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Delay to improvements on fish passage short-sighted, says IFM

The Institute of Fisheries Management (IFM) today criticised the government for missing the opportunity to tackle the major issue of fish passage with the new Marine and Coastal Access Act.

The part of the act which could require changes to remove barriers to fish passage, with the exception of barriers for eels, have been delayed until at least 2011 on the advice of the Better Regulation Executive on the grounds of cost.

While it welcomed the majority of the act, the IFM, the professional body for anyone working in fisheries or aquaculture, sounded caution on the delays, which could lead to rivers not achieving 'good' ecological status.

Chair of the institute Ian Dolben said: "We are very disappointed that the introduction of measures to improve fish passage has been delayed until 2011 on the basis of cost and believe this is a massive missed opportunity.

"While we understand that, in these tough economic times, cost is a major factor, we believe it is very short-sighted to delay the implementation of this part of the act, as it could risk the UK's ability to comply with Water Framework Directive deadlines.

"So the cost of improving fish passage has potentially been passed from mainly private companies which own the obstructions to the UK taxpayer, as we risk infraction proceedings from the EU and a potential fine if we do not comply with legislation."

The new Marine and Coastal Access Act does include measures to improve passage for eels, one of the most endangered fish in the world, but delays any obligation on the owners of obstructions to improve fish passage for other species until 2011.

ENDS

Notes to Editors

The implementation of the 'Free Passage of Fish Order' has been delayed until 2011 on the advice of the Better Regulation Executive on the grounds of cost.

Obstructions to fish passage will be assessed on a risk basis by the Environment Agency and the owners, mainly large private companies such as utilities, will be obliged to make changes to allow free movement of fish.

At present such changes can be required by the Environment Agency only when other work to obstructions is proposed, such as when hydropower schemes are built.

The act also contains a number of provisions related the management of migratory and freshwater fisheries, including:

- powers for the Environment Agency to introduce emergency byelaws, for example at times of drought, to ensure the protection of fisheries;
- changes to the system of licences and authorisations for fishing, which will improve protection of for, amongst others, lamprey and shad;
- changes to the system for introducing live fish into inland waters, which should improve protection of biodiversity;
- reform of the law on close times for various fisheries, which should improve the effectiveness of conservation measures for, e.g. eel;
- widening the scope of measures to impose close times to include eel fisheries, which again should improve conservation of this endangered species;
- changes to controls on fisheries undertaken through Certificates of Privilege, which should enable better, more sustainable management of fisheries where stocks are depleted;
- introducing powers to ban the use of gaffs or tailers, both implements used to catch or assist with the landing of fish, which can cause critical injuries to fish and reduce their survival after release.

The Marine and Coastal Access Act also provides for the establishment of new Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities in England with a duty to manage sea fisheries exploitation in a sustainable way.

These bodies in England, along with the Welsh Assembly Government in Wales, will have improved powers to manage and regulate sea fisheries in estuaries and up to six miles out to sea.

The role of the Marine and Fisheries Agency which currently enforces Common Fisheries Policy regulations in England is to be absorbed into the new Marine Management Organisation and its powers are also to be enhanced.

For more information or to contact the IFM's press officer please call Pete Turner on 07787 128799.