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By Helena Horton

Farmers are set ‘impossible task’ over risk to birds from badger cull

NATURAL England has been accused of bowing to badgers’ rights campaigners after setting farmers the “impossible task” of proving the cull poses no risk to ground-nesting birds. A High Court challenge by protester Tom Langton claimed that as badger culls increase numbers of foxes, rare ground-nesting birds preyed on by them are put at risk. The environment watchdog successfully argued that culling badgers can improve such bird totals but it agreed that people doing the culling would have to provide data.

Landowners said this is “impossible” as they were not asked to collect data before they culled the badgers, so they have no comparison for any new figures. One culling company in Gloucestershire has said it may have to stop operating because of the stipulations. It comes after Natural England (NE) lost its power to issue bird shooting licences in a row with farmers who kill birds that attack livestock and crops, after legal action by BBC host Chris Packham and his campaign group Wild Justice. They argued the licences did not take into account welfare concerns.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, MP for the Cotswolds and chairman of the parliamentary group on shooting, said: “I don’t believe that by culling badgers you are increasing the fox numbers, but if that is part of the undertaking that Natural England is taking to the judge, it was a stupid thing to do as it was an impossible thing. The worry is that no one will be able to cull badgers. To stop them on a minor technicality would be a nonsense.”

The MP asked Michael Gove to fix the situation and the Environment Secretary admitted the decision has caused “confusion and disruption”.

Mr Gove said: “I agree unnecessary bureaucracy should not be imposed on companies carrying out culls, and understand their frustration in having to adapt to new information. I am aware that a supplementary badger cull company in Gloucestershire ... has raised significant concerns and have been assured by NE discussions are ongoing.”

He said his department and NE are working as quickly as possible to resolve the issue, “in a way that avoids any further confusion or disruption for landowners and other stakeholders”. He added that if Natural England’s review finds “legally relevant adverse effect on bird populations, they would introduce measures to reduce fox numbers within 2km (1.2miles) of protected Sites of Special Scientific Interest”.

Farmers argue that they have to cull badgers to prevent the spread of bovine TB. Mr Langton, who runs The Badger Crowd, said he would press for further restrictions on culling. A Natural England spokesman said: “We will continue to review and improve our work to assess the impact of badger control operations on protected sites.”