
Written Ministerial Statement

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Culture, Arts and Leisure

Salmon Conservation

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Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): I am writing to update members on the state of wild Atlantic salmon stocks in the DCAL jurisdiction and of the need for stakeholders to take action to try to avert further decline in salmon numbers.

My Department commissions the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) to monitor the status of Atlantic salmon populations in the DCAL jurisdiction. Conservation Limits (CL) have been established for a suite of rivers that represent an index of the river types in the DCAL jurisdiction. These monitored rivers have failed to achieve CL in most years since 2002.

Although the definitive status of all river populations in the DCAL jurisdiction is not known, under the precautionary approach adopted by the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation, we should assume that all populations are suffering reduced reproductive capacity, since marine survival is so low and due to the similarity of unmonitored river types to monitored index rivers.

Loughs Agency monitoring has indicated that some Foyle catchment stocks are now also below management targets.

AFBI has determined that DCAL licensed drift nets and bag nets fishing for salmon off the Co. Antrim Coast are intercepting mixed stocks of salmon from rivers monitored by DCAL and also salmon from the Foyle catchment. Although draft nets fishing for salmon off the Co. Down coast have not been sampled to definitively determine composition of their catch in terms of rivers of origin, these fishing engines operate adjacent to

an index river that is failing to meet its CL. Again under the precautionary approach we should also assume that these nets are intercepting salmon from other non-index rivers in the area.

Long term monitoring of the survival of salmon during the marine phase of their lifecycle at Bushmills Salmon Station shows a decline from around 30% prior to 1997 to less than 5% today.

At the 'Salmon Summit' in La Rochelle, France, in October 2011 international scientists confirmed that wild Atlantic salmon are dying at sea in alarming numbers. Southern stocks including some in North America and Europe are threatened with extinction. The reasons for increased marine mortality are not clear but international research into various factors contributing to this is on-going.

After careful consideration of all the available scientific research and data I have concluded that the continued commercial exploitation of wild Atlantic salmon and killing of salmon caught by rod and line in the DCAL jurisdiction is currently untenable. Authorising such exploitation would be inconsistent with the Departments obligations under the EC Habitats Directive and with NASCO guidelines. This could lead to significant infraction fines being imposed by the EC.

Consequently I am calling on stakeholders to support a range of voluntary conservation measures for 2012 to allow my Department to consult on how we can contribute to the long term sustainability of wild Atlantic salmon stocks. Current legislation does not readily enable the introduction of further restrictions on the taking of salmon in time for the opening of the 2012 fishing season, hence the call for voluntary action by stakeholders.

Departmental officials have written to the Salmon and Inland Fisheries Forum, on which the range of stakeholders is represented, to ask for support for a range of voluntary

conservation measures to minimise exploitation of salmon stocks in 2012. Officials have written separately to all DCAL licensed commercial fishermen operating coastal and Lough Neagh fishing engines and have asked for a voluntary cessation of salmon fishing in the DCAL jurisdiction in 2012. Through the Forum the Department has asked for support for those measures and for voluntary catch and release for all recreational anglers in 2012. The implementation of such proposals within the DCAL jurisdiction would be consistent with steps taken by other jurisdictions on the island of Ireland and elsewhere.

It is hoped that stakeholders can find common ground in the interests of recovery of stocks and with the shared aim of a return to sustainability of all salmon fisheries, there will be a good level of support for the proposals. My Department will work with stakeholders to address any concerns and clarifications that they may raise.

With the co-operation of stakeholders the exploitation of wild Atlantic salmon can be minimised in 2012. This offers the Department time to consult on a range of options on the future of both commercial salmon fishing and recreational angling for salmon.