

## Briefing note

# Petition P-06-1333 Stop Natural Resources Wales from tree felling that threatens red squirrel survival

### Overview

Red Squirrels are part of our native wildlife. Populations have suffered significant declines because of competition with Grey Squirrels and the spread of squirrelpox virus. They have been assessed as Endangered in Wales, and GB.

Natural Resources Wales (NRW) is a member of the Wales Squirrel Forum which coordinates, supports and provides advice on the implementation of actions of the [Red Squirrel Conservation Plan for Wales \(RSCPW\)](#) and the [Grey Squirrel Management Action Plan \(GSMAP\)](#).

Red Squirrels are present in forests that NRW manages and in private woodlands. There are three key Red Squirrel populations in Wales in Anglesey, Clocaenog Forest and Mid-Wales. We are working with partners in these strongholds to help deliver the RSCPW objectives and provide financial and staff support to Red Squirrel conservation projects.

To thrive, Red Squirrels need the absence of Grey Squirrels, more woodland habitat, and sustainable forest management. We have contributed funds to the UK Squirrel Accord (UKSA) whose work includes the development of the Grey Squirrel fertility control research. We provide ongoing contracts for Grey Squirrel control in the NE Wales Red Squirrel focal area and provide funds for this work in mid-Wales.

### Red Squirrel Conservation

Red Squirrel populations are threatened by competition with the non-native Grey Squirrel which leads to a reduction in breeding success, followed by population decline and ultimately extinction. This population decline is accelerated by the spread of the highly infectious squirrelpox virus (SQPV). Grey Squirrels are carriers of the virus, and it causes high mortality in Red Squirrel populations.

Under the RSCPW the three main populations in Wales are recognised as 'focal sites' for conservation. Each focal site has a buffer area and for Anglesey this covers parts of North-West Gwynedd where Red Squirrels have become re-established following the successful eradication of Grey Squirrels on Anglesey and subsequent spread of Red Squirrels.

The RSCPW sets out targets and actions for Red Squirrel recovery in Wales and its implementation is led by the Wales Squirrel Forum (WSF). The WSF is chaired by [BASC](#) and NRW is the secretariat. Other members include Welsh Government, Clocaenog Red

Squirrels Trust, Mid Wales Red Squirrel Project, Red Squirrels Trust Wales, Countryside Alliance, UK Squirrel Accord, Coed Cymru, Confor, Tilhill, WTW and Mid Wales and the Marches Assessment Centre (land-based training provider).

During a review and refresh of the conservation plan in 2018 it was identified that Red Squirrel range had expanded since 2005 and the primary objective of maintaining breeding populations at all focal sites had been achieved. A secondary objective, to maintain the current distribution of Red Squirrels within Wales, was probably not achieved as there were few records of Red Squirrels at sites outside the focal areas where they had previously been recorded.

The primary action for Red Squirrel conservation is the management of Grey Squirrel populations to prevent competition and the spread of disease. Grey Squirrel management is usually undertaken by trapping and humane despatch. Research by [APHA](#), commissioned by UK Squirrel Accord, is underway into fertility control (immunocontraception) for Grey Squirrels. The five-year Research and Development phase is due to be completed in January 2024.

Woodland management is also important for Red Squirrels to ensure sufficient trees providing food are present and good arboreal connectivity.

Evidence from Ireland and Scotland indicates that the presence of Pine Martens is associated with a reduction in Grey Squirrel populations and increases in Red Squirrels. The mechanism for this is not fully understood.

## Legal position

Red Squirrels are protected under schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act. Offences include: Intentional taking, killing or injuring; Intentionally / recklessly damaging or destroying its place of shelter / protection; or Intentionally / recklessly disturbing it whilst occupying its place of shelter / protection.

Licences can be issued for various purposes including scientific or educational, conservation, preventing the spread of disease and preserving public health or public safety. There is also a defence within the Act whereby an offence will not have been committed if it is the 'incidental result of a lawful operation and could not reasonably have been avoided'.

