Landmark consultation launched on the reintroduction of beavers in England

Plans to release beavers into the wild in England have been set out in a consultation launching today (Wednesday 25 August) – marking a cautious step towards further reintroductions and establishing native beaver populations.

Beavers can play a hugely significant role in helping to restore nature to England. Widely referred to as 'ecosystem engineers', they create dams from trees, mud and rocks, which raise water levels, creating pools and wetland habitats which support the recovery of a wide range of native species.

Under the Government's proposals, applications for licences to release beavers into the wild would need to meet certain criteria, including demonstrating positive stakeholder engagement and local buy in, and proof that a comprehensive assessment has been undertaken of the impacts on surrounding land, the water environment, infrastructures, habitats, and protected species. Projects must also ensure that support for landowners and river users is put in place.

The consultation follows a successful reintroduction in Devon – the River Otter beavers reintroduction trial – which over five-years brought a wealth of benefits to the local area and ecology, including enhancing the environment at a local wildlife site, creating wetland habitat, and reducing flood risk for housing downstream.

The 12-week consultation is seeking views on:

- Potential future releases into the wild
- Current and future releases into enclosures
- Mitigation and management of beaver activity or impacts in the wild, including the River Otter population and all other existing wild living beaver populations

Plans to give beavers legal protection in England are also being announced today, to support their recovery. This will make it an offence to deliberately capture, kill, disturb or injure beavers, or damage breeding sites or resting places.

Secretary of State George Eustice said:

> We are committed to providing opportunities to reintroduce formerly native species, such as beavers, where the benefits for the environment, people and the economy are clear.
>
> Today marks a significant milestone for the reintroduction of beavers in the wild, with the launch of the Government's consultation on our national approach and management of beavers in England.

> But we also understand that there are implications for landowners, so we are taking a cautious approach to ensure that all potential impacts are carefully considered.

Chair of Natural England, Tony Juniper, said:

> The launch of Defra's consultation today marks an important and positive moment for the future of these wonderful animals in England. Beavers are not only fascinating creatures in their own right, but are also ecosystem engineers that will play a key role in restoring and linking habitats, in the process bringing many environmental benefits, like we have seen in the highly successful River Otter trial in Devon – hugely positive transformations, including the creation of wetland habitat, improving water quality and smoothing flood peaks.
>
> I encourage everyone to respond, so that the way we shape the future of wild Beavers reflects as many perspectives as possible.

Decisions on the reintroduction of formerly native species in England are made based on the principles set out in the Government's code of best practice for reintroductions, which was published in May this year. Future beaver reintroductions will be subject to a licence from Natural England.

Today's announcement contributes to delivering against the 25 Year Environment Plan commitment to provide opportunities for the reintroduction of formerly native species – provided there are clear environmental, social and economic benefits.

Responses to the consultation will be used to inform decisions on the approach to further releases of beavers into the wild in England. A summary of responses will be published in early 2022.

Today's announcement is part of the Government's commitments aimed at tackling the twin threat of biodiversity and climate change.

The Government's Environment Bill will deliver the most ambitious environmental programme of any country on earth and drive forward action to protect nature and improve biodiversity, including through a target for species abundance for 2030, aiming to halt the decline of nature.

The consultation will be live on gov.uk at 9:30am, Wednesday 25 August.

- Beavers were once native to Britain but were hunted to extinction in Britain around 400 years ago.
- The scope of this consultation covers beavers in England. Wildlife policy is devolved so decisions about reintroductions of species in Scotland and Wales are made by the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Parliament.
- A partner pack is available for download.

£4 million funding to boost UK biomass production

- 24 projects will receive government funding of up to £200,000 to increase UK production of biomass that can be used as sources of green energy
- projects include growing algae from whisky manufacturing, increasing yields of grass varieties and accelerating the breeding of willow trees
- biomass is used for low-carbon renewable energy generation and is a key component in UK's commitment to tackle climate change

Farming seaweed and growing algae from the by-products of whisky manufacturing are among 24 projects today (Wednesday, 25 August) awarded £4 million government funding to boost biomass production.

