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Assessment of the risk to biodiversity, animal welfare and animal health from release, rearing and import of common pheasants and grey partridges in Norway

The Norwegian Environment Agency and the Norwegian Food Safety Authority refer to the collaboration agreement with the Scientific Committee for Food and Environment (VKM). The Norwegian Environment Agency and the Norwegian Food Safety Authority hereby request VKM to assess the risk to biodiversity, animal welfare and animal health from import, rearing and release of common pheasants (*Phasianus colchicus*) and grey partridges (*Perdix perdix*) in Norway. We also request VKM to assess if there are measures that can reduce the risk of negative consequences.

Background

For several years, farmed pheasants and partridges have been imported to Norway for release in to the wild. In addition, there has also been an extensive release of birds farmed in Norway. The purpose of the release has been for hunting and for training and testing of hunting dogs. The released birds appear to have low survival in the wild, and new releases have therefore been made every year. The Animal Welfare Act states that "animals have intrinsic value regardless of the usefulness they may have for humans" and that "animals must be treated well and be protected against the danger of unnecessary stress and strain" (§ 3).

Prior to 2020, according to the regulations on keeping wildlife in captivity, farming of wildlife, and hunting on released game, pheasants and partridges could be bred without a legal permission. You could also release farmed game in the wild, in areas where the species had wild living populations. As of April 1, 2020, keeping of all wild species requires a permit in accordance with new wildlife regulations. In addition, as of January 1, 2016, a permit is required for the import and release of pheasants and partridges under the Regulation on alien organisms. Animal health requirements for the keeping of pheasants and partridges, and for domestic transfer of these species, are given in Regulations of 18 November 1994 No. 1020 on the certification of poultry holdings.

No permit applications for release of pheasants and partridges were submitted before 2018. Between 2018 and 2020, permissions were granted for the release of approximately 5,000 pheasants and 3,000 partridges annually. The Norwegian Environment Agency granted permits for release in

2018, 2019 and 2020. The decisions were appealed by BirdLife Norway and the animal protection organization NOAH.

In 2021, all applications for release of pheasants and partridges in Norway were rejected. The reasons for rejecting the applications were the risk of negative impacts on biodiversity and violations of the Animal Welfare Act. The decisions were appealed by the applicants. The Ministry of Climate and the Environment (KLD) processed the cases and decided to grant the appeals and issue permits for the release. After assessing the appeals, KLD pointed out that there is a need for additional knowledge about the impacts on biodiversity and animal welfare when releasing pheasants and partridges into the wild.

KLD and the Ministry of Agriculture and Food (LMD), have asked the Norwegian Environment Agency and the Norwegian Food Safety Authority to commission an assessment from the Scientific Committee for Food and Environment (VKM) of the risk of negative consequences for biodiversity, animal health and animal welfare when releasing pheasants and partridges for training and testing of bird dogs, as well as for import and rearing of these species.

In 2019, LMD commissioned the Norwegian Food Safety Authority to prepare a proposal for new regulations to control this activity, possibly through amendments to temporary regulations prohibiting hunting on pen-raised released birds (FOR- 100-08-24-761). The reason for the assignment was that LMD wanted an evaluation of whether the practice of training bird dogs on released pen-raised birds should be regulated based on animal welfare considerations.

Impact on biodiversity after release

Biological diversity, as defined in the Biodiversity Act § 3 letter c, is the diversity of ecosystems, species and genetic variations within the species, and the ecological connections between these components. The risk of negative consequences for biological diversity must be included in the assessment, including potential impact on ecosystems and other species, and risks associated with any hitchhiking species.

Some of the known effects of releasing pen-raised birds in the wild are increased competition, predation and disease, due to occurrence in higher densities than would otherwise occur and thereby altering the ecological factors for survival.

The purpose of the Regulation on alien organisms is to prevent the introduction, release and spread of alien organisms that cause, or may cause, negative consequences for biodiversity in Norway. Over the past few years, there has been increasing attention directed towards the possible threats to biodiversity posed by alien organisms, and it is therefore necessary to reassess previous practices of releasing birds for hunting and bird dog training. To protect Norwegian flora and fauna, there has been a restrictive policy regarding introduction and release of species, especially those with the potential to survive in Norwegian nature. Climate change may cause more alien organisms to thrive under Norwegian conditions, thus causing an additional threat.

Pheasant is considered an alien species in Norway. It is native in the Caucasus and eastward in large parts of Asia. Since the end of the 19th century, pheasants have been released in Norway for hunting purposes. There are some local populations after releases around the Oslo Fjord, on Jæren, around

Lake Mjøsa and a few other scattered areas. These populations coincide with the areas where repeated releases have occurred. They are most likely not self-recruiting, but dependent on repeated releases of birds to persist over time.

