

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

The content of this ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the Official Report (Hansard) process.

Culture, Arts and Leisure

SALMON CONSERVATION REGULATIONS

Published at 12.00 noon on Thursday 27 February 2014

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Members will be aware from my previous statements to the House, of the perilous plight of Atlantic salmon and my plans to introduce a range of conservation measures aimed at curbing the decline of this iconic species.

I am now pleased to announce that there will be new legislation in place on the 1st March 2014 which will introduce mandatory catch and release for salmon and sea trout angling and a prohibition of salmon and sea trout netting across the DCAL jurisdiction.

From this date all salmon and sea trout caught by anglers must be returned to the water again. This will apply to all waters across the DCAL jurisdiction with the exception of Lough Melvin which has consistently demonstrated a sustainable surplus of salmon above management targets. Here anglers will be able to take and keep 2 salmon or sea trout during the season. On all other waters, all salmon and sea trout caught by anglers must be returned to the water.

While fishing for salmon and sea trout anglers must use single or double barbless hooks only and will only be able to use worms after the end of each June to protect salmon smolts.

With regard to commercial fishing, salmon and sea trout netting will be prohibited in coastal waters and Lough Neagh. However, legislation will provide that anyone who has held a netting licence in any one of the last three years will have first preference for a new licence should netting resume. Legislation also provides that this eligibility can be passed to a nominee should the original licence holder not wish to apply.

Criteria for a resumption of netting will also be enshrined in legislation. Licences will only be issued if the Department decides that such netting will not have an adverse affect on salmon stocks in:

- (a) a Special Area of Conservation as defined under the Habitats Directive;
- (b) any rivers which are not meeting such salmon management targets as may be determined and published by the Department.

Compensation will also be considered for those netsmen who can demonstrate loss of income as a result of the introduction of these legislative measures.

Questions have been raised about the inclusion of sea trout in catch and release measures and the prohibition on salmon netting. While, in comparison to salmon, there is limited scientific data on sea trout populations in the North of Ireland, international data would suggest a dramatic decline in global sea trout numbers. AFBI's analysis is that there is insufficient data available to allow the exploitation of sea trout across the DCAL jurisdiction. My advised position is therefore to apply a precautionary approach to sea trout management based on international data until local information has been collected and assessed over a longer time period.

Any killing of sea trout would also have to be considered in context of both angling and netting. The difficulties of distinguishing sea trout from salmon, is still a very real concern from an enforcement perspective. Permitting netting of sea trout would be difficult to police and would have implications for salmon caught as a by catch. Commercial nets also catch larger sea trout which can be disproportionately detrimental to sea trout recruitment in rivers.

Some anglers have also questioned whether catch and release legislation can be effective when those fishing for other species can use barbed hooks and may accidentally catch and fatally injure salmon or sea trout. While this can happen, it must be noted that as all such fish must still be returned to the water, there is no incentive for anglers to deliberately target salmon or sea trout in this way. Indeed it is vital that individual anglers take personal responsibility for their actions on the river banks and do not use any methods which may cause potential injury to salmon or sea trout. To assist in this my officials will be engaging with local angling clubs to promote best practice in catch and release and have developed promotional material and an educational DVD to re-enforce this message.

I would also urge anglers to play their part in helping the Department to establish robust data sets of salmon and sea trout stocks in our waters. They can do this by ensuring that they make returns on fishing effort. While anglers will no longer be allowed to retain salmon or sea trout on the vast majority of our waters, they must still record and return details of fish caught and returned to the water. This continues to be a valuable dataset which will contribute to a scientific assessment of salmon stocks and will help determine when rivers might re-open for the retention of salmon or sea trout by anglers. To facilitate this, the format of the game fishing licence has been amended to include a form for anglers to record salmon and sea trout catch and release details for return to the Department at the end of the season.

In bringing forward this legislation, I have given a great deal of thought to the views expressed by the various stakeholder interests and believe that the new Regulations are appropriate, equitable, enforceable and essential to conserving and protecting wild salmon stocks in the future. I pay tribute to both commercial netmen and anglers in the way they have contributed to this consultation process and their willingness to rise to the challenges facing the future of salmon stocks.

I know that the vast majority of anglers will respond positively to these new measures as they have been for years the guardians of our waters and their response to the call for voluntary catch and release over the past two years has been commendable. I wish also to pay tribute to our last remaining salmon netmen who have been courageous in their willingness to undertake a voluntary cessation of netting in the last two years and who have provided valuable input during the consultation part of this process.

But let me also be clear about the enforcement of this new legislation. The protection of wild fisheries remains a priority for my Department and there is already a robust enforcement strategy in place to protect fish stocks and prevent illegal fishing. This will be enhanced with a new programme of financial assistance for angling clubs to meet the court costs associated with appointing private water bailiffs. Private water bailiffs play a key role in the Departments conservation, protection and enforcement work and I am sure that this financial assistance will help to secure and expand this role. I am also pleased to announce that a new patrol boat has been commissioned for use on Lough Neagh. This will enhance my Departments presence on the Lough by improving response times to incidents and augment the good work already being carried out by my officials in what is a difficult and sometimes dangerous job.

In the roll-out of this legislation, my officials will continue to engage with stakeholders to ensure the successful implementation of these measures. This will include a series of meetings with angling clubs to explain the new measures and promote best practice in catch and release, and on-going engagement with those netmen who have been affected by their implementation.

In summary I believe that these new measures are a very important step in building the sustainability of our salmon and sea trout populations. I am determined to continue to regulate fisheries and conserve and enhance fish habitats to ensure that commercial and recreational fisheries are sustainable and deliver benefits for future generations. I trust that members will welcome this new era for salmon conservation in the North of Ireland which I anticipate will be a template for fisheries management across other jurisdictions in years to come.