



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Research and Library Service Briefing Note

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# Eel Fishing Regulations 2010

## 1 Introduction

The following paper provides an outline of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's Eel Fishing regulations 2010, as well as providing background information on the decline in eel population within the Northern Ireland river basin.

## 2 Eel Fishing Regulations 2010<sup>1</sup>

DCAL, under the powers of the Fisheries Act (NI) 1996, plans to introduce a Statutory Rule which will bring the terms of the European Eel Regulation (EC) No1100/2007 into force in Northern Ireland.

The EU regulation requires member states to introduce Eel Management Plans (EMP) for each eel river basin within their region. Northern Ireland is home to three such basins – North West, Neagh Bann and North East. The EMP to be introduced will have the following impact:

- The Lough Neagh Bann catchment, Europe's largest wild eel fishery, will continue to operate at current levels, which have been judged sustainable. The fishery will be subject to close regulation and monitoring.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Letter to Clerk of Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure *Eel Fishing Regulations 2010* - 01 April 2020

- The Lough Erne fishery, part of the North West catchment area, has been judged unsustainable. As such commercial fishing in the area will cease. The 17 commercial fishermen who hold a license to fish for eels in Lough Erne will have an opportunity to tender for contracts to catch and transport eels for conservation.
- The North East basin contains no eel fisheries and will not be affected.

In short, the regulations will lead to the cessation of eel fishing (excluding fishing for conservation) in all areas other than Lough Neagh and named weirs of the lower River Bann.

The Department estimated that the regulation will come in to operation on 1 June 2010.

Similar EMPs have been drawn up to protect eel populations in England, Scotland and Wales.

### 3 Background to decline

The European eel has been in decline since the early 1980s. The reasons for the decline are unclear; it is *“a story of scientific mystery, climate change, business interest and tangled political intervention”*. What is clear, however, is that the eel has become *“one of Europe’s top conservation priorities”*.<sup>2</sup>

Scientists are yet to witness eels spawning in the wild, yet it is commonly held that they spawn in the Saragossa Sea. The eel larvae drift on sea currents, arriving at European shores as infant eels, known as elvers (also referred to as glass eels). These infant eels then travel up river estuaries into freshwater systems where they typically spend most of their lives.<sup>3</sup>

Since 1983 the numbers of elvers entering Northern Ireland’s river system (and river systems globally) has reduced significantly. This has led to a reduction in the number of adult eels (yellow, brown and silver eels).<sup>4</sup>

More specific reasons for the decline in eel populations, both recruitment of elvers (referring to the number of new eels entering the river system) and stock of adult eels include:

#### Recruitment decline

- Over-exploitation;
- Changes in oceanographical conditions, possibly linked to climate change;
- Reductions in accessible freshwater habitat;
- Degradation of freshwater habitats;

<sup>2</sup> *UK’s disappearing eel*, Financial Times, March 27 2010

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> *Fishermen Warn of eel crisis*, Belfast Telegraph, 20 March 2010

- Pollution; and
- Parasitism.

### Stock decline

- The loss of good yellow eel habitat, such as loss of wetlands, pollution or over abstraction of rivers;
- Barriers to migration, both in terms structural physical barriers, e.g. weirs but also of water quality and quantity barriers;
- Over-fishing; and
- A reduction in the number of elvers stocked in waters beyond the normal migration range.<sup>5</sup>

Figure 1, below, outlines the decline of elvers in the Lough-Neagh/Bann catchment area. The table demonstrates a decline from a mid 1940s peak of around 10,000kg of natural input to 2008, where the natural supply to the river was negligible.

Figure 2 outlines historic trends in yellow and silver eel catch for the Lough Neagh catchment area. The figure shows some fluctuation in catch for both species, however, a general downward trend is apparent.

Figure 3 presents elver recruitment data for the Lough Erne catchment area. Recruitment patterns for the Erne (measured in tonnes) again demonstrate downward trends.

