EFRA Inquiry: General Licences for Controlling Wild Birds

Please find attached a written evidence submission prepared by my department in response to your committee’s inquiry into general licences for controlling wild birds.

On 4th May, following a request from the Chair of Natural England, I took on ultimate decision-making for the purposes covered by the general licences revoked by Natural England on 25th April. I considered this action appropriate and necessary in order to respond to the urgency of the situation.

I intend to confirm shortly how we proceed on general licensing, following an evidence-gathering exercise undertaken by my officials over the course of the last month. Defra received more than 4,000 responses to the call for evidence and we have since been carefully considering all the evidence received in order to determine next steps, alongside additional relevant evidence.

The announcement of my decision will be made ahead of publication of a wider consultation this summer. I am clear that there is a need for further work to explore in more detail, with longer time for consultation, some of the issues around the use of general licences. There will be a further opportunity to submit evidence and views at that point.

I am determined that the right decisions are made to ensure that we have a robust and effective licensing system in place. At this moment it is crucial that Defra Ministers and officials are able to focus efforts on enabling the right decision to be made and ensuring that licence users are fully supported in the light of that decision.

In this light, it is my preference that Minister Coffey and I provide oral evidence to your committee next month, rather than on Tuesday 11th June. At this point my decision on the general licences will have been fully implemented and embedded on the ground, which I believe will enable a more productive session.
I hope you find this suggestion acceptable, and that our written evidence proves useful to your inquiry.

With every good wish,

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Michael Gove
From the Chairman of the Committee

Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
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12 June 2019

General Licences for Controlling Wild Birds

I am replying to your letter of 6 June informing me of your request not to appear before the EFRA Committee on 11 June to discuss the issues of General Licences for Controlling Wild Birds.

The ongoing uncertainty surrounding the general licence issue continues to be a source of great concern to the Committee, and more importantly for the farming, conservation and shooting communities. This has been exacerbated by the delays in announcing your new approach since you took control of issuing new licenses from Natural England at the beginning of May. The evidence we heard from Natural England on 21 May, and their subsequent written evidence, also raised a series of important questions about Defra’s involvement in the decision to revoke the original licences in April and your oversight of Natural England’s administration of the licences that the Committee is keen to explore with Ministers.

You will understand, therefore, that the Committee is disappointed that you have, again, had to ask to postpone the appearance of Defra Ministers to address this important matter, but accepts it is necessary. However, the Committee feels it is important that the uncertainty is not unduly extended, and that if interim arrangements are not announced in the coming days then it will important for the department to explain the reasons for the delays publicly. It therefore requests that a Defra Minister appears in front of the Committee in the first week of July notwithstanding whether you have been able to announce the details of your new approach by that point.

Neil Parish
Chairman of the Committee