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Dear Claire,

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) impacting seabirds in Scotland

A number of developers have been in contact with RSPB Scotland expressing their concerns at the HPAI outbreak in Scotland and asking whether there is anything they can do to help matters. We appreciate their concern, the uncertainty this might generate and would like to take this opportunity to provide you with a little more information about the outbreak and what we consider can be done to help. We would be grateful if you could circulate this letter to any interested Scottish Renewables members.

HPAI originated in poultry in East Asia in the late 1990s. It subsequently passed into wild birds and has spread across the world. As you are no doubt aware, the 2021/22 outbreak is causing unprecedented devastation to seabirds across Scotland. Numbers of reported great skua mortalities are into the thousands, with key colonies such as those in the Northern Isles and at Handa and St Kilda recording mortalities as high as 85%. This is particularly significant as Scotland hosts around 60% of the world breeding population of this species. Northern gannet, of which Scotland hosts around half of the world population, is also heavily impacted with mortality well into the thousands. At the Bass Rock in the Firth of Forth, the largest gannet colony in the world, impacts are severe but not yet fully quantified, nest failure has been estimated at around 95%. Elsewhere numbers of common guillemot mortalities are also growing, and the disease has further been identified in puffin, black-legged kittiwake, arctic tern, and eider ducks. Seabirds and wildfowl are the worst affected species to date but over 50 wild bird species so far have tested positive for HPAI in Scotland.

Scotland is internationally important for its seabirds. Yet an index of eleven breeding seabirds published by NatureScot indicates that numbers fell by 49% between 1986

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The RSPB is part of BirdLife International, a Partnership of conservation organisations working to give nature a home around the world.

and 2019, before HPAI impacts took hold. The main reasons for these changes include climate change impacts on marine food-chains, competition with fisheries for prey fish, by-catch in fishing gear and invasive non-native species on islands. Seabirds are especially susceptible to anthropogenic pressures that kill adult birds, as they are long lived, take time to reach breeding maturity and have low reproductive rates. Breeding pairs will only produce small numbers of chicks per year. A population subject to an increase in adult mortality is often not able to replenish numbers fast enough to prevent long-term population declines. An event like HPAI greatly increases their vulnerability to existing and additional pressures, including those pertaining to marine renewables.

The Scottish Government is now starting to acknowledge that HPAI is a major threat to wildlife. In the first step to developing a national response plan for HPAI in wild birds, NatureScot is setting up a dedicated Task Force. This will follow [UN recommendations](#) on HPAI in wild birds, will share expertise and co-ordinate action to tackle the outbreak. It will also plan for effective response to potential future outbreaks. We welcome this progress and would encourage other governments and sectors to do the same.

Long-term, we consider the solution to managing the impact of HPAI lies in building resilience in Scotland's seabird colonies through ecosystem and species recovery action and improving the state of our seas. The forthcoming Scottish Biodiversity Strategy and Seabird Conservation Strategy need to be ambitious and deliver real action and change at pace on the ground. Priority recovery and conservation measures for seabirds include further investment into coordinated research to understand HPAI and its implications for seabirds, closure of the industrial sandeel fishery in UK waters, a national programme of island restoration and biosecurity for seabird islands affected by non-native mammals, a lasting island biosecurity legacy across the UK archipelago following on from the [Biosecurity for LIFE](#) project led by the RSPB, and working with the fishing industry to reduce seabird deaths from by-catch in fishing gear. You will note that some of these actions overlap with those being promoted as part of strategic compensation initiatives and we are happy to discuss them in more detail with you.

Finally, and importantly, we need to guarantee that the necessary development of marine renewables minimises further harm to nature and only happens in parallel with measures that restore nature at equal scale and pace. Given climate change impacts across the living world, and the imperative to achieve both net zero and energy security, the RSPB recognises the urgency with which renewables must be deployed. To provide joint wins for climate and biodiversity, we urge a Nature Positive approach that embeds industry and government led action to restore resilient, thriving seas in our transition to renewable energy. We have participated in many useful discussions with developers so far and look forward to this continuing as Scotwind developments progress.

Yours sincerely



Anne McCall

Director, RSPB Scotland