The Northern Ireland area of the North Western International River Basin District (encompassing Upper and Lower Lough Erne, parts of the Drowes System and parts of the Foyle Catchment) is home to brown and silver eels. Figures 4 and 5 outline the stock levels of each eel type. Both sets of figures show an overall fall in stock numbers from the mid-nineties in the case of brown eels and from the mid-eighties in the case of silver. Two things should be noted about these figures, firstly there has been a slight increase in brown eel numbers in the final recorded year. Secondly silver eel catch figures post-1997 are only recorded for 2001.

Previously the shortfall in recruitment had been redressed by re-stocking with elvers from healthier fisheries, such as the Severn estuary. This is no longer possible, since these fisheries have also suffered from a serious decline in glass eel numbers since 2009.

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<sup>5</sup> Communities Project for Highland Biodiversity - Eel fishing *West Sutherland Elver Survey* (May 2008) [http://www.eelfishing.co.uk/West\\_Sutherland\\_Elver\\_Survey\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.eelfishing.co.uk/West_Sutherland_Elver_Survey_FINAL.pdf) (accessed 16/04/10)

Figure 1: Elver/Glass eel supply to Lough Neagh 1936-2008<sup>6</sup>

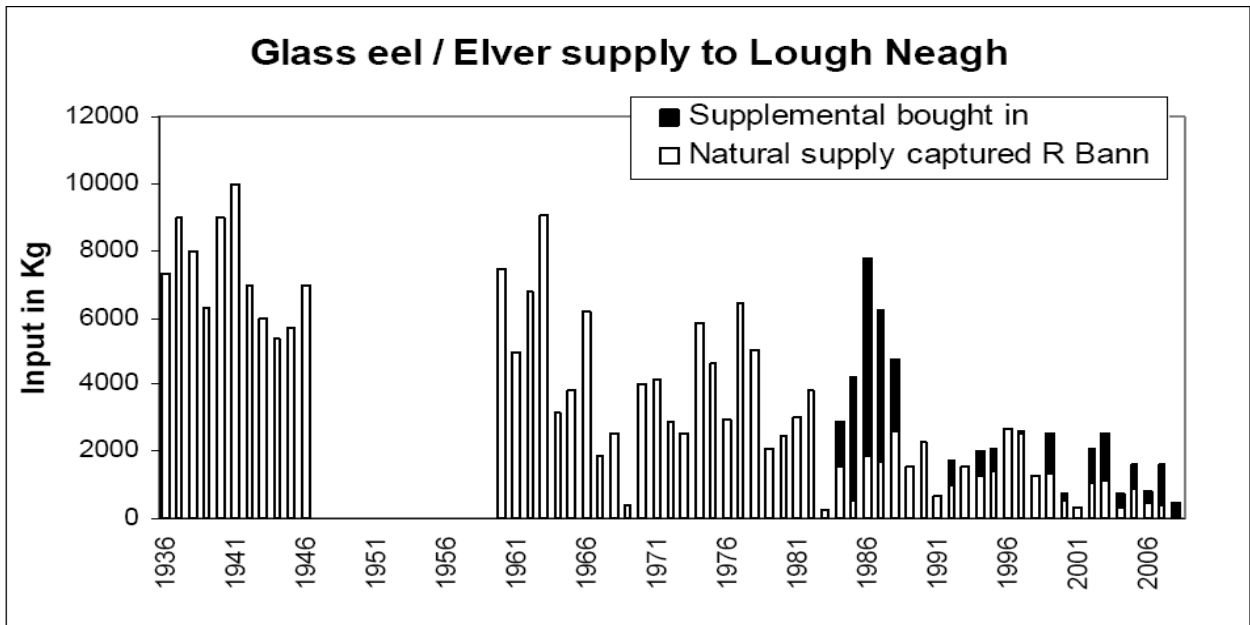


Figure 2: Commercial catch of yellow and silver eels from Lough Neagh (1965-2007)<sup>7</sup>