The 24 innovative projects, from start-ups and family-run businesses to research institutes and universities, will receive funding of up to £200,000 from the government's Biomass Feedstocks Innovation Programme to produce low-carbon energy using organic materials.

The projects will boost biomass productivity in the UK, through breeding, planting, cultivating and harvesting of organic energy materials.

Biomass refers to sustainably derived plant material that could be used as fuel to produce energy or to create products such as chemicals and bio-plastics. It is a small but important part of the renewable energy mix that the UK requires to meet its commitment to eradicate its contribution to climate change by 2050 – and is also backed by the UK's independent Committee on Climate Change.

Biomass materials include non-food energy crops such as grasses and hemp, material from forestry operations and marine-based materials such as algae and seaweed.

Energy Minister Lord Callanan said:

> Working to develop new and greener types of fuel like biomass is an important part of building a the diverse and green energy mix that we will need to achieve our climate change targets.
>
> We are backing UK innovators to ensure we have a homegrown supply of biomass materials, which is part of our wider plans to continue driving down carbon emissions as we build back greener.

Funding recipients

Today's funding recipients include:

- Rickerby Estates Ltd in Carlisle has received over £150,000, to look at scaling-up the harvesting of willow crops using new cutting-edge technology such as automated processing machinery that is controlled by GPS satellite guidance systems
- Green Fuels Research Limited in Gloucestershire has received over £190,000 for a project that will allow microscopic algae to be produced for biomass using wastewater from breweries and dairy industries
- SeaGrown Limited in Scarborough will use over £180,000 funding to develop new techniques to farm and harvest seaweed off the North Yorkshire coast, taking advantage of seaweed's qualities as a source of biomass and its ability to remove carbon from the atmosphere
- Impact Laboratories Limited in Stirlingshire, Scotland, received over £170,000 to look at innovation in the commercial cultivation of algae utilising heat provided by geothermally-warmed water from abandoned mine sites
- Aberystwyth University, Wales, has received over £160,000 for their 'Miscanspeed' project, which is looking at ways to improve the breeding of high-yielding, resilient Miscanthus or elephant grass – grass varieties that are well-suited for biomass use – in the UK

As a result of the £4 million government funding, the Biomass Feedstocks Innovation Programme will enable greater supply of organic materials from domestic sources rather than using imported matter, with the 24 projects supporting rural economies across the UK, including providing jobs and encouraging investment.

The Biomass Feedstocks Innovation Programme is funded through the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy's £1 billion Net Zero Innovation Portfolio. This supports the Prime Minister's 10 Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution that sets out the approach government will take to build back better, support green jobs, and accelerate our path to net zero.

UK Net Zero Business Champion Andrew Griffith said:

> Innovation is crucial to achieve a low carbon future and it's fantastic that the UK is home to so much world-leading entrepreneurial talent that will help us meet our climate change commitments.
>
> Not only will this funding for biomass feedstocks help to achieve net zero by 2050, but it rightly rewards innovative people and businesses that are leading the way to a brighter, cleaner future.

The UK government intends to publish a new biomass strategy in 2022 which will review the amount of sustainable biomass available to the UK and how this could be best utilised across the economy to help achieve the

government’s net zero and wider environmental commitments.

Dr Matthew Brown, co-founder of Forest Creation Partners, said:

> This government funding will enable us to find more places to plant trees up and down the country, fighting climate change and supporting local nature and communities.
>
> We’re proud to be part of Britain’s global leadership in using data science to create a greener and better world.

Dr Sebastien Jubeau and Dr Douglas McKenzie founders of Phycofoods, trading as Phyco-F, said:

> At Phyco-F we are delighted to have been awarded a contract to evaluate the feasibility of producing microalgae at significant industrial quantities using CO2 and nutrients produced as by-products of whisky production.
>
> If this evaluation is promising we will work with our partners in the whisky industry to develop a plan for the UK’s first demonstration plant that will be operating before the end of 2023.

