To: Alick Simmons, Shirley Trundle [7 April 2014]

Issue: Beavers on the River Otter, East Devon.

1. Three European beavers have been filmed by the BBC on the River Otter in South Devon. These are not licensed released animals, so are most likely from illegal releases or escapes.
2. There is a low risk (rare or unlikely, but does occur) that these beavers may be infected with *Echinococcus multilocularis* (as their origin is unknown), a zoonotic parasite for which UK has official disease free status.
3. Having looked at the legal options, the consensus from policy is that we should trap these animals and return them to captivity.
4. There may be some challenge from the landowner (who likes the beavers), but this is unlikely to be upheld on a legal basis.
5. We do not have a clear understanding of the risk to public health caused by these beavers as we do not know if they are infected with EM or not.
6. Nevertheless the **consequences** if they are infected and left free, with carcases subsequently scavenged by dogs/foxes and we at some future point lose our disease freedom for EM (thus opening the door to infected dogs returning from Europe) are **potentially very serious**.

Recommendation:

7. To pursue trapping and rehoming with voluntary cooperation of landowners, mindful of the legal and public relations challenge in testing for disease in these beavers

Background

8. European beavers are a formerly native species which may only be released under licence in GB. They have been known to escape from captivity occasionally.
9. The BBC has filmed a group of three on the River Otter in Devon. These are new reports to the NE team, and there is no evidence of where these may have come from. Comment from a beaver expert on February 27th suggested these animals may be an adult pair and a yearling.
10. Captive beavers in the UK are generally sourced from Bavaria or Norway. We do not know the provenance of the animals currently at large. The closest population in Escot Park is of Bavarian origin. [redacted]
11. Possible sources of these new sightings are: historic illegal release; recent illegal release; breeding escapees which have been undetected before.
12. Beavers can act as intermediate hosts for *Echinococcus multilocularis* (EM) (a dog and fox tapeworm for which the UK has tapeworm treatment border controls in place for dogs entering the UK to retain official disease freedom).

13. The Bavarian beaver population has a significant prevalence of EM (according to some reports, as high as 5%) and if these animals were born in Bavaria, there is a potential public health risk. Norway is free of EM.
14. Defra's risk assessment concluded there was a low risk of introduction of EM through imports of beavers. However, should a beaver carcase be infected with EM and be scavenged by a fox or dog (the definitive hosts) it could lead to spread of EM and eventual establishment in the UK with consequent serious public health impacts.
15. EM was detected in a captive beaver carcase from a site in Devon within a few kilometres of these new sightings 18 months ago.
16. Given the unknowns, we are therefore concerned that there is a non-negligible risk that these animals could be infected with EM. We have worked hard to maintain our disease freedom and retention of tapeworm rules and we would risk losing it if these animals were EM-positive.
17. There is also a biodiversity angle to this issue. Section 14 of the Wildlife Countryside Act (1981) prohibits deliberate release of animals to the wild which are not considered ordinarily resident in Great Britain. The European beaver is such an animal. Inaction in this case could set a worrying precedent that Government will not intervene where illegal releases occur. This in turn may lead to further releases where individuals are keen to see the species re-introduced and wish to avoid having to apply for a licence to release.
18. There was one licensed keeper of wild-caught European beavers in the Otter Valley area. [redacted].

<u>Options:</u>

19. Option 0: Do nothing (Leaving the family group where they are).
    - Could the animals be monitored regularly to check whether still alive? However there is no guarantee of being able to recover a carcase before it is scavenged. Sends out the wrong message about illegal release of imported beavers without a licence.
    - *Not a preferred option when there is an uncertainty around disease risk. It also sends an unwelcome message that Government will take no action where illegal releases occur, potentially encouraging further illegal releases.*
20. Option 1: Trapping and destroying the beavers in the absence of a suspicion that they could be carrying EM
    - No legal powers to do this. No immediate risk to human health.
    - *Not an option.*
21. Option 2: Trapping and testing the beavers to ascertain whether infected by EM
    - Requires anaesthesia and scanning for liver cysts (highly suggestive but not diagnostic) or culling and post mortem examination. Powers under the Zoonoses Monitoring Regulation permit all necessary actions to diagnose a zoonotic disease, but do not specifically state necessary actions may include culling suspect animals to reach a diagnosis. Therefore legal advice is that we could be challenged if we use this legislation to capture and cull these animals for diagnostic purposes, and Natural England approval is a requirement under this legislation when used for wildlife. However we would also be subject to challenge

