



## **Consultation response: NRW's proposed approach to regulating the release of gamebirds, June 2023**

**Do you agree that common pheasant and red-legged partridge should be added to Part 1 of Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 in Wales? This change would mean that releasing those species in Wales would need to be carried out under licence. Please give reasons for your views.**

We would strongly agree with the addition of red-legged partridges and common pheasants to Part 1 of Schedule 9. We believe this measure is long overdue to start to regulate the uncontrolled release of millions of gamebirds each year in Wales. Following a similar change in England, it seems logical for Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act to be used as the mechanism for this change, to ensure that the species lists on Schedule 9 are consistent across both nations. As the consultation paper sets out on page 23, the industry's current approach relying on self-regulation does not appear to be resolving the problems identified and there seems to be little evidence of compliance with the voluntary guidance produced by the industry, so it is clear that more regulation is needed.

**If these species are added to Schedule 9, please give us your views on whether our proposed licensing approach would be effective and proportionate?**

Although the RSPCA generally agrees with the precautionary approach outlined in the consultation document and that some releases should be allowed under licence, we do not agree with the proposal to use general licences to permit releases away from protected sites. We believe that collection of data on the releases of gamebirds is critical to ensure compliance with the new regulations can be monitored, and as general licences do not usually include reporting requirements, specific licences which can include conditions to report data should be used instead. Requiring specific licences for all releases of the two species, regardless of the distance from SSSI and European protected sites, would also have the advantage of simplifying the system rather than having a two-tier system of general and specific licences.

We believe that those releasing game birds should report on the location of release sites, and numbers of birds, to Natural Resources Wales along with data on numbers shot, or known to have died for other reasons. There is a paucity of data on the numbers of game birds bred, released and shot, and specific licences with reporting requirements would allow collection of more precise data on birds released at protected sites. The RSPCA would like to see data on all such releases in order to account for the numbers of birds used by the industry and ultimately, what happens to them.

From an animal welfare perspective, it is difficult to understand how a system can exist where large numbers of birds are bred (many imported from abroad), reared and released



with no data on what happens to them. No other farming system has such a large number of animals unaccounted for. Given the ongoing epidemic of avian influenza in the UK, the breeding, movement and release of these birds does need to be reviewed in order to inform future responses to the outbreak. As the consultation document references (page 15), there are multiple knowledge gaps around gamebird releases in Wales which illustrates the importance of using any new licensing system to collect this data in preparation for the proposed review of the licensing scheme in five years.

**We have based the proposed general licence conditions for pheasant release on the recommendations in the GWCT guidelines for sustainable gamebird releasing. However, the guidelines do not include specific density thresholds for red-legged partridge and there appears to be less evidence on which to base conditions relating to partridge. We have used what evidence is available, and expert opinion, to propose conditions for partridge releases. These are either based on a density threshold linked to the area of cover crop provided, or on density per hectare of release pen (as with pheasants), depending on how the birds are released. We would welcome views on whether these proposals are appropriate and workable and whether they could they be improved.**

We would agree with using the GWCT guidelines to establish maximum density limits for both pheasants and partridges, and with a limit of 1000 birds per hectare away from protected sites. Although no density limits for releases within 500m of protected sites were suggested in the consultation document, we anticipate that any specific licences granted for such releases would include a condition imposing a lower density limit than the GWCT guidelines to reflect the increased conservation value of the protected sites.

A lower density limit would also potentially improve welfare conditions for the birds, with reduced competition in the release pens and immediately after release; a reduction in the numbers of birds that are killed in road traffic accidents and other misadventures; and reduce the numbers of birds that are reared unnecessarily and dumped when surplus to requirements.

**The GWCT guidelines include a recommendation that no more than one third of woodland with game interest should be used for release pens. This is to ensure sufficient woodland remains that can benefit from habitat management activities. We would like to include this recommendation in our proposed general licence. However, we would prefer to be able to define what can be included in the calculation. Do you have suggestions for how this might be achieved?**

The RSPCA does not have any suggestions for definitions that could be used in the calculation, but we support the recommendation and would like to see it made a condition of any licences.



**Location and density appear to be the main factors influencing the environmental impact of releases, but we recognise that smaller releases in less sensitive areas are likely to present reduced risks. It may be appropriate that small gamebird releases taking place away from sensitive protected sites and their buffer zones are not subject to the same general licence conditions that apply to larger releases. Do you think this is something we should consider? Please give reasons**

We support the principle that smaller-scale releases taking place away from protected sites could be subject to less restrictive conditions, but we would encourage the application of the precautionary principle in determining which releases are considered 'small'. We also feel that conditions which require reporting the numbers and locations of releases must be included in every licence, regardless of the size of release, in order to ensure accurate data collection.