BEAVERS IN THE RIVER OTTER

MEDIA BRIEFING PACK [16 July 2014]

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STATEMENTS

General line to take

A Defra spokesperson said:

"We are taking precautionary action by testing the beavers. This will be done with their welfare in mind."

On being asked if we will cull beavers:

A Defra spokesperson said:

“There are no plans to cull the beavers. Once captured and tested, we intend to rehome them in a suitable location, and all decisions will be made with the welfare of the beavers in mind.”

Natural England line

A Natural England spokesperson said:

“Our present focus is on licensing the humane capture of the beavers so they can be tested before being rehomed.”

KEY MESSAGES

- Beavers have not been an established part of our wildlife for the last 500 years. Our landscape and habitats have changed considerably since then and we need to assess the impact the release of any such animal could have;
- There is a low chance that these beavers may carry a disease (*Echinococcus multilocularis)*. The UK currently holds Disease Free Status for this disease which we do not want to lose;
- We have the opportunity to take precautionary action now and test the beavers to make sure they do not harbour the pathogen. The tests cannot be carried out on site, so we have no option but to capture and test them;
- We will wait until the kitts are a suitable age before catching the beavers to test them;
- We are working with our agencies to gather information and consider the best place to rehome them after they have been tested negative;
- We are currently considering the best place to rehome the beavers and no decision has been taken yet;
- The welfare of the animals, and in particular any dependent young, will be a priority consideration in any action taken.

BACKGROUND

1. A small number of European Beavers have been detected on the River Otter in Devon. These will have entered the wild through escaping from captivity or illegal release.

2. Beavers can act as intermediate hosts for *Echinococcus multilocularis* (EM), the dog and fox tapeworm. This parasite poses a public health risk. Defra's risk assessment concluded there was a low risk of introduction of EM from beavers. However, the disease status of the animals living in the wild in Devon is unknown.

3. Beavers are a formerly native species which may only be released under licence. Inaction could suggest that HMG will not intervene where illegal releases occur; potentially leading to further illegal releases.

4. In light of the risks, doing nothing is not an option: we are considering trapping, testing and rehoming. There are no plans to kill the animals. Initially, we would attempt to trap these animals with the voluntary cooperation of local landowners. However, if this is not forthcoming we would aim to use powers under the Zoonosis Monitoring Regulation to attempt recapture.

5. Losing disease-free status for EM would further increase the risk of the disease spreading, as we would no longer be able to require dogs coming in from Europe to be vaccinated for the disease.

TIMESCALE

- Since agreement to recover the animals was given officials have worked with AHVLA and Natural England to take forward the recovery of the animals.
- This is being undertaken in 3 phases, as set out below, at an estimated cost of £42,726.

Action	Timescale
Phase 1 (Preparation) (already taken place)	
Identification of landowners and other relevant parties to secure access permission	Currently ongoing (we have identified all, but have yet to make contact or receive responses from all)
Identification of suitable (i.e. secure) premises for direct transfer of captured individuals	Completed
Identification of suitable premises for long-term rehoming	Currently ongoing
Application and issue of relevant licences from Natural England. The capture and relocation of the beavers will be licensed under the Conservation of Habitats & Species Regulations	Application submitted. Deadline is 7th August
Phase 2 (Pre-trap survey)	
Habitat survey in order to identify sites of beaver activity and the optimum locations to undertake trapping	[redacted]
Establishment of [redacted] most likely capture sites	[redacted]
Period of [redacted] monitoring [redacted]	[redacted]
Sourcing of suitable traps [redacted]	Completed
Phase 3 (Trapping):	
Deployment of traps [redacted]	[redacted]
A period of [redacted] traps inactivated	[redacted]
A period of active trapping	[redacted]
Transfer of captured animals directly to approved premises and testing for *E multilocularis (EM)*	[redacted]
Transfer of captured animals to rehoming location	TBC

MEDIA Q&A

Q. Why don't you just leave the beavers in the wild?

A. Releasing species which are not ordinarily present in the UK without a licence is an offence, and turning a blind eye could encourage others to do likewise. We are also aware of one particular parasite the tapeworm *Echinococcus multilocularis (EM)* that can infect beavers. This parasite could pose a serious risk to human health. The UK is currently free of EM.

Q. Will these Beavers be shot? Will these beavers be trapped?

A. There is no intention to shoot the animals. Every effort will be made to capture the animals alive. In recapturing the beavers we will make every effort to ensure their welfare, particularly of dependent young.

We intend to recapture, test and rehome the beavers in a secure environment (it will be illegal to subsequently release these animals to the wild without a licence) to reduce this risk.

Q. How will the animals be recaptured?

A. In order to recapture and test these beavers for EM, non-lethal capture methods will be used, most probably cage traps. The animals will then be transported to secure holding to be tested before rehoming.

[If asked directly: We hope that, because of the potential health risks, landowners will allow AHVLA staff on to their land to capture the animals. If that fails we have powers for access/capture to test animals for zoonosis.]

Q. Will you leave any beavers born in the wild there/ will you recapture only those beavers which have escaped/been illegally released from captivity/ could be infected with EM?

A. We intend to capture all the beavers, including any known to be bred this year (which therefore could not be infected with EM). This reflects our concern regarding an unauthorised release, and the welfare of the family group.

