

## COARSE FISHING CLOSE SEASON ON ENGLISH RIVERS

The Environment Agency will retain the coarse fishing close season on English rivers following a review of the evidence and public consultation.

### Background

Coarse fishing close season byelaws prohibit river angling between 15 March and 15 June, with the aim of protecting spawning fish. Many anglers believe a close season is necessary to protect spawning fish: others contest it is unnecessary and that removing it would give them more chances to fish and provide potential benefits to the angling trade. Most other countries with coarse angling operate a close season (although dates and species differ).

The Environment Agency has previously removed the close season from most stillwaters and most canals. However, it considers river fish stocks to be more sensitive to the potential impacts of disturbance leading up to, during and after spawning.

In 2015, a study group, comprising the Environment Agency, Angling Trust and Institute of Fisheries Management, reviewed the scientific evidence on the close season. The group identified that a lack of studies on the impact of angling during the close season means the evidence base remains very limited and it is widely accepted that gathering more information would be too expensive. The review highlighted that some fish, for example barbel and dace, may be more sensitive to angling disturbance, especially where they aggregate in shoals ahead of spawning. It also identified pike as being particularly sensitive, such that it might require specific protection should the close season be removed or changed for other species. The study group recommended that the Environment Agency could move away from relying on the precautionary principle and take a risk-based decision on future regulation.

### Public consultation

A survey of anglers' opinions in 2018 showed 43% supported retaining the close season; 17% supported retaining a close season, but changing the dates; and 33% supported removing it.

Given interest in the issue, the Environment Agency ran a public consultation in 2019 to gather any further evidence to help determine if there was a case for change and to understand stakeholder concerns around three options: to retain, amend or remove the close season.

The consultation ran from 14 January 2019 for 12 weeks. We consulted fisheries and conservation organisations, the angling trade and other groups with an interest in rivers and fisheries. We received 13,680 responses from over 12,500 anglers, 320 businesses and from representatives of 225 clubs. The Institute of Fisheries Management, Wild Trout Trust and Salmon & Trout Conservation UK were among the national representative organisations who responded, along with Natural England, government's statutory conservation agency.

No additional substantive evidence has emerged from the consultation. Fifty percent of respondents support removing the close season; 39% support retaining the current close season; and 9% support retaining a close season, but with different dates (four weeks later and two weeks shorter). Those national representative organisations that responded<sup>1</sup>, along with Natural England, supported retaining the close season.

<sup>1</sup> The Angling Trust responded, but adopted a neutral position.

## Decision

The Environment Agency will retain the coarse fishing close season on English rivers.

The existing evidence indicates that removing the close season would pose risk to at least some coarse fish species in some locations.

Experience from The Environment Agency's own coarse fish broodstock collection and coarse fish rearing over 20 years supports the experience of others that some species, notably chub and barbel, form large spawning aggregations and that these can be very sensitive to disturbance while spawning. Where disturbed, spawning females may reabsorb their eggs and defer spawning to the following season rather than spawning elsewhere or later. Access to suitable spawning habitats is limited in many of our morphologically altered rivers.

Amending the start and end dates of the close season would increase protection for some fish (later and repeat spawning fish), but would also increase risks for those that spawn early. A close season that provides protection for all coarse fish species for the duration of their spawning times would run for over five months, from early February to late July. This would be very precautionary.

Removing the coarse fishing close season or changing the start/end dates would not have been possible for all rivers in England. The Environment Agency would most likely have to retain a higher level of protection on some or all rivers designated as Special Areas of Conservation and Sites of Special Scientific Interest to protect sensitive species and habitats, as it has on some stillwaters. Many of these rivers are important coarse fisheries, including the Hampshire Avon, Wensum and Wye.

In addition, we expect some angling clubs would retain the current or a different close season on their waters. Combined, this resulting patchwork of regulation would increase confusion over where and when fishing was allowed, with a consequent impact on Environment Agency, angling clubs and anglers.

The current close season is risk-based and maintains protection for the majority of coarse fish.

While changing or removing the close season would provide additional angling opportunities on rivers and potentially some economic benefits for angling-dependent businesses, the Environment Agency believes, on balance, that these are limited and that they do not override the long-term viability of fish stocks. It does not believe the current close season is a significant barrier to increasing angling participation and fishing licence sales.

### A note of thanks

The Environment Agency is extremely grateful to all those that found the time to contribute to the consultation. The fact that so many did reflects how important an issue this is to anglers.

It would also like to thank the study group for its work to collate, analyse and interpret the available evidence on the close season. This has facilitated an informed debate on the issue.

The Environment Agency recognises that a proportion of anglers will be disappointed in this outcome, while others will welcome it. This reflects a shared passion for fishing. We will continue, working with partners, to consider new information on the close season as and when it becomes available.