

MLA/2025/00157 Falmouth Docks Development

Response from Falmouth Marine Conservation Group - Holding Objection

04.09.2025

1-Summary of overall position

We welcome the detailed Environmental Statement (ES) that has been submitted for the proposed extension to Falmouth docks. However, Falmouth Marine Conservation still has concerns around several aspects of the application in terms of assessment of impacts, the extent and type of mitigation proposed, and the amount of monitoring planned. Consequently, this response takes the form of a Holding Objection. If the additional information we request is made available and fully addresses our concerns, we may be in a position to withdraw this holding objection.

2-Concern over type of end-use

We appreciate that the intended end-use of the dock redevelopment may be outside the scope of this consultation. However, for information we wanted to highlight that an academic review of over 200 research papers published in [*Marine Pollution Bulletin*](#) in 2021 found that cruising is a major source of environmental pollution and degradation, with air, water, soil, fragile habitats and wildlife affected. We note that the dredging depth required is driven by proposals for cruise ships to dock. If a cost-benefit analysis has been produced, we request that it be made public to offer reassurance that environmental issues have been considered alongside economic imperatives.

3-Impact of noise from construction

50 weeks of pile driving activity is likely to have a significant impact on small cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoise) and seals which use the estuary and could lead to deaths or permanent injury and deafness. Presence of marine mammals is underestimated for the area in the ES as it is based on sightings data only. More recent acoustic data from the Cetacean Acoustic Tracking Program (CATT) show very frequent use of the area by toothed cetaceans throughout the year. Common dolphins and harbour porpoise have been recorded feeding well up into tidal creeks. Seals use areas in the estuary as haul out sites and have also been seen well up into the estuary. The Seal Research Trust holds more detailed data on seals in this area than that used in the ES from the Sea Mammal Research Unit (SMRU). We request that data from these additional sources is used to inform and update the mitigation proposals for the application.

We feel that the level of cetacean and seals monitoring is insufficient. It is important that the presence and movement of these animals within the higher reaches of the estuary is monitored, especially around Penryn (due to the shape of the creek and

proximity to the docks site meaning animals could be trapped in this area). If cetaceans and seals move into the estuary despite the piling noise, we need to know about it so that work can be halted until they safely leave. Otherwise, we risk mass strandings in response to noise issues as occurred in 2008 when 26 common dolphins died after stranding in the Percuil river after noise from naval exercises outside the estuary pushed them up into the creek.

We also recommend a clear line of communication is agreed between the developer, the MMO and local organisations such as Cornwall Wildlife Trust, British Divers Marine Life Rescue and Seal Research Trust so that we can pass on additional sightings of marine mammals from the public or volunteers in the area.

Regarding mitigation of impacts, we request that compressed air bubble curtains are considered as a method to lower noise levels. Licenced use of acoustic deterrents could also be considered to drive acoustically sensitive species out of the Penryn River prior to construction noise beginning.

4-Dredging and excavation

As the Fal is home to the most extensive and healthiest maerl beds in England and Wales, this habitat is of particular concern. Maerl is classified as irreplaceable habitat and any loss of this within the SAC in terms of extent or decline in condition is unacceptable. The development will not only impact protected features of the Fal and Helford SAC but will also risk the majority of Cornwall's priority marine habitats and species as identified by the draft CIOS marine nature recovery framework, including kelp, native oysters, seagrass, maerl and cetaceans. Also, Seasearch data shows that Falmouth Harbour is an important area for *Hippocampus guttulatus*, the long snouted seahorse, a protected species, and this needs addressing in the ES.

The ES assesses the impact on benthic habitats including maerl and seagrass (both of which are found within a short distance from the development) as low or negligible. However, the scenario presented for dredging is best case and does not take into account adverse weather conditions which may alter the footprint of the modelled excavation sediment plume.

When the prevailing winds are from the south, we feel it is more likely that fine sediment will be deposited on the main seagrass beds off Kiln quay, Flushing, which is only 0.6km from the North arm of the Docks. We request that the modelling is revisited with different wind directions included and that mitigation strategies be updated accordingly, with the presence of the long-snouted seahorse also considered. As an example, it may prove necessary to halt dredging work when certain weather conditions are forecast.

Resuspension of sediments and associated release of nutrients can lead to eutrophic conditions and enhanced algal growth. The resultant overgrowth of algae can

smother sensitive habitats and also deoxygenate deeper areas in some environmental conditions (especially during spring and summer). This risk is not addressed in the ES and needs to be added in.

We would like to see a detailed monitoring program built into the development timetable to test for sediment loading, nutrients and contaminants in the water column at sensitive sites before work starts (to establish baselines), during (with a plan to cease operations if these become excessive or damage to maerl and associated wildlife is detected) and after (to monitor impacts).

5-Sediment disposal at sea

A similar plan should be implemented for sites near the sediment disposal site. Recent maps and surveys show maerl, kelp and seagrass habitats are located near to the modelled sediment dispersal plume from the disposal site, as well as subtidal moderate energy circalittoral rock, particularly the area known as the Bizzies reefs. The modelled plume also suggests a considerable sediment load will be transported into the Falmouth Bay to St Austell Bay Special Protection Area. This, along with potential effects on the diving birds which are the SPA's protected feature is not addressed in the ES and needs to be included. The modelling of dredging plumes and disposal plumes does not currently mention additional impacts of varied weather conditions. Different combinations of windspeed and direction, swells and rainfall volume may affect dispersal of contaminated sediments. Independent monitoring of dredging and disposal should be carried out by suitably qualified and experienced personnel during operation. This will identify any unexpected sediment dispersal and allow operations to be stopped or delayed as needed to prevent dispersal into sensitive areas.

6-Contaminated sediment

We welcome the recognition of contaminated sediment issues and their inclusion in the ES. Tributyltin (TBT) has been shown to be particularly dangerous to molluscs. The risk of contaminated sediments containing TBT being released is a major threat to the future of the Fal oyster fishery and shellfish aquaculture in the Penryn River and the wider Fal estuary.

The planned use of a lidded backhoe dredger is crucial. It is also important that the work is carried out carefully and precisely following a detailed best-practice methodology with full training for operators as required, to minimise risk of loss of contaminated sediment. We note the core sampling that has been carried out with sediment sampling and analysis at various depths to inform the disposal methodology. It is still possible that some of the material intended for disposal at sea may contain some contamination, so we request that sediments will be routinely sampled and analysed during operations and if unexpected contamination is

detected disposal plans will need to be adapted accordingly to ensure that all contaminated sediments are correctly disposed of. Sediments will need to be very carefully handled at all stages, whether contaminated or not. Ideally disposal would be further from shore than the proposed dumping area, but we realise this may not be possible due to licensing arrangements.

There is serious risk of contaminated sediment being accidentally released if the operation is not closely monitored and reported at all stages of the lengthy redevelopment process. Given the nature and scale of the works and the risks involved, we request that an independent Ecological Clerk of Works is employed for the duration to ensure that best-practice operating procedures, detailed in an agreed method statement, are followed and risks minimised and mitigated.

7-Operational impacts- Light Pollution

The redevelopment plans will result in increased light pollution from additional illumination of the docks, and from vessels whilst docked and when moving into and out of the area. We would like to see this impact addressed in detail within the ES, including impacts on the SAC and SPA and expert advice sought to avoid, minimise and mitigate impacts on both terrestrial and marine habitats and species.

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