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Rt. Hon. Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State
Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs
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Dear Secretary of State,

I was delighted to arrive at Natural England last week and to have the honour of assuming the role of Chair. I am very much looking forward to working with you, all of my new colleagues and our many stakeholders in leading the organisation into what I hope will be a new era for conservation in England, not least through the different roles we can play in implementing the 25 Year Environment Plan.

While I have spent my first days considering how we might proceed with that broad agenda, you will be aware that my arrival coincided with an announcement relating to the system of General Licences operated in England for the lethal control of certain bird species in relation to public health and safety, protection of crops and livestock and the conservation of wildlife.

Having spoken at some length with senior colleagues at Natural England about this decision, which was taken before my arrival, I am assured that we were forced into a situation where we concluded that we had to revoke these licences. This was the result of a legal action brought against us by Wild Justice. In reaching this conclusion the board considered unequivocal legal advice that we would be unable to mount a defence to that action. We shared our advice with Defra colleagues and explained that we had no choice but to concede the claim by accepting that the current licence was unlawful.

In making this decision the board were fully aware of their duty to protect the natural environment, including through a licensing system which takes into account the needs of people and wildlife. On April 25th we took down the General Licences and began the complex process of introducing an alternative, which we explained to you before we started.

This focuses on more specific and therefore lawful General Licences, supported by immediate provisions of individual licences for users who need to act before a new licence, in advance of a more comprehensive review of the General Licences later in the year. This was communicated to all users of the licences.

Our team have been working hard to implement this system over the last 10 days and a number of new licences are now in place with many stakeholders reassured that they can, or will soon be able to, act lawfully. However, inevitably there are some concerns, and in some cases misunderstanding, about the new licences. Despite our efforts to explain the need for the change, some groups are reporting confusion among their members and a level of dissatisfaction that is in some cases spilling over into frustration.

I and my board are committed to a long-term review of how General Licences have been applied since the 1990s, so as to understand what has brought us to the current position, and to inform a planned comprehensive review later this year that will be used to create a new system fit for today. However, we also need to ensure that the immediate situation continues towards resolution.

It is my view that this resolution can be supported by your leadership and that, consistent with your statutory powers, you may wish to temporarily take on the ultimate decision making around the general licences.

I am immensely grateful for the efforts of my new colleagues at Natural England in working urgently to identify alternative solutions for all those affected. I am confident that they will continue to show true diligence in their efforts to work with you to resolve this very difficult position as quickly and as clearly as possible to achieve the best for wildlife and for individuals who rely on licences.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tony Juniper', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Tony Juniper
Chair, Natural England