

Natural England's call for badger cull evidence an 'absolute nightmare'

By Rachel Salvidge, Ends Report, 13 May 2019

Natural England has asked licensed cull companies for information to ascertain whether the ongoing badger cull has increased fox populations, in a move which has infuriated some landowners. The nature regulator made the request following a judicial review of badger culling. The legal challenge was based on a claim that the badger cull is resulting in an increase in the fox population which, in turn, is leading to a greater threat to ground nesting birds.

The case, brought by Thomas Langton, argued that Natural England must undertake an assessment of the effects of a reduction in badger numbers on protected birds. Natural England said that culling would lead to an overall reduction in the number of both badgers and foxes, and therefore that there would not be a significant increase in predation on ground nesting birds. However, the regulator committed to review evidence and said that if evidence were to emerge of an adverse effect on bird populations, they would introduce measures to reduce fox numbers within 2km of protected Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs).

To gather the evidence, licensed cull companies have been asked to provide information on whether fox control is currently taking place in specific areas, the frequency of control and, where this is already known, numbers of foxes taken for the past two years. Responding to the move, Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, MP for the Cotswolds and chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Shooting and Conservation, wrote to environment secretary Michael Gove expressing his concerns about the burden being placed on the cull companies.

Clifton-Brown received a reply from Gove on 2 May - seen by ENDS - which states: "I agree that unnecessary bureaucracy should not be imposed on companies carrying out culls, and understand their frustration in having to adapt to new information as legal processes continue." Gove said he has been assured by Natural England that "discussions are ongoing between that company and Natural England to find a satisfactory solution", with the regulator "continuing to liaise with the National Farmers Union and other relevant companies to communicate updates and identify better solutions for culling companies".

Speaking to ENDS, Clifton-Brown said the idea that the badger cull increases fox numbers is "flawed" and that cull licence holders were being asked for information that they "don't have because they hadn't been asked to collect it". "It's an absolute nightmare... the hoops they have to go through," he said, adding that the move is "another example of Natural England not having a clue about what goes on on the ground". He described it as a "ploy by conservationists to stop the cull", adding that "people's livelihoods are at stake."

Any attempt to attach further licence conditions would be rejected by the National Farmers Union (NFU). In a statement, the NFU said: "We feel that any area that accepts a licence condition to undertake the control of foxes would not be in a position to do so. As a limited company they are not set up to undertake these actions and are not technically in a position to enforce it."

A Natural England spokesperson said: "We take our role in assessing and issuing badger control licences very seriously. As is normal practice, we will continue to review and improve our work to assess the impact of badger control operations on protected sites, including SSSIs."