Q. What will happen to the captured animals after they have been tested?

A. The Animals cannot be re-released to the wild, without a license, as that would be a breach of the law. In the first instance we will be looking for a secure location in which they can be kept, possibly a site that already hosts beavers in captivity. If an application for their release into a specific location, the Riiver Otter, or elsewhere, is received by natural England (the licencing authority) they will consider it in line with existing guidelines and practices

Q. Why is it illegal to release the beaver to the wild in GB?

A. Section 14 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) prohibits release to the wild of any animal which is not ordinarily resident in, nor a regular visitor to, GB or which is listed in Schedule 9 to the Act. Principally, this is used to

prevent the release of non-native species without some level of certainty that their release will not be harmful to wildlife or the environment, or to the animals themselves. The legislation also applies to formerly native species which are no longer ordinarily resident.

A number of species which are the subject of re-introduction programmes are also listed in Schedule 9 to ensure that these programmes are carried out in an appropriate manner (i.e. according to International Union for the Conservation of Nature guidelines).

Currently we do not consider the European beaver to be 'ordinarily resident' in GB. As such its release is prohibited except under licence.

Q. How will an application for the animal's release be considered if, once captured and tested clean of EM, one is received?

A. Natural England would consider any such application and ensure that Government policies and IUCN guidelines would be met by such a re-release.

Q. How would a decision be made on any application for a licence to release these beavers?

A. We understand the need for everyone with an interest in this case to know as soon as possible what will ultimately happen to these beavers. Our current position is that it would be premature to issue a licence for their release pending the results of the Scottish beaver trial, expected in 2015. However, Natural England would consider any application and, if it followed the IUCN guidelines for reintroductions of formerly native species, including proper local consultation, may refer it to the Secretary of State for consideration.

Q. What is the parasite that we should be concerned about, how would we get it?

A. The parasite is a tapeworm called *Echinococcus multilocularis (EM)*. This parasite lives in the adult stage in animals such as foxes and dogs. These animals, which can become infected by eating an infected rodent, such as a beaver, pass tapeworm eggs in their faeces. Humans, or other animals, can become infected by accidentally ingesting eggs from the environment. Once ingested the eggs hatch into larvae which become lodged in the various organs of the animals, such as lungs, brain and liver, forming cysts. In humans this causes a serious disease that requires lifelong drug treatment and / or surgery.

Q. Why can't you simply test the beaver's faeces to see if they have the parasite?

A. The parasite only exists in the cyst or larval form in infected beavers (and other infected rodents), and they do not pass the eggs in their faeces. Other animals **(**eg

dogs and foxes) that become infected by parasite will develop the adult worm and pass eggs in their faeces However, by the time that occurs the infection will have become established in the wild and extremely difficult, if even possible, to eradicate.

Q. Can people be infected from the beavers?

A. The beavers do not represent a direct threat to public health, as the parasite exists in the cyst or larval form in them, and they do not pass the eggs in their faeces. However if they are positive for EM and are preyed on or scavenged by dogs or foxes then these animals would in turn become infected by the parasite which would develop into the adult form, producing eggs which are passed in faeces and contaminating the surrounding environment. This is the route by which people (or beavers) contract the parasite.

[EM reproduces in dogs and foxes, which can become infected if they eat other animal species that have been infected through ingesting eggs which are contaminating the environment. Once a dog or fox is infected it will go on to contaminate the environment as the tapeworms will produce millions of eggs that are passed in the faeces of the infected dog or fox. These eggs can lead to other individuals (including beavers, small rodents and also people) becoming infected. Such species are termed as intermediate hosts as the parasite does not reproduce in these infected individuals and therefore they are not responsible for contaminating the environment with tapeworm eggs.]

Q. Do we have EM in the UK?

A. The UK is officially EM disease-free. Loss of this status could have public health implications. Once lost the UK could no longer require tapeworm treatment for the thousands of dogs entering the UK annually, and if EM became established in UK its eradication in wildlife could prove impossible.

Q. Does infection with EM cause illness in dogs?

A. Dogs infected by the worm form of the parasite do not show any clinical signs but do excrete many worm eggs in their faeces. This is a source of infection for people. The dogs can be treated with a dose of anthelminitic. Rarely dogs can be infected by the cyst form of the parasite from ingesting eggs themselves and may show clinical signs. In this case the dogs do not excrete worm eggs in their faeces.

Q. How do you know the beavers are infected?

A. The beavers have entered the wild through escape or illegal release and we do not know their origin, or whether or not they are infected with EM.

Whether any of the beavers could be infected with EM depends on their origin. If these animals were born in Bavaria, they could be infected. Norway is free of EM, so

if the feral beavers were originally sourced from Norway, or are animals born in the UK, they would be free of EM.

Q. How will you test the beavers for EM?

A. The beavers could be tested in a number of ways, and the actual approach has not yet been decided. However, none of the tests can be undertaken on site, as this could compromise the health and welfare of the animals. Although none of the tests that can be used in anaesthetised beavers can guarantee an animal is definitely free from this infection, a non-lethal means of testing will be used for each beaver that is trapped.

Q. When will a decision be made?

A. We are considering how the beavers could be recovered, and will also assess the likely presence of dependent young, before making a decision about the timing of trapping action. The welfare of the animals will be considered in making any decision.

Q. What else are you doing to keep the UK free of EM?

A. All dogs entering the UK must be wormed with a drug that will kill EM, avoiding imported dogs contaminating the UK by eggs passed in their faeces. Other relevant imported animal species are generally only imported into zoos where they are kept securely and so cannot pass infection on to dogs or foxes in the UK. Laboratory rodents that are imported are also kept securely.

We have produced a voluntary Code of Practice for importers and keepers of European beavers. This has been out to consultation and we have finalised the document. It can be found on the Defra website. It includes advice on where to source beavers, how to make a beaver enclosure safe, how to comply with trade rules and what our concerns are for public and animal health.

http://www.defra.gov.uk/animal-trade/files/Code-of-Practice_Beavers1.pdf