast which the public can enjoy. Rights of access will not be unfettered: they must strike a fair balance between the interests of the public wishing to access the route and those of any person with a legal interest in the land.