## NRW's role

As the Land Manager of the Welsh Government Woodland Estate (WGWE), which includes 40% of the total Welsh forest resource, NRW manages forests where Red Squirrels are present including on Anglesey, Clocaenog and Tywi Forest.

We also support Red Squirrel populations in how we regulate felling and woodland creation, and how we provide advice, evidence and support for partners.

NRW is supporting the Magical Mammals project which is working to safeguard Red Squirrel populations in Anglesey, Gwynedd and Clocaenog. The project is funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and run by the Red Squirrels Trust Wales (RSTW) and Clocaenog Red Squirrels Trust (CRST). NRW is providing annual match funding and staff support over the course of the 5-year project.

NRW is the licencing Authority for licences issued under the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

NRW is responsible for issuing felling licences under the Forestry Act 1967 (as amended). Under the Agriculture (Wales) Act 2023 NRW will have the power to add environmental conditions to felling licences. We are currently working with external stakeholders and Welsh Government colleagues to develop these environmental conditions, which includes conditions for safeguarding Red Squirrels.

NRW led on the development and revision of the [RSCPW](#), working with members of the Wales Squirrel Forum. The plan identifies actions for Red Squirrel conservation including habitat management, Grey Squirrel control and disease risk.

NRW worked with Welsh Government in the development of the [GSMAP](#), which seeks to address both the impacts on Red Squirrels and trees.

NRW is a signatory to the UK Squirrel Accord which aims to secure and expand UK Red Squirrel populations beyond current thresholds and ensure UK woodlands flourish and deliver multiple benefits for future generations of wildlife and people. The accord has funded research into immunocontraception to tackle the Grey Squirrel population.

NRW lets and manages contracts for Grey Squirrel control on the WGWE at Clocaenog Forest and Tywi in mid-Wales.

## How we manage our woodlands

All our forests are managed to the UK Forestry Standard which sets out best practice. This includes complying with legislation to protect wildlife. In addition, our forests are independently audited and certified as sustainably managed against the UK Woodland Assurance Standard.

The way in which we manage the land in our care where Red Squirrels are present is set out in *Red Squirrel Guidance for Forest Management on the NRW Managed Estate* which is part of our Land Management Manual. This sets out how our Forest Resource Plans should consider Red Squirrels in the management planning and harvesting of our forests.

We aim to maintain and/or increase Low Impact Silvicultural Systems/Continuous Cover Forestry (LISS/CCF) where forest stability can be maintained to allow arboreal connectivity (corridors) and continuity of future forestry structure to enhance multi-age and diversity.

We carry out species survey before we undertake any work in the forest. Our ecologists check for the presence of protected species, including Red Squirrel and Pine Marten. If evidence of protected species is found we put in mitigation, this could mean an exclusion zone or delaying the work until the species has moved.

Red Squirrels are difficult to survey and monitor due to their secretive nature and low densities in some forests. NRW commissioned research in 2022 to identify a methodology for assessing Red Squirrel population trends on Anglesey. Following a tendering exercise, this work was completed by a consortium between Bangor University and Craig Shuttleworth<sup>1</sup>. The monitoring technique uses observations of Red Squirrels on cameras as an index of population size. Additional work is underway to identify a suitable methodology in low-density populations of upland conifer sites such as Clocaenog and Tywi Forest.

We minimise impacts on Red Squirrels during harvesting operations by not undertaking works where Red Squirrels are present during the period between 1 February and 30 September when there may be dependant young in dreys (nests). When planning harvesting operations, we also aim to maintain an arboreal corridor through or around the edge of the coupe.

We hope the information provides the information you need on the topics raised in the petitioner's letter.

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<sup>1</sup> Shannon G, Valle S & Shuttleworth CM. 2022. Using remote activated cameras to estimate relative abundance and habitat preference of red squirrels (*Sciurus vulgaris*). NRW Evidence Report Series. Report No: 672. 40pp.