



Environment Minister drops the ball on EU protected habitats and species due to funding cuts

Cuts to funding of environmental groups blamed on a 10.7% reduction in the Department of Environment (DOE) budget haven't been dealt out evenly and their administration has been a farce according to Queen's University Belfast (QUB). The Department has withdrawn funding grants to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Ulster Wildlife, RSPBNI and the Mourne Heritage Trust. However, it now emerges that the Department is breaking binding contracts with QUB. This is a very different situation as QUB had won a 10 year contract to provide statutory surveillance and monitoring via the Natural Heritage Research Partnership (NHRP) with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA). This was not a funding grant but a Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP)-administered EU-wide tendered contract which, according to QUB Legal Services, can only be broken due to poor performance but will be terminated on 22nd June 2015 due to a lack of funds.

It has transpired, after the Environment Minister, Mark H. Durkan, got a grilling by the Stormont Environment Committee chaired by MLA Anna Lo, that £1.25M of funding has subsequently been found to reinstate funds to invited environmental NGOs (paid for by the 5p plastic bag tax plus expected slack in the system due to a voluntary redundancy scheme within DOE). QUB has not been invited to apply under the new scheme as, not being an environmental NGO and holding a contract, it is ineligible. QUB were informed about the termination of their contract by a letter addressed to the non-existent School of Biological "Services" rather than Sciences meaning receipt of the letter was delayed. Their response stated that QUB's contractual performance had been outstanding (according to the DOE's own internal assessment) and there was no contractual clause allowing contractual termination due to lack of funds. They requested a meeting but received a response from the DOE Permanent Secretary, Leo O'Reilly, reiterating the Department's position but he did not address any of the issues raised by QUB. Professor Ian Montgomery, responsible for the running of the NHRP contract said "It appears that this decision was taken by the Permanent Secretary with no consultation with NIEA, and possibly the Minister".

The termination of the NHRP contract jeopardises four staff and four PhD students with a loss of more than £1M to QUB over the next three year whilst damaging trust between Government and Academia based on 15 years of highly productive collaboration. Professor Montgomery added "Once the contract is broken, and we have resolved the outstanding legal issues, we will be most reluctant to re-enter any contract with the DOE in future leaving it high and dry with respect to evidence necessary for enforcement of environmental protection."

"The DOE had commissioned us to examine a range of high priority, EU-protected habitats and species including the freshwater pearl mussel (Ireland's only critically endangered species), three species of lamprey, red squirrel (near threatened), pine marten, Irish hare and damage to peatlands by wildfires. Without our evidence-base to inform policy the Government will be effectively paralyzed in its ability to protect these habitats and species and respond to threats, including large fines from Europe due to inaction."

For example, QUB currently runs two projects on the restoration of horse mussel (*Modiolus modiolus*) reefs in Strangford Lough. These biogenic reefs are vital for marine biodiversity and were once widespread in Strangford Lough Special Area of Conservation (SAC). A recent Northern Ireland Audit Office report suggested that DOE was slow to react to

environmental damage of *Modiolus* reefs with complaints to the European Commission representing “a significant risk to the public finances” of £6.6M in infraction with £475,625 of ongoing daily fines payable by the Stormont Executive. QUB research is the only action taken by the Marine Division in attempting to isolate the factors contributing to the species’ unfavourable status. Ulster Wildlife, who previously raised the state of *Modiolus* with Europe, is currently considering another letter to the EU Commission to raise the issue yet again. Professor Howard Platt, a member of the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside (CNCC) and Ulster Wildlife, speaking in a personal capacity said that “The termination of the NHRP contract represents a substantial risk to the public purse far in excess of the money saved by cutting the research with associated Ministerial embarrassment for dropping the ball (again) on such an important issue. This is extremely short-sighted of a Department”.

QUB has responded again to the Permanent Secretary, the Minister and his Special Advisor, the Environment Committee and NIEA and now awaits their response.

ENDS

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- The Natural Heritage Research Partnership (NHRP) between the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and *Quercus*, Queen’s University Belfast (QUB) is a 10 year contract from 2008 to 2018 won under DFP-administered EU-wide tendering.
- *Quercus*, Northern Ireland’s Centre for Biodiversity and Conservation Science, seated within the School of Biological Sciences at QUB was created by NIEA (then the Environment and Heritage Service or EHS) in 2003.
- Taking both contracts together (*Quercus* & NHRP), DOE has invested £4.2M of funding in QUB research since 2003 with the current contract worth more than £1M to QUB over the next 3 years (2015-2018). QUB have used these funds to lever a further £2.2M from external sources. Thus, for every £1 that the Department has invested, QUB have provided a further 50% funding to augment research directly related to NIEA statutory obligations.
- Since 2008, QUB has completed 69 DOE-funded projects with a further 42 funded by levered monies. A total of 66 peer-reviewed scientific papers (a measure of quality rarely provided by NGOs which receive funding grants for similar work) have been published.
- The cost of running down the partnership whilst delivering all outstanding work would be £252,879. Note that the new DOE Natural Environment Fund (NEF) which is aimed at grant funded NGOs for funding reinstatement offers £1.25M from the Department. Thus enough money IS available to, at the very least, delivery the current outstanding work whilst DOE efficiency savings and redundancies should create enough slack that future financial years are not hit as hard as 2015/16 providing an opportunity to save NHRP in its entirety.
- The economic value of Northern Ireland’s Natural Heritage contributes £573M to the Northern Irish economy annually - but for these benefits to continue to contribute measurably to the economy, their protection and interpretation must be properly resourced.
- More information is available from www.quercus.ac.uk
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