if EM becomes established in the UK as a result of these beavers and we had not pursued every means available to avoid this outcome.

- *Not an easy option. Cannot test live beavers to definitively determine health status.*

22. Option 3 (preferred option): Trapping and transferring the beavers to a secure environment.
    - No need to test for EM; the beavers pose no risk to health of other beavers or to humans unless they die and the carcases are scavenged by dogs or foxes.
    - *Preferred option as their being kept securely mitigates the chance of predation/ scavenging, and may be preferable politically, and sets a good precedent that Defra is serious about the licence conditions for importation of non-native species. May require additional legal order under the WCA to return to captivity as the re-homing site would need to be licensed. Need to have voluntary approval of the landowners.*

<u>Legal Issues and Policy Implications for Non Native Species:</u>

- The species is not ordinarily resident in GB. It is, therefore, unlawful under Section 14 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 for this species to be released, or allowed to escape to the wild.
- It is possible that these animals have been illegally released. Alternatively it is possible their former keeper did not keep them in a secure enough manner, contrary to their licence requirements. Whichever of these reasons led to their departure from captivity we are concerned that by failing to take action in this case it may set a precedent. This could encourage further illegal releases of beavers or other animals which may have unknown ecological, social and economic impacts, or could cause other licensees to take a cavalier approach.
- Richard Benyon was opposed to the release of this species into the wild in England. We do not know the views of Lord de Mauley. *[**Note added 29 August 2014**: Defra's policy* Licensing under Section 16 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (release of species prohibited by section 14) *published at* http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130123162956/http:/www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-pets/wildlife-management/licensing-policy/*in December 2012 is:*

    > *Where an application for the release of the European Beaver (Castor fiber) into the wild in England is received, ongoing studies into a trial release in Scotland (2010-2015) and uncertainties about the impacts of upstream flooding caused by the species, make it premature to issue a licence, pending the results of the aforementioned trial.]*

- Conservationists are proposing a pilot beaver release in Cornwall but a licence has not been applied for yet. Our current commitment is to await the results of the Scottish Trial, due to report in 2015.
- For Public Health, under the Zoonosis (Monitoring) (England) Regs, Statutory Instrument 2007/2399 would allow the Department (under consultation with Natural England) to enter a premises and carry out necessary tests and sampling of wild animals suspected of carrying a zoonosis. EM is a named disease in this legislation. . However, [redacted] the legal and policy view is that it was not intended that sampling would involve the death of the animal.

- The beavers only present a risk to human health if the carcase is scavenged by a dog or fox and there is contact between people and the infected dog or fox faeces. Beavers are asymptomatically infected and therefore there is no welfare issue.
- Loss of our EM disease-free status has public health implications. Once lost the UK could no longer require tapeworm treatment of the thousands of dogs entering the UK annually. Regaining disease freedom is exceedingly problematic when there are two wildlife hosts (foxes and rodents).

Publicity and PR Issues

- The reporting on the BBC has been positive about the sightings. The Guardian and the Devon Express & Echo have also reported on the sightings.
- Some stakeholders have expressed concern in the past about rumours of a reintroduction of beavers and are likely to do so again.
- In Europe beavers have both alleviated and exacerbated flooding issues depending on where they are. At the moment media reports suggest the public would be in favour the introduction of beavers to reduce flooding.
- There may be negative press coverage and reputational issues which ever option is chosen.