



TM

*Keeping the Balance*

The Rt Hon George Eustice MP  
Secretary of State  
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs  
Seacole Building  
2 Marsham Street  
London  
SW1P 4DF

19 March 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

**GENERAL LICENSING CRISIS - STOATS**

Alongside other stakeholders, we were sent by Natural England yesterday two new General Licences for issue next week relating to the control of stoats. These licences are completely unfit for purpose and another general licensing crisis such as that which rocked rural England last year is about to break over us.

Without workable general licences, all trapping of stoats in England will become illegal from 1 April under an amendment made last year to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (WCA). This is the most critical time of year for controlling stoats to prevent serious damage to young livestock and vulnerable ground-nesting birds. It will be catastrophic if workable General Licences for stoat trapping cannot be issued by 31 March.

The background to this is the UK's need to implement the Agreement on International Humane Trapping Standards (AIHTS), now long overdue. Your Department wrote an implementation plan for AIHTS three years ago and put it out for public consultation in 2018. It advocated protecting the stoat from all trapping by adding it to a new schedule of the WCA, as has been done, but then issuing General Licences to allow control again using only the new, AIHTS-compliant traps. We were told this would be the "least burdensome" approach.

We now face the imminent issue of flawed NE General Licences which will affect the control of stoats in England in the following ways:

- The types of livestock that can be protected from serious damage will be limited to just a handful of species. Currently control is allowed to protect all livestock.
- We will only be allowed to control stoats from April to July inclusive, "if trapping at other times would not provide a satisfactory solution". How can we possibly show that in a legally watertight way? April to July is the key time to protect ground-nesting birds.

- We will only be able to trap stoats to prevent serious damage to released gamebirds, "If stoat predation [alongside other predation] were to reduce or threaten to reduce, the number of birds recovered by shoots to below 35%."
- No stoat trapping would be allowed to conserve wild pheasants or redleg partridges, two key reasons for stoat trapping throughout the lowlands.
- Within SPA and Ramsar sites, vehicles used for checking stoat traps would be confined to 'existing roads and tracks. In many cases there are none.
- The purpose of NE's 'conservation' stoat licence is limited only to 'conserving wild birds', so we couldn't trap a stoat to save a water vole, for example.
- And the aim of any trapping under NE's proposed conservation licence must be to improve the conservation status of the wild bird in question, "rather than to achieve any other benefit." Although it is accepted that some of the conserved birds may be shot, that cannot be the aim of conserving them nor the justification for controlling stoats under the licence.

These are all completely new restrictions. None of them were mentioned in Defra's implementation plan for AIHTS, which is all about stoat welfare and has nothing whatever to do with any of the above. You will appreciate that what is being proposed by NE will make stoat trapping virtually impossible for all practical purposes. There has been no consultation on the above; we only saw the paperwork yesterday and yet it is due to devastate the important work of gamekeepers, farmers and others throughout England from the week after next.

This is despite our repeatedly pressing NE and Defra for sight of and discussion about the intended stoat General Licences for AIHTS implementation. Indeed, the National Gamekeepers' Organisation responded to Defra's consultation two years ago in April 2018 saying:

*"The NGO has concerns about the proposed approach of protecting stoats from any trapping but then allowing it again (using AIHTS-compliant traps only) under General Licence. We have long experience of the General Licences for bird control being issued late and with an ever-increasing number of often impractical and unjustified conditions as to the purposes for which traps are set, the ways they are used and the approach to dealing with captured individuals. At the very least we seek the Government assurances that this will not happen under these proposals and we are not prepared to 'sign up' to the process until we have seen satisfactory drafts of all the General Licences being proposed."*

In the intervening two years, the gamekeeping, farming and trap manufacturing industries have done their bit to the full, working with your officials to develop new AIHTS-compliant traps, tested and approved with funding from ourselves. We have promoted the need for everyone to change to compliant traps from 1 April 2020 and tens of thousands of new traps have been made, bought and deployed in the countryside in accordance with Defra's implementation plan. Doing so has cost farmers and shoots hundreds of thousands of pounds. Those affected are now livid and justifiably so.

This crisis is fundamentally different from that which devastated bird control last year when NE withdrew the main General Licences for that activity at just 48 hours' notice. Then NE were responding to a sudden and unexpected legal threat from Wild Justice; this time they have had over two years to prepare workable stoat licences. Instead they have again shown their utter incompetence to run wildlife licensing in England.

That incompetence even extends to failing to understand that since 4 May last year it has in fact been Defra's responsibility to grant all General Licences as the letter sent by your predecessor to the Chairman of NE and its Annex make clear. See:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/799918/letter-secretary-of-state-to-ne-chair-controlling-wildbirds-4-May-2019.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/799918/letter-secretary-of-state-to-ne-chair-controlling-wildbirds-4-May-2019.pdf)

We ask you, please, to take this urgent matter in hand immediately and to issue Defra General Licences in the coming days that will allow stoat trapping to continue as now and without any further restrictions, albeit using the new AIHTS traps. That is what Defra's implementation plan for AIHTS intended.

With thanks,

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Liam Bell', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Liam Bell

Chairman, National Gamekeepers' Organisation