

Lough Erne Invasive Species Group Established

An inter-agency strategic response to the previously unseen levels of aquatic weed-growth on Lough Erne has been initiated. Called the Lough Erne Invasive Species Group (LEISG) the group is a sub-group of the Lough Erne Management Consultative Committee which is facilitated by Fermanagh District Council. Members of the group include Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), Waterways Ireland, Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) Inland Fisheries, Destination Fermanagh and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

A specific threat has been identified in an invasive weed first identified in Lough Erne a number of years ago but which spread dramatically in 2010. Commonly called 'Nuttall's Pondweed', the weed has survived the winter period in significant quantities and the potential for further growth has implications for recreation and tourism in Co Fermanagh for which a multi-agency response is warranted.

The inter-agency group has gathered information about Nuttall's Pondweed and is developing appropriate management strategies which will be implemented by the relevant agencies in a co-ordinated manner. Weed-cutting and harvesting has been identified as the most appropriate control measure available at present. In the event that intervention is required in 2011, weed-cutting will be undertaken by Waterways Ireland within the marked navigation channels at the appropriate time in the growth cycle of Nuttall's Pondweed. In addition a trial using "trailing cutting knives" will take place in April to ascertain if this technique increases the effectiveness of controlling this particular weed.

The focus of Waterways Ireland's weed cutting will be primarily to keep the main channel and then access to the public amenities open. Waterways Ireland will also be harvesting the weed and sending it for composting to prevent further spread.

Upper Lough Erne is a European Natura 2000 designated site and therefore control measures must not undermine the conservation objectives of the area.

Management of the water levels is also seen to have a role in weed management as Nuttall's Pondweed grows in up to 3 metres of water. The review of water level control on the Erne system, as recommended in the July 2010 Flooding Taskforce report, will take into account flood risk, recreational and environmental interests. LEISG will have an opportunity to input into the review.

The group is advising individuals, groups or private commercial interests wishing to undertake weed-cutting on Lough Erne to contact NIEA directly via the contact details at www.nidirect.gov.uk to obtain permission.

For more information on Invasive Species see <http://www.invasivespeciesireland.com>.