In November 2020, the government launched the brand Together For Our Planet which provides practical tools, resources and advice to support companies to take action on climate change, understand their emissions and develop a plan to tackle them.

Notes for editors

- the Biomass Feedstocks Innovation Programme is funded through the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy’s £1 billion Net Zero Innovation Portfolio, which aims to accelerate the commercialisation of innovative clean energy technologies and processes through the 2020s and 2030s
- this competition is being conducted in 2 phases, one building on the other, to produce innovations that address some of the barriers to feedstock production, helping to scale up the supply of UK sustainable biomass in the coming years
- in Phase 1, suppliers will receive full funding to produce robust project plans for innovations that, if implemented, would make a positive material contribution to UK feedstock supply
- in Phase 2, Phase 1 projects that successfully progress will enact their project plans, successfully constructing, operating, testing, refining and evaluating the innovations and having a clear commercialisation route for deployment

Read a full list of successful projects.

The besiegement in Daraa must stop

Thank you, Mr President, and thank you to today's briefers.

As we've heard, the situation in Daraa is severe. The UK remains deeply concerned about the situation in Daraa. 50,000 civilians have been besieged there since June.

Heavy bombardment has led to the displacement of 37,000 people and at least eight civilians have been killed.

Civilian infrastructure has been targeted by the Syrian regime, as it has throughout the conflict, with shelling rendering parts of the Daraa National Hospital inoperable.

And civilians continue to contend with shortages of fuel, cooking gas, water, and bread, as a result of the regime's behaviour.

The UK calls on all parties to ensure and expedite impartial humanitarian access through all modalities, including through partners not registered in Damascus.

In particular, we call for immediate humanitarian access to be granted to Daraa el-Balad where 5,000 to 6,000 families have been without access to humanitarian aid and support since 5 August.

We welcome the recent statement by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights addressing the appalling humanitarian situation, as well as the remarks today from the Special Envoy and Undersecretary Griffiths. We would welcome an update from the UN on progress on efforts to develop contingency plans and ensure a positive response to the request for an inter-agency convoy to Daraa.

All people of Daraa must have access to vital support services and food. The besiegement must stop.

We also remain concerned by the escalation of violence in the northwest of Syria, in violation of the ceasefire agreement. We are appalled at UNICEF reports that at least 45 children have been killed or injured since the beginning of July. We urge all parties to the conflict to respect the ceasefire and ensure the protection of civilians and humanitarian workers, in line with international humanitarian law.

And finally, on the humanitarian situation, there is a need to address water scarcity through an inclusive, multi-sector response plan coordinated at a 'Whole of Syria' level with support from the UN's Syria Regional Office in Amman.

We welcome recent progress in this regard, and look forward to consolidated

analysis and response planning.

On the political process, the UK urges implementation of the steps enshrined in UN Security Council Resolution 2254, namely: a nationwide ceasefire; unhindered aid access; the release of those arbitrarily detained; the establishment of conditions for safe refugee return; and free and fair elections pursuant to a new constitution. They represent the only way out of this conflict.

Special Envoy and Undersecretary General, you have our full support for your continued efforts to make progress on this file.

Thank you, Mr President.

A moment to inject new momentum to peace efforts in Yemen

Thank you, Mr President. Welcome, Undersecretary Griffiths, to your new capacity. I'd like to thank all our briefers today and I'd like to welcome the Secretary-General's appointment of Ambassador Grundberg as Special Envoy to Yemen. We look forward to working with him as we did with you, Undersecretary.

Ambassador Grundberg's appointment is a moment to inject new momentum to peace efforts in Yemen. We all know there is no military solution. Over a year and a half since it began, the Houthi offensive on Marib remains entrenched, and they resort to enlisting child soldiers. The Houthis must not replicate previous patterns of behaviour and should engage in good faith with the new Special Envoy on securing a political solution to the conflict.

