

Date: Monday, March 9, 2009

UNDER-10m vessel owners who have been issued with second tier capped licences under DEFRA's package for the English under-10 sector are re-registering their boats in Wales or Scotland to get round the restriction and obtain full licences, reports Phil Lockley.

Angry skippers of under-10m boats who have been given capped licences say they have been robbed of the ability to fish flexibly that is essential to successful inshore working.

Dave Cuthbert, co-chairman of the New Under Ten Fishermen's Association (NUTFA), is advising all skippers with capped licenses to register their boats away from England.

He told FN: "Quite a few of our members have done this already. One member travelled from the north east coast to Cardiff registry and came back with a Welsh number.

"DEFRA can do no more than issue a full licence and from what our solicitors say, there is nothing that DEFRA can do about it in the future.

"I asked a senior DEFRA fisheries officer for his opinion, and was told that this loophole cannot be closed.

"I feel no sympathy for the minister, Huw Irranca-Davies, as he was told throughout the consultation process that a two-tier licensing scheme would not only be discriminatory and cause tremendous earnings losses for many inshore fishermen, but also a greater disaster for DEFRA because its own staff hate the idea."

He said NUTA cannot open legal proceedings against DEFRA until a capped-licence skipper has appealed and been rejected, but said the association will mount a legal challenge as soon as this occurs.

"We have instructed our solicitors today (Monday) to hold back to see what DEFRA's position is on this loophole. But the minister has said that neither he nor DEFRA has any jurisdiction on

imposing the two-tier licensing scheme via the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

“I advise all capped-licence holders to submit an appeal if they wish but not to wait for the result – re-register your boat as well.”

He said fishermen could travel to the UK Registry of Shipping & Seamen at Cardiff, pay a sum over the counter and re-register immediately. The registry must issue a full licence.

The capped licence scheme has dismayed and angered skippers throughout England, although skippers are unwilling to comment publicly for fear of jeopardising their appeals.

Two Cornish skippers explained how they are “just cove men” and that unless they can switch from bass fishing to Pollack fishing to cod fishing or “any other quota fish”, they cannot survive.

One said: “I’m scared, my wife is distraught with worry, it’s going to be hard enough to survive without this lot.

“Last year was a very bad year on the whitefish, even with the non-quota bass, and the squid were absent. We desperately need whitefish now because the bass are not here for another two months.

“Winter here is bad and almost every year several of our boats come ashore – we have punts of only 20ft or less and the weather out there is all too often wild.

“We are proud people. We want to work, we are not scroungers wanting to live on the dole, but that would be the only alternative with a capped-licence.”

Another skipper, normally a shell fisherman, has been a cove boat fisherman from the same port for over 40 years and has been an RNLI coxswain “for a very long time”.

He said: “What will I do now that the shellfish prices have hit the floor? It isn’t only that the price of crab has fallen – they don’t even want crab, so what can I do?

“We work tiny boats, we are no threat to the quota, what on earth is this government trying to do – take away the right of a man to earn a living, do they want us all on the dole?”

Skippers who have retained a full licence say they fear DEFRA will raise the 300kg of quota fish per annum qualifying level for a full licence “significantly” in the future.

They say they will “shoot every net we have” to catch as much quota fish as possible to retain their eligibility – the opposite of DEFRA’s aim of capping effort on quota stocks.

One said: “I have no option but to fish for quota fish, there won’t be a Pollack alive on any of the inshore wrecks. We will no choice but to fish hard.

Jerry Percy, leader of the Welsh Fishermen’s Federation is not surprised at the English skippers queuing up to re-register, and said: “

BLOB: Re-registration has occurred in reverse on the decommissioning element of the package. An English skipper was advised by the authorities to re-register his Scottish-registered boat in England to be approved for decommissioning. He did so and his boat was being broken-up this week.