

## Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

**Petition Number:** [PE1815](#)

**Main Petitioner:** Steve Micklewright on behalf of Trees for Life

**Subject:** Translocate Protected Beavers to Reduce Licensed Killing

Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to initiate a programme to translocate protected beavers to suitable habitat outside existing beaver range, to minimise the need to kill animals adversely impacting arable farmland.

### Background – beaver reintroduction in Scotland

The Eurasian beaver has been protected by law in Scotland since 1st May 2019, when it became a [European Protected Species](#) by virtue of [The Conservation \(Natural Habitats, &c.\) Amendment \(Scotland\) Regulations 2019](#). This decision was the culmination of a 10-year process starting with a trial reintroduction in 2009. It is the first example of mammal reintroduction in Scotland and marks the return of a species that was part of Scotland's native wildlife before becoming extinct around the 16th century.

[The Scottish Beaver Trial](#) began in Argyll in 2009, though it later became apparent that beavers were also present through unauthorised releases in the Tayside area. A 2018 [Scottish Natural Heritage \(SNH - now known as NatureScot\) survey](#) found that they were spreading and also found outside the Tay and Earn catchments, with an estimated population of 433.

Beavers act as 'ecosystem engineers' by building dams which create pools and wetlands. This can enhance biodiversity and slow water flow, assisting with flood management and water quality. However, their presence can also be controversial with land managers due to concerns about impacts on uses such as farming, via damage to drainage systems or flood banks.

The [Scottish Government set out its policy approach](#) when it decided that beavers should receive legal protection, also stating that beavers should be allowed to expand their range naturally, populations in Argyll and Tayside could remain, and that they should be managed to minimise impacts on land owners. In giving evidence to the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee on the Conservation (Natural Habitats &c) Amendment (Scotland) Regulations 2019 on 19 March 2019, [the Cabinet Secretary Roseanna Cunningham MSP said](#):

“We now anticipate that beavers will simply be allowed to spread naturally. We will not be attempting to formally contain them in certain areas, but neither will we be particularly incentivising them to spread further, and we will certainly not tolerate pop-up beaver populations in completely separate areas of Scotland.”

The Scottish Government had been under pressure from environmental and animal welfare groups to introduce the legislation. In December 2018, a group of organisations [sent an open letter](#) to the First Minister highlighting welfare concerns about unregulated culling, including shooting of pregnant beavers and beavers with dependent kits.

### **How have beavers been managed since becoming protected?**

The Scottish Government’s decision to allow beavers to naturally spread meant they would need to become legally protected in accordance with the EU Habitats Directive, transposed into Scottish law by the [Conservation \(Natural Habitats, &c.\) Regulations 1994](#). This status means it became an offence to kill or injure a beaver or deliberately disturb them during breeding and rearing periods unless expressly permitted under licence.

NatureScot [have published a Management Framework For Beavers in Scotland](#) which sets out [guidance for land managers](#), and circumstances under which licences for interventions - including lethal control and removal of dams - will be issued. Management techniques to prevent beaver damage, such as protecting trees or removing newly-built dams, does not require a licence. NatureScot committed to provide free advice to land managers, and is developing a [beaver mitigation scheme](#) - trialling management measures with land managers from other parts of Europe (such as Norway) and North America.

Before granting a licence for lethal control or disturbing mature beaver dams, NatureScot must be satisfied that the following tests are met:

1. Licence purpose. Licences are required to prevent serious damage to certain interests such as crops, for health and safety or other important social, economic or environmental purposes.
2. Alternatives test. Licences must be issued as a last resort where other possible actions have been tried or are not likely to resolve the problem.
3. Conservation impact. Actions must not harm beavers’ conservation status.

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform also said [in a letter to NFU Scotland](#) in 2019:

“I can guarantee that any farmers experiencing or anticipating problems from beavers on prime agricultural land will be given licences to manage beavers if they are required and that these will be available in advance of protection being afforded.”

At the time of beavers becoming protected, environmental groups indicated that that lethal control must be a last resort, not a 'go-to solution'.

### **What level of lethal control of beavers has taken place?**

On 28 May 2020, [NatureScot published a report on beaver management](#) stating there was a “challenging balance” between protecting beavers in Scotland and helping to prevent serious damage to some farmers' land.

The report set out that between 1st May and 31st December 2019, NatureScot issued 45 licences which permitted lethal control or dam removal, stating that they were “granted when there was no other effective solution to prevent serious agricultural damage”. Five of the licences permitted dam removal or manipulation only. All licences were issued for the purpose of preventing serious damage to agriculture and all but one of these (97.5%) were issued on land classified as Prime Agricultural Land. Evidence of serious damage was said to include waterlogged fields and crops, and erosion on riverbanks and embankments. One additional licence was granted to allow an ecologist to live-trap beavers. NatureScot refused 33% of licence requests.

