

The European Eel

Factsheet 2

Eel Management Plans

A European Union Regulation requires member states to produce Eel Management Plans, in a bid to halt and reverse the decline in eel. The Environment Agency has produced 11 EMPs, covering each of the 11 River Basin Districts in England and Wales. Each plan addresses the causes of decline in eel populations and identifies management actions which are achievable.

Eel are long lived, living in freshwater for 15 to 20 years before migrating to sea to spawn. It will take several eel generations before we will know if measures we put in place now will have an impact. We may not see any improvement in populations for another 40 to 60 years.

The measures addressed in the 11 EMPs fall into five broad groups.

Improving eel passage

Barriers to migration, such as tidal flap gates, weirs, water intakes and turbines, are a big issue for eel. Building eel passes and screening intakes will need to be examined alongside the needs of all fish. New eel passage regulations will assist us in doing this.

Monitoring

Our knowledge of eel populations is patchy, so we have put programmes in place to collect more information. We have identified a series of "index" sites that are representative of the rivers in each of the river basin districts. Eel surveys at these sites will allow us to make more accurate assessments of current stock levels and, more importantly, how they change in the future.

Access to habitat

Eel are not that fussy about habitat, but in the past decades a lot of prime eel areas (lower reaches of rivers, confluences with the sea and associated creeks) have been lost. Changes in farming practice and draining lowland areas for development are the main causes. These losses, coupled with the construction of flood defences and weirs, have interrupted the continuity of river systems. More recent views on managing flood risk and sustainable flood storage may be a way forward to reconnect coastal and lowland habitats that eel (and many other animals) depend on.

Large numbers of glass eel die as they come to the end of this vulnerable life stage and start feeding in rivers. This is a natural process, but if there is more habitat available, more of the surviving glass eel have a greater

chance of reaching adulthood and returning to sea to spawn.

Stocking

Stocking must also be considered as an option to boost eel stocks and is specifically mentioned in the EU Eel Regulation. We are piloting small stocking programmes and monitoring their success.

Regulating eel fishing

Where an eel fishery exists, we must ensure that it is well regulated and sustainable. We will also need to ensure any catch return data can be used to help us monitor stocks. The England and Wales eel fishery represents less than 2% of total European eel landings. Numbers of licences are declining, but eel fishing continues to be a part of rural traditions and can boost local economies.



More information

Details of the UK's Eel Management Plans can be found at - <http://www.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/fisheries/freshwater/elmp.htm>.

Factsheets in this series -

- 1. The European Eel
- 2. Eel Management Plans
- 3. UK Eel Fisheries
- 4. Elver Poaching
- 5. Eel Facts and Figures