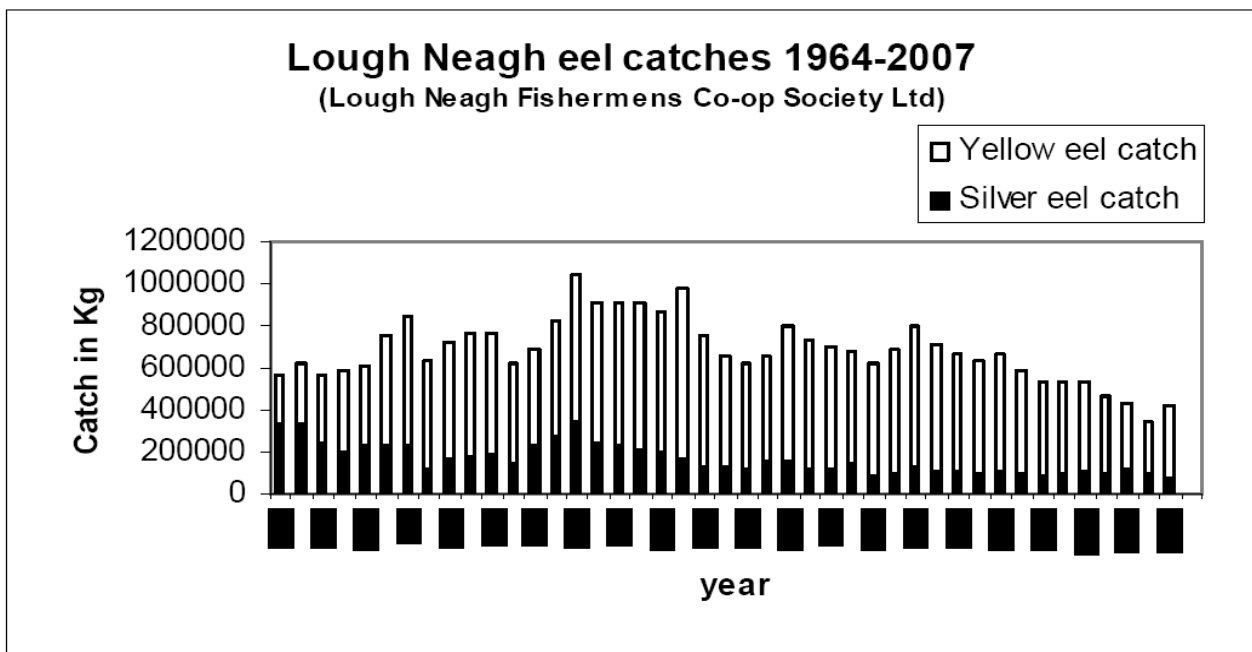
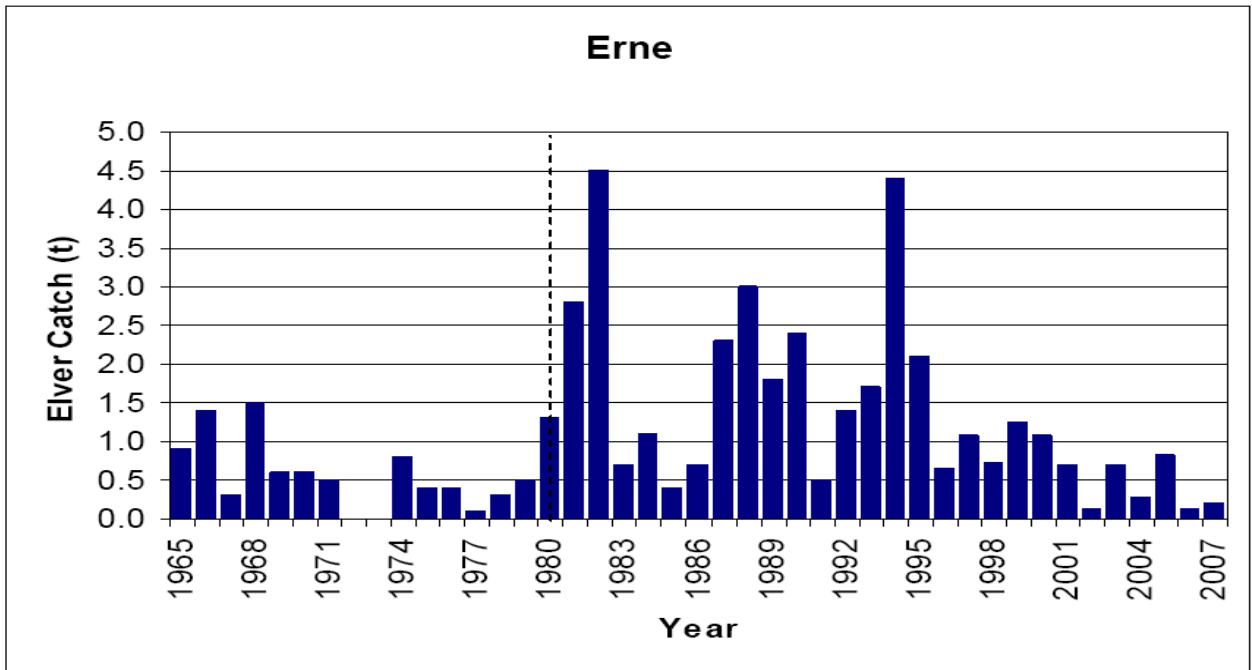