Under the licences granted, 15 beavers were trapped and moved to either Knapdale or a trial reintroduction project and fenced sites in England, 83 dams were removed, and 87 beavers were shot by accredited controllers. The report also stated that all lethal control licence holders were contacted about the possibility of trapping, but live-trapping is not always possible for a number of reasons, including the nature of the site and how beavers use those sites.

Based on survey information, NatureScot estimate that lethal control and trapping has taken place within around 13% of territories, and the proportion of the overall range of beavers in Tayside covered by licences is “likely less than 10%, with control being carried out on around 5%”.

The report recommends continued work to explore alternatives to lethal control, improve understanding of the impact of control measures on the Tayside population, and recognise the benefits of beavers for nature. It also expresses hopes that as work with farmers develops, and the beaver population expands “away from high conflict areas”, there will be less need for control measures in the coming years.

A number of environmental groups expressed concern about the level of lethal control taking place when these figures were released, also arguing that based on 2018 survey information on national population size (an estimated population of 433 beavers), it appears that more than 20% of the population were culled in 2019.

The [Scottish Wildlife Trust for example said that this level of culling was “unsustainable”](#), and there should be a new “forward-looking strategy for beavers, which includes the potential for strategic reintroductions into other areas of Scotland” and “helps the species to spread into the 100,000 hectares of core habitat that have been identified throughout the country”. This refers to

a [2015 study by NatureScot](#) which identified a potential 105,586 ha of 'core beaver woodland' habitat across Scotland.

The animal welfare charity [OneKind](#) have called for a [more compassionate approach to beaver management](#) and requested that the Scottish Government increase its support for translocation. The charity [Scottish Wild Beaver Group](#) [has instigated an art project](#) to "commemorate the 87 beavers killed in 2019" and question whether lethal control is being employed as a genuine last resort. In response to a Parliamentary question in June 2020 on whether SNH (now NatureScot) had discussed welfare concerns in relation to beaver culling with the SSPCA, ([Question S5W-29089](#)), the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, Roseanna Cunningham MSP, said that SNH has held discussions with the SSPCA about examination of animals shot under licence and is considering a protocol for this process.

Some [concerns about potential illegal persecution have also been raised in the media](#) since beavers became protected. In response to a Parliamentary question in May 2020 asking what estimates have been made of any suspected illegal culling of beavers ([Question S5W-29083](#)), the Cabinet Secretary responded that SNH (now NatureScot) was not aware of any beavers that have been killed without a licence, but that "Police Scotland investigations are ongoing to ascertain if there have been breaches of the conditions of two licences that permit lethal control".

The [National Farmers Union in Scotland](#) have said that in its first year of [operation](#), the licensing framework for managing beavers was "proving effective and fit for purpose", allowing for the management of beavers in areas of productive farmland where the species has had a clear impact.

### **Is any translocation of beavers taking place?**

Translocation involves people moving animals or plants from one area to another. For beavers it would usually involve trapping animals and releasing them into another area. Given their status as European Protected Species any translocation of beavers in Scotland would require a licence from NatureScot. The potential for translocation of beavers in Scotland is currently limited by Scottish Government policy, which is [described in a NatureScot document on beaver translocation](#) (part of its Management Framework):

"Given the Minister's statement (see Annex 1) that the Scottish beaver populations should naturally expand in range from the two original populations, this means that in Scotland suitable receptor sites would have to be within the current range of beavers at that time. This is likely to mean that **translocation in Scotland would only be permitted within gaps in this range or to reinforce the existing Knapdale population**. Conservation translocation to areas outside of Scotland would only be acceptable as part of an approved project as described above." (emphasis added)

As set out above, NatureScot reported that between 1st May and 31st December 2019, 15 beavers were trapped and moved to Knapdale (the site of

the original Argyll reintroduction) or to a trial reintroduction project and fenced sites in England. The report states that “NatureScot will consider opportunities for conservation translocations of beavers from high to low conflict areas within existing catchments to improve resilience of existing populations”.

More generally, a [Scottish Code for Conservation Translocations](#) was published in 2014 by the National Species Reintroduction Forum (chaired by NatureScot). The Code states:

“Conservation translocations, such as reintroductions, can provide a conservation benefit by increasing the number of individuals or places in which a species occurs. They can also offset biodiversity declines caused by habitat loss, climate change, or other human impacts on the environment. Many conservation translocations are low-risk. However, some have the potential for negative impacts on the environment and other land-uses.”

Specific considerations involved in translocating beavers (e.g. welfare factors, genetic diversity issues) are discussed in [NatureScot’s 2015 Beavers in Scotland report](#).

There have been [a number of projects involving conservation translocation in Scotland](#) involving species such as woolly willow, pine hoverfly, freshwater pearl mussel and white-tailed eagle.

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