

Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs

Wednesday, May 17th 2017

Water users urged to take precautions due to outbreak of Crayfish Plague on River Suir between Clonmel and Carrick-on-Suir

All water users are being urged to take precautions after confirmation of an outbreak of Crayfish Plague on the River Suir between Clonmel and Carrick-on-Suir. It comes after large numbers of dead freshwater crayfish were reported on the river earlier this month; DNA analysis has now confirmed that the cause of death was crayfish plague.

This worrying situation is being investigated by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) of the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI), the Marine Institute, and Tipperary County Council.

The kill only impacted White-clawed Crayfish and other freshwater animals are not affected. This is a characteristic feature of the disease which only infects species of crayfish but causes 100% mortality.

This is the second confirmed outbreak of the disease in Ireland following one in Co Cavan in 2015. There is no indication of how the disease reached the Suir although a link to the Cavan outbreak is considered unlikely as the disease there appears to have run its course. This outbreak on the River Suir is of great concern as the stretch of river affected is popular with anglers and canoeists.

NPWS, IFI and Tipperary County Council are urging all users of the river to implement routine cleaning and drying of their equipment once they leave the river and before using it again. This is especially important as it is known that the crayfish plague organism can be carried on wet equipment to new sites. Containment of the outbreak is essential to prevent spread to other as yet unaffected populations in Ireland.

Further spread of the disease along the Suir is highly likely now that it is present. All agencies will be working to contain the outbreak to this river. Given the experience of outbreaks elsewhere, a total kill of the population is expected which will have major consequences for the ecology of the river. Crayfish are very common in the Suir and are important in maintaining its ecology.

Anyone using the river is being urged to observe the Check, Clean and Dry protocol. All wet gear should be checked for any silt or mud, plant material or animals. It then should be cleaned and finally dried. Disinfectant or hot water (over 40C) should be used to clean all equipment followed by a 24hr drying period should be adopted as standard practice in all freshwaters. Drying is especially important, including removing of any water from inside a boat and disposing of it on grass. A drying period of at least 24 hours is needed to ensure that a boat is clear of infectious organism.

People are also asked to alert the authorities of any mass mortalities of crayfish, sightings of unusual crayfish (e.g. red claws, large size).

The White-clawed Crayfish is a globally threatened species and Ireland holds one of the largest surviving population. It is the only freshwater crayfish species found in Ireland and is present in lakes, rivers and streams over much of the island. Throughout its European range, this species has been decimated by the impact of Crayfish Plague which spread to Europe with the introduction of North American species of crayfish. Until 2015, Ireland was considered free of the disease and it remains the only European country without any established non-native crayfish species.

Many American crayfish species are resistant to Crayfish Plague, but can act as carriers of the disease which is rapidly fatal when passed to the White-clawed Crayfish. The combined impact of the introduced crayfish species (which may out-compete the smaller native crayfish) and Crayfish Plague have completely eliminated the White-clawed Crayfish from much of its European range, leaving Ireland as the last stronghold of the species. The species is protected under Irish Law and the EU Habitats Directive. It is illegal to introduce any non-native species of crayfish to Ireland.

If Crayfish Plague becomes established there is a high probability that the White-clawed Crayfish will be eliminated from much of the island. Furthermore, if non-native crayfish are found to be established in Ireland, this could have a severe impact on habitats (e.g. destabilising canal and river banks by burrowing) and other freshwater species, such as salmon and trout fisheries. However there is no evidence to date that non-native freshwater crayfish have been introduced to Ireland.

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

For further information contact Brian Nelson (087 967 9937; brian.nelson@ahg.gov.ie) or Ciaran O’Keeffe (087 2646416) ciaran.okeeffe@ahg.gov.ie

Anyone who sees any dead or dying crayfish should report this to National Parks and Wildlife Service, Inland Fisheries Ireland, Tipperary County Council or Colette O’Flynn at the National Biodiversity Data Centre, Waterford (email: coflynn@biodiversityireland.ie)

Members of the public who suspect they have seen a non-native species of crayfish are asked to take a picture of it showing the underside of the claws and submit this through this web page <http://records.biodiversityireland.ie/record/invasives> or direct to Colette O’Flynn (email: coflynn@biodiversityireland.ie) Phone: 051 306248

Further information:

White-clawed Crayfish *Austropotamobius pallipes*. This occurs throughout Ireland mainly but not exclusively in areas of limestone geology. It lives in a very broad range of freshwater

from tiny streams and ditches to many small, medium and large lakes. The species is a generalist feeder and it in turn is a significant prey item of the Otter.

Crayfish Plague is caused by a fungus-like organism *Aphanomyces astaci* which is of North American origin but now occurs throughout Europe. The Crayfish Plague organism (technically an Oomycete and often called water moulds) normally grows on the outer shell of crayfish and as North American crayfish are generally immune to it, as they can prevent any infection reaching their body tissues. However, when the water mould infects White-clawed and other European crayfish, it rapidly, and fatally, spreads into the body tissues. Infected animals become distressed and behave abnormally and may survive several weeks before dying.

Non-indigenous Crayfish. These are any species which are not native to the country. Many crayfish species have been moved within Europe and into Europe from North America and Australia. The most significant of these is the North American Signal Crayfish *Pacifastacus leniusculus* which is one of the main carriers of Crayfish Plague. This species is much larger than the White-clawed Crayfish and with distinctive red coloration on the underside of the claws.

Background information on the native and non-native crayfish and the crayfish plague is available to view and print from these web pages:

<http://www.biodiversityireland.ie/crayfish-plague-2017>

http://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/publications/pdf/Crayfish_leaflet.pdf

Pictures of White-clawed Crayfish and Signal Crayfish are available from Colette O'Flynn at the National Biodiversity Data Centre

Information on the Check, Clean, Dry protocol is available from the GB Non-native Species Secretariat web site <http://www.nonnativespecies.org/checkcleandry/>