Figure 3: Elver Catches on the Erne 1965-2007<sup>8</sup>

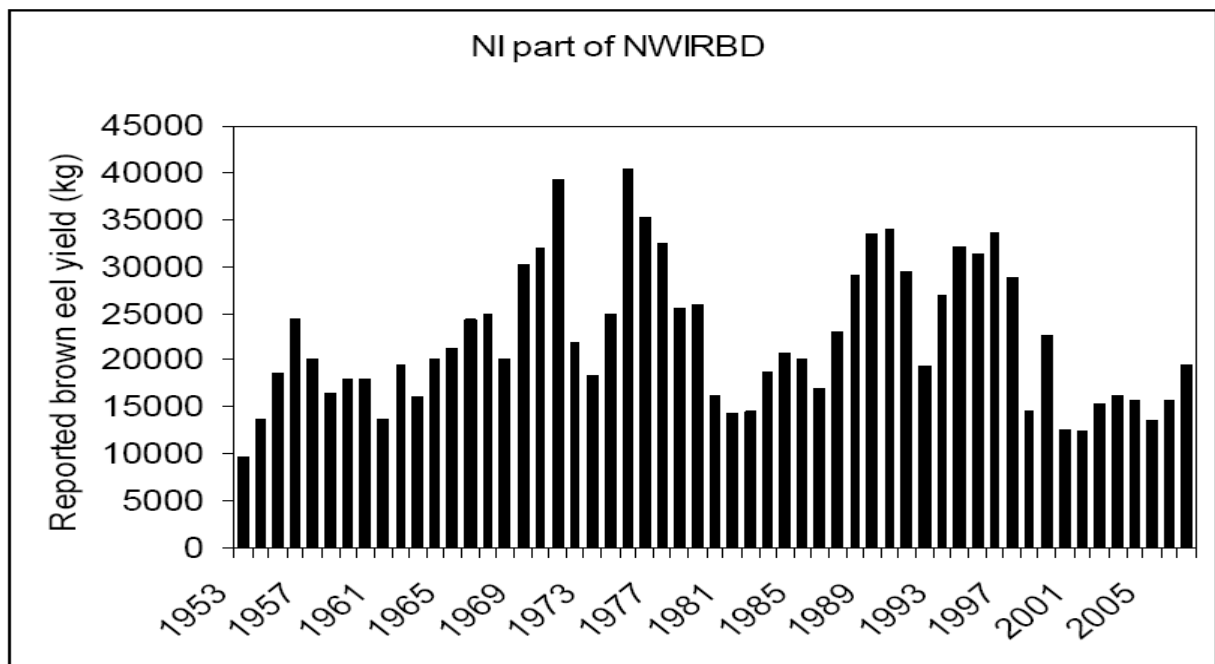
<sup>6</sup> Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, *Eel Management Plan Neagh / Bann River Basin District* (March 2010), p20

