

Proposed new salmon and sea trout rod fishing byelaws for the Rivers Usk and Wye in Wales

Executive summary

This technical document sets out the case for the introduction of fishing controls to protect stocks of salmon and sea trout in the River Usk and the River Wye (in Wales) and presents concluding proposals for new byelaws to regulate fishing and the keeping of captured fish. This follows our review of evidence of the stock status derived from catch statistics, and the continued concerns over the status of juvenile fish populations in these two catchments.

The byelaws would replace the current byelaws mandating the release of all rod caught salmon and sea trout on the Wye that have been in place since 2012, and all salmon throughout the season and any sea trout caught before 1st May on the Usk, which are each due to end on 31st December 2021. NRW's case is that the proposed byelaws meet all three of the requirements of necessity, proportionality and reasonableness.

If new byelaws are not put in place for the 2022 season onwards, then there would be reduced protection of the vulnerable salmon and sea trout stocks in the rivers Usk and Wye. In evaluating management options, conservation and sustainability of the salmon and sea trout resources should take precedence. The proposals are also set in the context of maximising spawning escapement and promoting stock recovery towards improved resilience and sustainability.

The proposals would, if confirmed and implemented, see byelaws requiring statutory catch-and-release (C&R) fishing for all salmon and sea trout caught by rod on the River Wye (in Wales) and on the River Usk for all salmon throughout the season, and for any sea trout caught before the 1st May.

Natural Resources Wales is now seeking views on these proposals.

Our overall objective for salmon and sea trout is:-

“To protect, through the application of best-practice science and management, the sustainability of our natural resource of wild salmon and sea trout stocks in Wales.”

This technical case describes the status of stocks in the rivers Usk and Wye, considers issues around the exploitation of salmon and sea trout stocks and sets out the options for sustainable management.

In recent decades the status of most of our stocks of migratory salmonids in Wales has declined: the Usk and Wye are no exception. There is a complicated range of factors that has contributed to this, including the reduced survival of fish at sea, the pressures on freshwater habitats (including water quality), and past unsustainable

fishing effort in high seas and other interceptory fisheries including some fisheries in home waters. Some of these pressures have been addressed or removed, including introduction of mandatory catch and release of all salmon and sea trout in the Wye in 2012. However, stocks have not returned to levels of historical abundance, or even to a position of sustainability where exploitation can be allowed.

Our position is that stocks may be exploited when they are sustainable, but that until they are, we must ensure that pressures are moderated or excluded in order to achieve this goal. In line with this position, we introduced the 'All Wales' byelaws which came into force in January 2020, which mandate the release of all salmon caught by rod or net in Wales. On the Usk, they also mandate the release of any sea trout caught before the 1st May and all sea trout longer than 60cm.

Salmon is a species listed under Annex 2 of the EC Habitats Directive (Council Directive 92/43/EEC on the Conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora) and currently contributes to the designations of the Usk and Wye as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs). At the last report by the UK in 2019 the status of Atlantic salmon was reported as Unfavourable-Inadequate, because both population and future prospects were assessed as inadequate.

Both salmon and sea trout are listed as UK BAP (Biodiversity Action Plan) priority species. Both are therefore currently regarded as most threatened and requiring conservation action.

Under the Environment (Wales) Act 2016, there is a duty on public authorities to:-

“seek to maintain and enhance biodiversity so far as it is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions. In so doing, public authorities must also seek to ‘promote the resilience of ecosystems’”.

Both species are included in the list of the living organisms of principal importance for the purpose of maintaining and enhancing biodiversity in relation to Wales.

Evidence

We have considered 3 principal sources of evidence in concluding our preferred option for management change:-

1. The status of adult stocks of salmon and sea trout in both rivers
2. The status of juvenile salmon and trout stocks in both rivers
3. The status of salmon as a designated feature of the Usk and Wye SACs

Salmon

The most recent assessment of our stocks indicates that the Usk is currently 'Probably at Risk' and the Wye is 'At Risk' of failing to achieve their management objectives (in 2020), and both are predicted to be 'Probably at Risk' in 5 years' time (in 2025). Based on average egg deposition levels over the last 5-years (2016-2020), both the Usk and Wye have recorded deficits against their indicative Management

Targets of 4.35 and 24.52 million eggs, respectively. These deficits approximate to 1,449 and 8,175 8lb fish equivalents.

The status of salmon as designated features of both the Usk and the Wye SACs was 'unfavourable' in the most recently published round of Condition Assessments (Milner et al, 2013), driven largely by poor adult runs.

Sea trout

The most recent assessment of our sea trout stocks indicates that the Usk stock is currently 'At Risk' of failing to meet its conservation limits and is predicted to remain 'At Risk' in 2025. The Wye stock is currently 'Probably At Risk' of failing to meet its conservation limits and predicted to still be as such in 5 years' time.

Juvenile Salmonids

The status of juvenile salmon stocks in the Usk is of serious concern. Since 2015 there has been a decline in fry across the catchment with a significant failure of recruitment in 2016 (Gregory et al, 2020). Returning adult salmon numbers have been low in 2019 and 2020, although some uncertainty remains as to whether this can be wholly attributed to the 2015/2016 recruitment failure. The numbers of juvenile salmon in the Usk catchment have not substantially recovered since this time, remaining at low abundance in both 2018 and 2019.

Whilst the 2015/16 recruitment failure seen on the Usk was also evident on the Wye, it was not as severe, and some recovery has been seen since. However, the juvenile salmon population on the Wye has been below average in recent years and remains of concern.

Options

We have considered the following principal options:-

1. **Do nothing** further, allowing the current catch and release byelaws on the Usk and Wye fisheries to lapse on 31st December 2021.
2. **Maintain current C&R restrictions.**
3. **Maintain current C&R restrictions and introduce additional measures.**
4. **Closure of the rod fisheries**, resulting in negative socio-economic impacts.

Further options around season dates and method restrictions have also been considered and are detailed later in this technical case.

We conclude that:

Option 2 is required for the Usk, and for sea trout on the Wye;

Option 3 is required for salmon on the Wye.

Our proposals

We are proposing to seek confirmation of new byelaws for rod fishing on the River Usk and the River Wye. We propose the following measures to run until 31st December 2029, a date selected to synchronise dates with the period of the 'All Wales' and 'Cross Border' byelaws that were implemented in 2020.

River Usk

A. Salmon

Statutory catch and release fishing at all times.

B. Sea trout

Statutory catch and release fishing from the start of the fishing season until 1st May each year

River Wye

A. Salmon

Statutory catch and release fishing at all times.

Revised finish date for the season, the open season to run from 3rd March to 17th October for the whole River Wye.

B. Sea trout

Statutory catch and release fishing at all times.

Note: NRW is working with the Environment Agency on the technical case and rod fishing byelaws for the Wye and is seeking to ensure commensurate byelaws for the Wye in England, thereby ensuring a consistent catchment approach for the cross-border river.

Your response

We would like your views on our proposals and invite you to submit these using the form designed for the purpose which is available via our consultation hub.

[Respond to the consultation on proposed Usk and Wye byelaws](#)

Hard copies of the documents can be requested by emailing fisheries.wales@naturalresourceswales.gov.uk: Or by writing to:-

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Respondents on matters for the River Wye should note carefully that representations to this consultation for arrangements in Wales will be received by Natural Resources Wales. The consultation for the River Wye in England will be a different consultation and representations to that will be received by either the Environment Agency or by Defra.