As highlighted by our briefers, urgent steps are needed to address the economic crisis. The Yemeni Riyal in the South recently passed the symbolic mark of 1000 Riyals to the dollar for the first time. This decline is symptomatic of the health of the wider economy. As Martin said, dire humanitarian conditions are driven by the lack of purchasing power, not by the lack of the goods themselves. Yemenis cannot afford food or to pay for the trip to a hospital, let alone pay for the treatment once they get there. External financial support is needed but urgent reform is required by the Government of Yemen in order to facilitate this.

I'd like to recognise and thank US and Gulf donors for their recent additional contributions to the humanitarian appeal which have helped Yemen avoid famine, for now. However, a relatively well-funded humanitarian response will not be able to keep pace with a deteriorating economy forever.

We also continue to be concerned by the spread of COVID-19. It is only a

matter of time before the Delta variant reaches Yemen and compounds an already terrible situation. The authorities must acknowledge this impending risk, not suppress the collection of health data. They should encourage rather than impede the vaccination programme. In partnership with the World Bank and the World Health Organisation, the UK will fund the roll out costs for nearly 2 million doses of the Oxford Astra Zeneca vaccine allocated to Yemen via the COVAX facility.

This conflict has a disproportionate effect on the marginalised people of Yemen – particularly children, as we heard from the Executive Director – and each day peace is delayed they are being robbed of a future. The UK supports the important work of UNICEF, providing over $16 million so far this year, with a further payment of at least $6.5 million expected next month.

Thank you, Mr President.

New study to test third COVID-19 vaccine for people with weakened immune systems

- Participants will be given either Pfizer, Moderna or Novavax as a third dose of vaccine

- The government-funded study follows the results of the OCTAVE trial showing that 89% of people who are immunocompromised or immunosuppressed generate antibodies, and 60% generate a strong antibody response after 2 doses

A new clinical trial to determine whether a third dose of vaccine will improve the immune response for people who have weakened immune systems is launching in the UK.

The study, OCTAVE DUO, will offer people who are immunosuppressed or immunocompromised a Pfizer, Moderna or Novavax vaccine to determine whether this will give a stronger immune response than 2 doses.

The £2.2 million study will build on the OCTAVE trial, led by the University of Glasgow and co-ordinated by the University of Birmingham's Cancer Research UK Clinical Trials Unit.

The OCTAVE trial has published preliminary data today showing that 89% of people who are immunocompromised or immunosuppressed generate antibodies following vaccination, and 60% generated a strong antibody response following

2 doses of a vaccine.

However, 40% of people in these groups mounted a low, or undetectable, immune response after 2 doses, and the level of antibody response varies between the groups studied.

The level of antibodies required for protection from COVID-19 is still not known, and it is likely that T cells also play an important role in protecting people from the virus. These findings therefore do not provide a conclusive assessment of the protection vaccines offer people with weakened immune systems.

Up to 1,200 patients who are already involved in the OCTAVE study or those with other at-risk conditions involved in parallel studies will be recruited to the OCTAVE DUO trial.

The OCTAVE DUO study, co-funded by the government's Vaccines Taskforce and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and led by the University of Glasgow and University of Birmingham, will analyse in detail the immune response of this group to the vaccine and the durability of this protection. It will also use healthcare records to determine whether any participants are later diagnosed with COVID-19.

Initial results are expected later this year to inform the UK's COVID-19 vaccine deployment in these specific at-risk groups. The trial will follow the patients to mid-2022 and offer more detailed information at that stage about the immune responses that develop in these groups.

The government is carefully considering the findings of the OCTAVE trial and will also consider any further appropriate advice – including from the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) – for those who are immunosuppressed as part of regular reviews of the latest data and evidence on vaccine efficacy and effectiveness.

