

## Introduction of measures to help alleviate cormorant predation problems at fisheries.

The main policy change proposed is to move away from killing a small number of cormorants to aid non-lethal scaring towards the granting of licences to kill and take those birds causing problems.

### Licensing changes

1. There has been an increase in the number of birds coming inland since the 1970s which has led to an increase in the damage caused to fish stocks. This has threatened the livelihoods of fishery owners and managers. We also believe that because the current licensing system is perceived as “difficult”, fishery owners do not make full use of it.

2. The number of cormorants breeding in Britain has risen over the last 25 years, with a rapid increase in numbers breeding inland - estimates place the number of individual birds wintering in Britain at approximately 23,000, with about 17,000 of those in England. Defra has accepted for some time that cormorants can and do cause serious damage to some fisheries. Despite seeking solutions which do not involve the killing of cormorants, we have so far not found answers to all the problems that they cause which is why new measures are being announced.

3. Licence holders with a serious cormorant problem will be allowed to shoot more cormorants. This would enable a more concerted effort early in the season which might help stop birds establishing a feeding routine at a particular site. At the moment, licensees tend to hold back killing their full quota in case of problems later in the season as quotas are small.

4. One of the main stumbling blocks for licence applicants is providing evidence of serious damage which can be extremely difficult to obtain – up to 70% of the licence applications refused fail on this basis alone. Where a significant number of cormorants are present at a site and where cormorants are known to be feeding on vulnerable fish stocks, or there is a realistic prospect of this situation arising, this will constitute a risk of serious damage. This will still need to be confirmed by Defra on a case by case basis. Nevertheless the law requires that Defra must be satisfied that there is no other satisfactory solution to killing before it can issue a licence – under the current system we don’t require applicants to actively demonstrate that a control or management technique does not work – evidence which shows a particular method is impracticable is also accepted. This will continue to be the case.

5. In order to make the licensing system more user-friendly, licences to kill cormorants could be -

- **issued for a period of up to two years.** Currently licences expire after one year or less.

**issued between 31 August and 15 April. However, where it is necessary to protect salmon and sea trout smolts, licences to kill birds can be issued during the smolt run up to 1 May.** This extends the period where licences can be issued to cover the smolt run while having regard to the welfare risk that birds will be shot while rearing chicks. This is a relaxation of existing rules as although licences can in theory be issued throughout the year, during the sensitive summer cormorant breeding period the licensing criteria is much stricter and only very small numbers of licences are approved. This extension will also apply to protect designated spawning sites such as gravel shallows on rivers for all species of fish and fisheries that are planning fresh stockings of fish in still waters where they would be vulnerable to attack.

- **issued in advance to prevent problems occurring.** This already takes place but not all applicants make sensible use of this service – rather they wait until the problem is serious and then expect immediate action from Defra. We will produce a clear and concise guidance notice to guide applicants through the new system – most anglers can predict when migratory fish will arrive so, with a little forward planning, a licence can be issued in good time.
- **issued without an assessor’s visit unless this is a new licence application or where circumstances have significantly changed. Every site will however be visited at least once every two years. We reserve the right to visit a site more often if we believe it necessary.** At the moment advisors visit on every application.
- **amended by telephone, fax or by email.** This facility already exists to allow applicants more flexibility to submit and amend applications. Applications can be downloaded from the internet. In line with current Defra policy we are in the process of developing a system where all licence applications can be completed on-line.
- **ensure that the Environment Agency and other Defra agencies are aware of the above changes and encourage them to follow permitted procedures where appropriate.**

#### **Permitted numbers to be killed.**

6. Defra will continue to grant licences to kill cormorants on a case by case basis to solve specific problems at fisheries. However the number of cormorants permitted to be shot will be increased. This may have an effect on the size of the national cormorant population although this will not lead to an irreversible or long term decline in numbers. The proposed strategy would suppress the cormorant population to lower numbers but this would be stable. We will monitor this to ensure that our predictions are accurate, and alter this policy to protect the conservation status of the cormorant should this prove necessary

7. Models based on the range of population estimates predict that the annual removal of 2,000 birds would suppress the size of the English cormorant population by between 15 and 20% with this effect taking 5 years to be fully apparent. This suppression would be stable and would not lead to a further long-term decline in population size. The repeated removal of 2,000 birds per annum would have a margin of safety of 25%-40% compared to the levels that would place the population at risk of a long-term decline. There is scope to remove more birds (up to 3,000 birds) per annum for a short number of years but this would reduce the population more quickly but the removal of high numbers could not be sustained long-term.

8. If high numbers are removed in the first few years of a new strategy, then this would need to be monitored carefully through a refined WeBs count and the number of licences reduced in future years to ensure the population is stable. This would, therefore, protect the conservation status of the bird, (as required under the Birds Directive), while providing enough flexibility to resolve fishery problems.

9. For those cases which affect SPA’s (and other protected sites) Defra are legally required to give notice to EN on a case by case basis and EN are given 28 days to consider such cases. The Department fully considers EN’s advice when deciding whether to issue the licence and the conditions attached to the licence. If the Department does not concur with EN’s advice then it must give notice to EN explaining the extent to which its advice has been followed and the licensed operations may not commence until 21 days after such notice is given. A change in this procedure would require a change in primary legislation.

## Research

10. Defra-funded research into underwater refuges as a way of protecting fish from cormorants is being undertaken collaboratively by CEFAS and CSL, and has been providing some encouraging results. The research has provided clear evidence that the quantity of coarse fish species eaten by cormorants can be dramatically reduced when refuges are present; by 80% in still waters. This work is continuing, but in order to keep anglers and fishery owners apprised of these interesting developments, it is planned to produce a **Defra advisory leaflet outlining provisional ideas on refuge design and their application**, and to report on the initial results. This leaflet will be made available via Defra Wildlife Advisors and the Defra website.

11. It is also planned to produce an article on the work for the Environment Agency's Reel Life magazine, which is circulated to around one million anglers. In addition, **we will also provide one to one training by RDS advisors to help first time** applicants understand the licensing system, complete the licence application form and explain the practical application of fish refuges. As a result of the above changes, there will be more advice and help available for cormorant licence applicants than any other species.

12. Some interests suggest that the licensing process is ambiguous suggesting Defra requires all applicants to carry out the same deterrent activities, but then argue these measures are not suitable in all cases. This is a contradictory view. **The current system which operates on a case by cases basis is the only way in which we can ensure small and large fishing enterprises are treated fairly**

13. Finally, Defra has already spent approximately £1.5 million on researching alternative non-lethal methods of cormorant control. Results from this work are already incorporated into the current policy to promote non-lethal methods and recent research results on refuges are extremely promising in certain circumstances. Nevertheless, there are gaps in the programme. **To this end, Defra is recommending that further work is undertaken to test the applicability of refuges, optimise refuge design and determine the most cost-effective spatial arrangements in still waters as well as looking at ways to resolve problems in rivers. We will also consider ways of enhancing the reliability of population estimates of cormorants.**

There is also a significant need to look into refining WeBs data to help inform our predictive model of cormorant population size. There may also be scope to undertake research into cormorant problems at rivers.