

Targeted Maintenance Activity on the Shannon

Background

Over the years, there have been many calls for a maintenance programme to be put in place for the Shannon. Maintenance of rivers and other watercourses has some benefit in preventing the deterioration of channel conveyance capacity. While maintenance on its own cannot protect properties and has no beneficial effect on the extreme flood events witnessed during the Winter of 2015 and more recently in Donegal, it is recognised that maintenance can have a positive role to play in mitigating against the effects of less severe flood events and summer flooding.

Last December, the Shannon Flood Risk State Agency Co-ordination Working Group took a major decision to develop a plan for strategic maintenance works on the River Shannon. A planned maintenance programme to address the deterioration of the river channel would complement the Group's existing Work Programme and the specific measures that are identified for the areas at risk in the Draft Shannon Flood Risk Management Plan, which is currently being finalised.

A sub-committee of the Group was established and is examining all of the necessary legal, environmental, technical and other considerations that arise in bringing forward both short term and long term proposals.

In March 2017, the Group agreed to the delivery of targeted maintenance activities in specific locations identified as feasible by the members of the Group. Staff from the Office of Public Works, Waterways Ireland, Inland Fisheries Ireland and the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) worked together to identify the scope of potential activities and proposals emerged for targeted activities to be carried out in a range of locations within the Callows area of the River Shannon this year in accordance with the permitted seasonal windows for such activities.

The Group was acutely aware of that any potential targeted activity had to be considered in the context that Callows are part of both an SAC and a SPA.

Consultative approach

The OPW worked with the other members of the Shannon Working Group including Waterways Ireland, Inland Fisheries Ireland and NPWS to visit the sites and identify potential works and any environmental issues for each identified location.

As part of this consultative approach, NPWS identified that a full Natura assessment would be required for a number of the proposed activities. These were not advanced any further as

a result. Other locations were also excluded on the basis of the identification of some alluvial woodland and the likely presence of protected species.

The timeline for carrying out activity was also considered. Tree cutting is restricted to the period September 1st to the end of February to protect nesting birds. Channel work is restricted to the period May to September to avoid impacts on salmonoid fish. These environmental windows, taken together, restrict many activities to the month of September.

Using this consultative approach, the OPW narrowed down the number of locations where some targeted maintenance activity could potentially be carried out to a list of seven locations, subject to the appropriate environmental consents and environmental windows for the proposed activities to be carried out.

Consent Process

The OPW proceeded to make applications for derogated consent from the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht under Regulation 30 of European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 (SI 477/2011) in respect of activity at these seven locations.

As part of the consent process, the proposed works were assessed by the NPWS as not being likely, either individually or in combination, to have a significant effect on the cSAC, subject to being carried out as described and according to OPW standard operating conditions and environmental management practices (including appropriate biosecurity measures).

A mammal survey was also carried out in advance of the grant of consent. This identified that there were a number of protected species including otter and pine marten in the area of one of the proposed locations for removal of fallen trees. An exclusion zone has been established to address this issue.

Consent was granted by the NPWS subject to certain restrictions imposed that included the use of silt curtains where excavation was proposed and the establishment of an exclusion zone in one particular location. This consent fulfils the obligations of OPW and the State for assessment under Article 6 of the Habitats Directive.

Onsite activity

On foot of the receipt of consent, OPW mobilised plant and personnel to the first of the locations, at Muckinish near Banagher County Offaly. Work commenced on site last week and is due to be completed over the coming days.

The potential to carry out further work at other locations for which consent has been received will be reviewed in terms of availability of resources and the seasonal restrictions that may apply to the types of activity required at each site.