<sup>7</sup> Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, *Eel Management Plan Neagh / Bann River Basin District* (March 2010), p24

<sup>8</sup> Department of Food, Environment and Rural Affairs, *Eel Management Plans for the United Kingdom North Western International River Basin District* (March 2010) p7

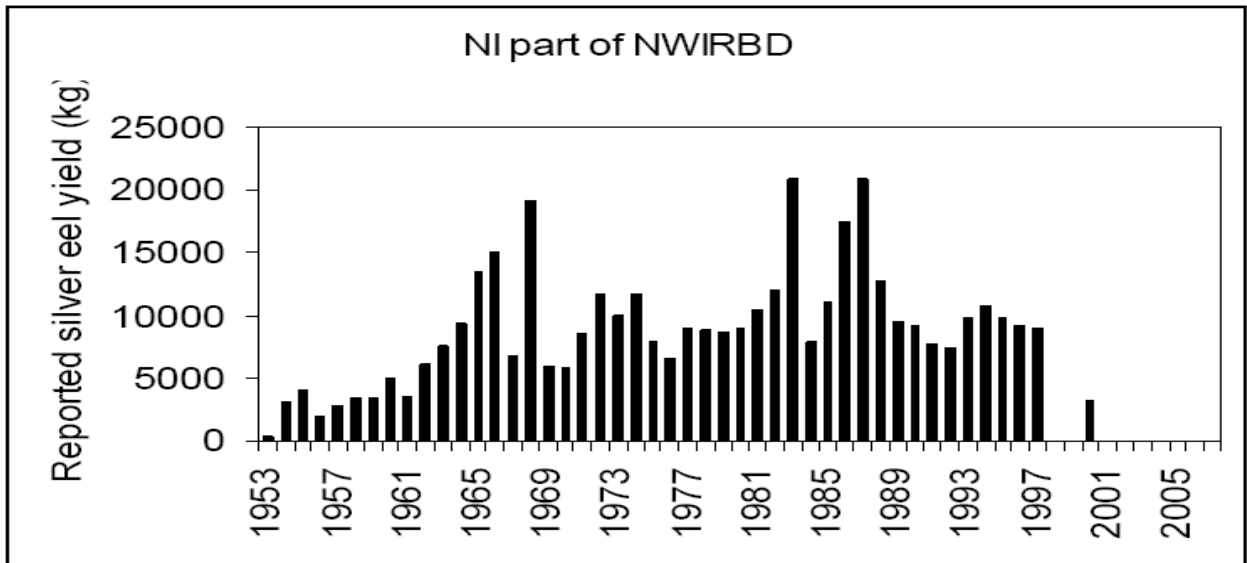


**Figure 4: Reported brown eel catch for the Northern Ireland part of the North Western International River Basin District<sup>9</sup>**



<sup>9</sup> Department of Food, Environment and Rural Affairs, *Eel Management Plans for the United Kingdom North Western International River Basin District* (March 2010) p13

**Figure 4: Reported silver eel catch for the Northern Ireland part of the North Western International River Basin District<sup>10</sup>**



<sup>10</sup> Department of Food, Environment and Rural Affairs, *Eel Management Plans for the United Kingdom North Western International River Basin District* (March 2010) p14