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Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Food and the Environment

SEALS POLICY – POLICY CONSEQUENCES OF RECENT RESEARCH FINDINGS ON THE CAUSES OF SPIRAL SEAL MORTALITIES (OR “CORKSCREW SEALS”)

Purpose

1. To inform Scottish Ministers about the results of recent research on spiral seal mortalities and the consequences for seals policy.

Priority

2. Immediate. **The report will be published on Tuesday 3 February 2015 in order to allow developers to adjust their proposals in light of its findings.**

Background

3. In the period 2009-2014 (to October 2014), 86 seal carcasses (38 harbour/common seals and 48 grey seals) were found in Scotland (the majority in the Firths of Forth and Tay) all with unusual spiral injuries ('corkscrew seals') the cause of which was unknown. Such injuries were also observed elsewhere in the UK and in Europe and North America. In response to this, Scottish Government commissioned the Sea Mammal Research Unit (SMRU) at St Andrews University to investigate the possible causes. Until late in 2014, the investigation suggested that certain types of ship propellers might be responsible for the injuries and, indeed, scale model tests appeared to confirm this. As a result, SMRU were funded to tag a number of grey seals in the Forth to examine their potential interactions with shipping and, if possible, discover if any suffered the recorded spiral injuries as a result.

4. It was during this tagging work that a number of examples of juvenile grey seals with typical spiral injuries were found but, unexpectedly, these were seen and recorded to be the result of **adult grey seal predation**. A single grey seal was observed killing and partially eating 5 juveniles (and a total of between 11 and 14 juveniles were subsequently noted dead) over a number of days during December 2014, all with distinctive spiral injuries. A recently published journal article from Germany highlighted a similar case this time involving adult grey seal predation of harbour (or common) seals. **This research provides strong evidence that grey seal predation rather than ship propellers is likely to be the main cause of the spiral seal mortalities.** It does not necessarily mean that ship propellers are completely eliminated from the possible causes but are now very unlikely. On 16 January 2015 SMRU provided a draft report on the results of their research and Marine Scotland called an urgent meeting with UK regulators and UK statutory nature conservation bodies (SNCBs) to discuss the consequences of this unexpected new information for seals policy and for wider marine planning activities.

UK Meeting

5. On 29 January 2015 the UK regulators and SNCBs met to discuss the implications of the research results. **They agreed that the final research report, which will be available at the start of next week, should be published on 3 February 2015** in order to inform developers, shipping and ports and NGOs of this important new information as soon as possible. **The SNCBs agreed to revise their existing advice on the spiral seals issue** to reflect the new findings and publish this in the near future.

Communications

6. The early publication of this report and its consequences for developers will require careful handling. A draft news release (attached) has been compiled in consultation with Communications Greener colleagues.

Recommendation

7. That you note this information and agree the draft news release.

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 30 January 2015

Copy List:	For Action	For Comments	For Information		
			Portfolio Interest	Constit Interest	General Awareness
Minister for Environment and Climate change			X		

DG Enterprise and Environment
 Linda Rosborough: Director, Marine Scotland
 Greener Communications
 David Palmer: Marine Planning & Policy
 David Mallon: Marine Environment
 Jim McKie, Marine Licensing
 Mike Bland, Marine Licensing
 Phil Gilmour, Marine Renewables
 Anna Donald, Marine Planning
 Colin Moffat: Marine Scotland Science
 Ian Davies, Marine Scotland Science
 Chris Wilcock, Ports and Harbours
 Val Fergusson, Ports and Harbours
 Amanda Chisholm, SEA team
 Ian Vickerstaff, SGLD
 [Redacted] Marine Environment