



Department  
for Environment  
Food & Rural Affairs

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Dear David,

Thank you for your letters of 4 May to the Northern Ireland Office and myself about preventing the extinction of Atlantic salmon. Your letter to the Northern Ireland Office has been transferred to Defra and I will be responding to both letters.

The Government remains concerned about the widespread decline in salmon stocks that is currently seen not just in UK rivers, but throughout the North Atlantic. The 2021 Annual Salmon Stock Assessment for England and Wales produced by the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (Cefas), the Environment Agency (EA) and Natural Resources Wales, again provides cause for concern<sup>1</sup>. Factors such as poor marine survival, predation, barriers to migration and agricultural pollution all put pressure on our remaining salmon stocks.

Internationally the UK Government continues to engage at the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation (NASCO) to conserve, restore, enhance, and rationally manage Atlantic salmon through international cooperation, taking account of the best available scientific information. Our efforts to negotiate a new West Greenland Regulatory measure in 2022 were rewarded with a significant reduction in overfishing, thus improving marine survival. We very much hope this improved management will continue in 2023. The UK Migratory Fisheries team at this year's NASCO annual meeting focused on ensuring the wide-ranging recommendations from NASCO's third External Performance Review were prioritised to deliver effective and timely actions for salmon.

Domestically, there is a clear need to maximise the numbers of salmon surviving and to enhance the quality and availability of salmon habitat to enable more salmon to spawn successfully. Defra and the EA continue to work alongside UK partners with a stake in the future of healthy salmon through collaborative partnerships. In England, strategic direction for salmon conservation is provided by the England Fisheries Group (EFG), which I believe the Institute for Fisheries Management are members of EFG is currently exploring how to build on the outcomes already achieved through the collaborative Salmon Five Point Approach.

The EA is the lead management authority for wild salmon in England. The EA has completed substantial work protecting salmon from fisheries exploitation, with strong support from Defra. For instance, in December 2018, England-wide national salmon byelaws were introduced closing all coastal salmon net fisheries in England and introducing mandatory catch and release on rod fisheries where salmon populations are most at risk. The EA have also worked closely with Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities to implement new regulations that have reduced the use of nets in estuaries and inshore coastal waters, that will help to protect salmon in these areas.

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[Salmon Stocks and Fisheries England and Wales 2021](#)

Other notable improvements, to date, include:

- Strengthened partnership working with non-Governmental organisations who have actively promoted catch and release and actions for salmon, with catch and release rates now standing at 93%.
- Since 2016, improvements have been made to salmon passage at more than 50 barriers, opening access to over 644 km of river habitat.
- Advancement in scientific knowledge of salmon with over £2 million invested in advancing England's national fish counter network, Cefas' review of marine stressors, the Missing Salmon Alliance, and the Likely Suspects Framework, all to enable better targeting of resources to support salmon recovery.
- Reduced predation via balanced Defra licensing policy of culling piscivorous birds.

Following the dramatic reduction in fisheries exploitation our domestic focus must now turn to wider measures that will enhance the environment in which salmon live.

New Environment Act 2021 targets have been put in place to sort major pressures on water to significantly reduce pollution from agriculture, wastewater treatment works and abandoned metal mines pollution. Water companies will be required to upgrade over 2000 wastewater treatment works of which around 400 will need to meet the strictest limit for phosphorus discharges.

Environment Act targets set four new legally binding long-term targets for water, to tackle some of the most significant pressures on the water environment and help us reach our overarching ambition for clean and plentiful water in the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP). These four targets are as follows:

1. Reduce nitrogen, phosphorus, and sediment pollution from agriculture into the water environment by at least 40% by 31 December 2038.
2. Reduce phosphorus loadings from treated wastewater by 80% by 31 December 2038.
3. Halve the length of rivers polluted by harmful metals from abandoned mines by 31 December 2038.
4. Reduce the use of public water supply in England per head of population by 20% by 31 March 2038.

In April, we published our Integrated Plan for Water. It marks a step-change in how we manage our waters. It looks at both water quality (how clean our waters are) and water resources (how much of it we have). We need to look at both things together.

Our Plan will help deliver a safe, reliable, resilient supply of clean and plentiful water – for our homes, businesses, for leisure and for wildlife that rely on it. It will restore precious habitats, helping to reverse species decline, so that people and wildlife can benefit from these ecosystems for generations to come.

It is underpinned by three things:

1. Increased investment for improvements. That includes £1.6 billion from water companies to spend on new and better infrastructure in the next two years, more funding for catchment-scale groups, and almost tripling slurry grant funding for farmers to £34 million (up from £13 million).
2. Stronger regulation. That includes more EA inspections of wastewater treatment works, banning plastic wet wipes, and new restrictions of 'forever' chemicals that damage our waters.
3. Tougher enforcement. That includes bigger penalties for water companies and tighter control over water company dividend payments.

In England, we have now also set four legally binding targets for biodiversity. By 2030 we have committed to halt the decline in species abundance and by 2042 we aim to reverse species decline; to reduce the risk of species extinction; and to restore or create more than 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitats. We have set out our plan to deliver on these ambitious targets, along with our other environmental targets, in the revised EIP (EIP23) published 31 January 2023.

Cleaning up pollution from abandoned metal mines should not have a negative impact on salmon. The Water and Abandoned Metal Mines programme is intended to increase the resilience and abundance of river-flies (macro-invertebrates) on which salmon and other fish rely, as well as decreasing one of the chemical pressures on salmon in their freshwater phase. High metal concentrations are known to prevent successful breeding by salmon and other fish.

I am grateful for the work your organisation has done to continue to draw awareness to plight of salmon, and I look forward to continuing working with your organisation in the future.

Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you need further information.

Yours sincerely,



**Rt Hon Mark Spencer MP**