Health and Social Care Secretary Sajid Javid said:

> Vaccines have built a strong wall of defence in the UK and this is allowing most of us to learn to live safely with COVID-19.
>
> We know some people may get less protection from the vaccine than others, so we are planning for a booster programme in the autumn, prioritising those most at risk.
>
> This new study will play an important role in helping to shape the deployment of future vaccines doses for these specific at-risk groups.

A separate study by Public Health England (PHE) in July which looked at antibody response and vaccine effectiveness against symptomatic infection also showed that those who were immunocompromised had lower antibody responses.

It also found that protection from COVID (vaccine effectiveness against symptomatic disease) for those who are immunosuppressed of all ages after one dose was 4%, but after 2 doses it was 74%, providing similar protection to those who are not in an at-risk group. Again vaccine effectiveness may vary by specific condition and severity of that condition.

Patients included in the OCTAVE DUO study are people with:

- lymphoid malignancies
- immune mediated inflammatory diseases (including rheumatoid arthritis, psoriatic arthritis, vasculitis and inflammatory bowel disease)
- renal disease
- solid tumours (including breast and lung cancers)
- haematopoietic stem-cell transplantation
- hepatic and intestinal disease
- primary immune deficiency

Professor Iain McInnes, Head of the College of Medical, Veterinary and Life Sciences at the University of Glasgow who leads the OCTAVE and OCTAVE DUO studies, said:

> It is hugely important for us to urgently understand the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines in people who have immune-mediated inflammatory diseases, cancer, and diseases of the kidney or liver.
>
> Our first study to answer this question is the OCTAVE study which has shown that there is a group of patients who may not mount a sufficient immune response.
>
> We are pleased to now roll-out the OCTAVE DUO trial, to investigate the effects of a third dose on this particular group of patients who have shown an undetectable or low vaccine response. We hope to provide answers to this very important unanswered question.

Professor Pam Kearns, Director of the University of Birmingham’s Cancer Research UK Clinical Trials Unit which is co-ordinating both OCTAVE and OCTAVE DUO, said:

> The pandemic has been particularly concerning for millions of people in the UK who have conditions or long term illnesses which place them at greater risk of severe illness and death from COVID-19.
>
> Together with our preliminary findings from OCTAVE, this new study will be instrumental in helping inform how best to vaccinate patients with chronic conditions, and protect them from COVID-19 infection in the future.

Dr Rob Buckle, Chief Scientist of the Medical Research Council, part of UKRI, which co-funded the trial, said:

> While most of us are relieved to be vaccinated to protect ourselves and those around us, today's results investigating the outcome for people with immunosuppression will be of concern to the subset for whom the vaccine didn't trigger a large protective response.
>
> This new study of giving third jabs to this group is critical research which we hope will demonstrate a much-needed immunity boost or identify those who could benefit from other interventions.
>
> One of the real strengths of the UK's scientific response to the pandemic has been the way that we've assembled teams of experts to lead cutting-edge studies like this, to inform our vaccine roll-out and government decision-making in real time.

More than 89 million doses have been administered in the UK, including more than 47 million people with a first dose and more than 41 million people with a second dose.

Data from PHE shows COVID-19 vaccines are highly effective against hospitalisation from the Delta (B.1.617.2) variant, the dominant strain in the UK. The analysis shows that, across all adults, the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine is 96% effective and the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine is 92% effective against hospitalisation after 2 doses.

COVID-19 vaccines have saved around 95,200 lives and prevented 82,100 hospitalisations and 23.9 million infections in England alone, the latest data from PHE and Cambridge University shows.

Further advice on vaccination, including on whether a third dose should be given to the immunocompromised, is not dependent on the OCTAVE DUO, the results of which are expected later this year.

Recruitment to the OCTAVE DUO study will be only from the cohort of people involved in the initial OCTAVE study, and similar studies.

Hospital study sites that recruited patients for OCTAVE:

- QEH Birmingham
- Glasgow
- St James's Leeds
- Imperial London (Hammersmith)
- Oxford
- Addenbrooke's
- Southampton
- King's College London
- Sheffield
- St George's London
- Freeman Hospital