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Friday, 26 January 2018

By email to: Correspondence.Lesley.Griffiths@gov.wales

Dear Ms Griffiths,

As you know, the Angling Trust is the representative body for all disciplines of angling with thousands of individual members and members of affiliated clubs in Wales. It is united in a collaborative relationship with Fish Legal, a separate membership association that uses the law to protect fish stocks and the rights of its members throughout the UK. Freshwater angling is one of the Wales's most popular pastimes and also makes an important contribution to the economy, generating at least £150 million in revenue, attracting visitors from throughout the world and supporting countless jobs either directly or indirectly. Angling also has numerous social benefits for individuals and communities and for many local anglers it is their only leisure activity. A large proportion of this angling is for game fish: salmon, sea trout, trout and grayling.

The Angling Trust responded, along with hundreds of anglers, to the recent consultation by Natural Resources Wales regarding the exploitation of salmon and sea trout in Wales. The overwhelming majority (83%) of responses were opposed to the imposition of mandatory catch and release on the angling community. We also attended the NRW board meeting where this was discussed on the 18th of January. We were very disappointed that the board decided to recommend to Welsh Government that the views of the anglers (who pay their wages) should be ignored and that they should go ahead with banning the taking of fish by anglers, which is something they have been doing for centuries.

Anglers have greatly increased the rates of catch and release in recent decades and they also invest countless volunteer hours and substantial funds into the restoration and protection of our nation's rivers. Anglers are often the first to report pollution incidents, poaching and other illegal activity. The NRW board was rightly concerned from the responses to the consultation that anglers had lost confidence in NRW as an organisation and in Welsh government's recognition of the importance of angling.

In addition to this consultation, anglers have been faced with your government's recent consultation which proposed opening up all rivers to navigation, which would destroy our members' property rights, and a complete failure by NRW and Visit Wales to promote what is left of Welsh freshwater fishing to visitors. A decade ago, the Fishing Wales initiative generated a massive return on investment, but since it was axed there has been an apparently deliberate attempt to hide the opportunities to fish on Welsh rivers from potential visitors. It is understandable that many now believe that Welsh Government is deliberately trying to destroy angling.

The NRW board also recognised that anglers are not the cause of declining fish stocks and that the reasons are mismanagement of the natural environment and that urgent action was now required to correct that failure. Whilst climate change is a factor affecting all salmon stocks, some rivers are still managing to maintain or even increase their populations by successfully managing the other human pressures on the water environment. However, these are very much the exception in Wales.

I have written to you several times about the endemic levels of slurry pollution from the intensive dairy farming areas of Wales, but you have declined to meet with me to discuss this on several occasions and have failed to take the necessary urgent and comprehensive action required to tackle this dire situation, which is getting worse. In the last decade I have also witnessed in Wales a huge expansion of the area of maize, stubble turnips and over-grazing of pasture that are causing an increase in flood risk and heaping costs on the rest of society.

Your government's response has been for a voluntary approach to regulation of agriculture, the country's biggest polluting sector, which kills far more salmon and sea trout than anglers could ever dream of catching, let alone taking home to feed their families. Two major pollution incidents on the Teifi two years ago killed more salmon and sea trout than the entire annual catch by anglers, but Natural Resources Wales has still not prosecuted either of the perpetrators. Countless other prosecutions for agricultural pollution are pending. In this context, the imposition of 100% mandatory catch and release regulations, making it a criminal offence for thousands of anglers to take fish home to feed their family very occasionally, looks entirely disproportionate, asymmetric and staggeringly unfair.

I urge you to adopt a voluntary approach to implementing catch and release, which would be compatible with the approach that we have negotiated with the Environment Agency in England. As I wrote to you in a letter in May of 2017, it is now more urgent than ever that your government sets out a clear strategy to tackle the ever-growing problem of agricultural pollution and the impacts it is having on fish stocks, and the wider environment. Finally, we would like to see a comprehensive programme introduced to manage predation from cormorants and goosanders to reduce the impact that they have on salmon and trout stocks, and coarse fisheries, throughout Wales.

I would like to meet with you and your officials to take this agenda forward. In England, we meet regularly with the Water and Fisheries Ministers and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and I see no reason why you should not meet with the representative body for one of your largest stakeholder groups in the context I have set out above.

Yours sincerely,

Mark Lloyd

Chief Executive, Angling Trust & Fish Legal