

# LOUGH BEG

## Views About Management The Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 Article 28(2)

### A statement of Environment and Heritage Service's views about the management of Lough Beg Area of Special Scientific Interest ("the ASSI")

This statement represents the views of Environment and Heritage Service about the management of the ASSI for nature conservation. This statement sets out, in principle, our views on how the area's special conservation interest can be conserved and enhanced. Environment and Heritage Service has a duty to notify the owners and occupiers of the ASSI of its views about the management of the land.

Not all of the management principles will be equally appropriate to all parts of the ASSI and there may be other management activities, additional to our current views, which can be beneficial to the conservation and enhancement of the features of interest. It is also very important to recognise that management may need to change with time.

The management views set out below do not constitute consent for any operation or activity. The written consent of Environment and Heritage Service is still required before carrying out any operation or activity likely to damage the features of special interest (see the Schedule on pages 1 and 2 of the attached Document B for a list of these operations and activities). Environment and Heritage Service welcomes consultation with owners, occupiers and users of the ASSI to ensure that the management of this area maintains and enhances the features of interest, and to ensure that all necessary prior consents are obtained.

### MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

#### Species-rich wet grassland and breeding waders

Species-rich wet grassland is an important habitat for wildlife, and Lough Beg contains one of the largest areas of such grassland in Northern Ireland. The wet grassland in the ASSI is also notable for the rare plants, important invertebrate communities and breeding birds that it supports. The latter includes a large concentration of breeding waders (Snipe, Lapwing Curlew and Redshank). Such important concentrations of breeding waders have become scarce in Northern Ireland.

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance and enhancement of the wet grassland through the conservation of its associated native plants and animals. In general, sensitive management of the habitat should ensure that its component communities of plants and animals are protected.

Many of the more sensitive plant species can be quickly lost through intensive management treatments, such as fertiliser and herbicide application. However,

grassland generally needs some management to retain its interest. Although occasional small patches of scrub can be valuable in providing additional habitat niches for birds and invertebrates, in the absence of management, coarse grasses can quickly take over and ultimately woody species may become dominant.

Grazing by cattle is the most effective way of controlling the growth of more vigorous plant species and helping to maintain open areas and a diverse sward structure which also benefits breeding waders. In the absence of grazing, cutting of the vegetation to create open areas and reduce the dominance of coarse grasses and rushes is desirable.

There are some specific management practices relating to factors such as vegetation structure, grazing levels, soil moisture and predators that are of particular importance for breeding waders. For example, limited rush cover can help provide good habitat for breeding waders while heavy infestations can mean that shorter areas useful for feeding are lost. Rush-topping may be necessary.

Sward height is also important. This often determines which species of wader will make use of the area, with longer vegetation attracting Snipe and short vegetation being more suitable for Lapwing. Use of fertiliser should be discouraged, as this can increase early season grass growth, thus reducing the suitability of the site for waders, such as Lapwing, which prefer shorter swards. Such use also means livestock could move onto the land early, at high stocking rates, which would increase the risk of trampling of nests.

The breeding productivity of ground nesting waders can be reduced by the presence of tall hedges or mature trees in the immediate vicinity of the nest site as they provide lookouts and nest sites for predators such as Hooded Crow.

Specific objectives include:

Low intensity grazing has contributed to the conservation and enhancement of the features of interest. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the continuation of this practice.

Prevent the loss of more sensitive grassland plant species and breeding waders through the control of scrub, bracken and rushes. In general, maintaining a species-rich sward that is also suitable for breeding waders can be achieved through the appropriate grazing regime. In some cases other methods of control, such as cutting or rush-topping, may be required. Such activities should not be carried out during the wader breeding season.

Maintain the diversity and quality of the species-rich grassland by ensuring there is no application of fertiliser, slurry or herbicide to the site.

Where appropriate, encourage the blocking of drains to prevent the grassland from drying out.

Limited scrub and tree management may be required as appropriate to deter predators such as Hooded Crow.

### **Wintering Waterbirds**

Lough Beg ASSI is a wintering site for large numbers of migratory waterbirds. As part of the Lough Neagh system it supports populations of Little Grebe, Great crested Grebe,

Great Cormorant, Whooper Swan, Mute Swan, Greylag Goose, Shelduck, Wigeon, Teal, Gadwall, Mallard, Shoveler, Pochard, Tufted Duck, Scaup, Goldeneye, Coot, Lapwing and Golden Plover that are significant in an all-Ireland context.

Swans, geese, ducks and waders are attracted by a rich food supply and secure roost sites. Wildfowl make use of both open water and surrounding open habitats, particularly wet grassland, for feeding. Aquatic vegetation and invertebrates are important food sources for many ducks while swans, geese and some ducks obtain a proportion of their food on land. Waders such as Lapwing and Golden Plover feed predominantly on worms, insects and other invertebrates in wet grasslands. The quality of feeding areas is, however, susceptible to the influence of operations undertaken both within and outside the ASSI that may result in pollution or changes in water quality or unacceptable levels of disturbance to feeding birds. It is therefore important that damaging practices are minimised around the ASSI.

Secure roost sites, free from disturbance, are essential to allow the birds to conserve energy when not feeding. Some of these roosts may lie outside the ASSI. Undisturbed roosts are particularly important during severe winter weather. Wildfowl usually roost on open water, while waders tend to use islands or isolated headlands. The variety of habitats present within the ASSI should be managed in order to safeguard the wintering waterbird population.

Specific objectives include:

Feeding habitats – it is important to maintain the quality and extent of habitat used for feeding by the birds, in particular the open water and surrounding reedbed, fen and grassland, where present.

Disturbance around known roost sites and frequently used feeding areas should be minimised. Access by walkers, vehicles, boats and other persons or activities which may cause disturbance should be restricted where possible.

#### **Management principles applicable to all habitats throughout the site**

Ensure that disturbance to the site and its wildlife is minimised.

Discourage non-native species, especially those that tend to spread at the expense of native wildlife.

Maintain the diversity and quality of habitats associated with the species-rich wet grassland, such as open water, swamp, fen and wet woodland, through sensitive management. These adjoining habitats are very important for wildlife, especially breeding birds, invertebrates and rare plants.



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Authorised Officer

Dated the 28<sup>th</sup> of January 2008