Partridge occurred naturally in Norway until the 1940s, did most likely disappear due to climatic reasons and modern agriculture. The species is not defined as an alien species in Norway, but because it no longer occurs naturally, the Regulation on alien organisms apply to its release. A release permit is required for species with no natural occurrence in a district. The Regulation is in place to prevent negative impacts on biodiversity from the introduction and release of alien organisms, not already present in the district.

When referring to organisms "which do not occur naturally in the district" in the Biodiversity Act, it includes both species, subspecies and populations not found in a district as well as subspecies, species and populations that occur in the district because they have been released there. A release must therefore be justified in accordance with permits granted by a public authority and refer to conditions to prevent damage to biodiversity. The same considerations must be made with regards to both importing and releasing organisms.

There is a need for a scientific assessment of the risk of negative consequences for biological diversity associated with the import and release of pheasants and partridges.

Animal welfare related to release

The association of bird dog clubs has developed guidelines for the release of birds (see Appendix). We are aware that in certain cases, the birds have been fed in the terrain for some time after the release.

The Animal Welfare Act (DVL) § 28 states that "Animals from animal holdings can only be released into the wild given that the animal has good opportunities to adapt and survive in the new environment." This requires that the birds must be of a species able to adapt to a life in the wild, and that they have been prepared for life in the wild prior to the release. There is a ban on releasing animals that are unlikely to be able to adapt a life in the wild.

According to DVL § 14, it is forbidden to leave animals in a helpless state.

The birds must therefore be able to find natural shelter, food and water at the site where they are released. They must be robust and mature enough to have a good chance of surviving in the environment in which they are released. The birds must have access to an acceptable living environment during all seasons after release, not only in the first period. If the birds to a limited degree are able to find food, it will be a prerequisite that they must be fed to comply with § 14. This will, however, be in conflict with the wording of § 28 of the Animal Welfare Act, as they do not have good chances of survival without human intervention.

Animal welfare related to keeping and transporting pheasants and partridges

Our knowledge of how pheasants and partridges are kept is limited and based on inspections of one pheasant farm facility, and one partridge farm facility. These are only two examples of how this activity is carried out. There is also a written statement describing the activity from a breeder of pheasants and partridges. To our knowledge, pheasants and partridges are raised from parent

animals in Norway, and some are imported as chickens from Sweden. Fertilized eggs of pheasants and partridges are also imported. Resale of farmed birds to bird dog clubs in other parts of the country does also occur to some extent.

In the pheasant farm inspected by the Norwegian Food Safety Authority, the birds are kept in closed houses in enclosures after hatching, and after a few weeks they are released into the enclosures. A few weeks later, they are released into a large flying aviary with simple mesh walls and mesh roofs. The chickens are kept in the aviary until they are 10 - 12 weeks old, when they are released into the terrain. The birds are released from the end of July and until the end of August at the latest. Using the birds for training of hunting dogs is not allowed until at least 20 days after they have been released. In their guidelines, the association of bird dog clubs have also included transport requirements for the birds.

In the partridge farm inspected by the Norwegian Food Safety Authority, chicks are received when they are 8 weeks old. The birds are put into a barn with free access to a fenced outdoor area. The birds have two weeks to adapt to the new location before the fence is opened out into the terrain. The birds are released in two batches. They are allowed time to settle in the terrain for at least 20 days before the dog training starts. After release, they can seek shelter in bushes and forests in the edge zones around the fence on the property. The birds are released in July and August.

See Appendix for a full summary of the inspections.

Animal health considerations related to import, keeping, release and national movement of pheasants and partridges

Norway has largely been spared the most serious infectious diseases affecting poultry and other birds. In 2020 and 2021, there were outbreaks of bird flu (H5N1), which led to a curfew for poultry and other captive birds, and a hunting ban in some municipalities. We are also aware that there have been outbreaks of bird flu in pheasant farms in Denmark and the United Kingdom. An outbreak of diseases may have substantial consequences for biodiversity, poultry producers, the egg and poultry industry, and society in general.

Animal health requirements for the keeping of pheasants and partridges, and for the domestic transport of these, are given in Regulations of 18 November 1994 no. 1020 on the certification of poultry holdings. These regulations will be replaced by new animal health regulations that will come into force at some point during the spring 2022. Provisions on animal health requirements for keeping and domestic transport of pheasants and partridges, will then be found in the Terrestrial Animal Traceability Regulations and the Terrestrial Animal Transfer Regulations. These regulations contain provisions intended to limit the risk of spreading diseases in, among other things, poultry stocks during keeping and domestic transport.

Terms of reference

The Norwegian Environment Agency and the Norwegian Food Safety Authority request VKM to assess the risk of negative consequences on biodiversity, animal welfare and animal health from the import, breeding, transfer and release of pheasants and partridges in Norway.

Impact on biodiversity after release

We request VKM to:

- Assess the risk of negative consequences for biological diversity from releasing farmed pheasants and partridges.
- Assess whether there are other activities in connection with the release that can have negative effects on biodiversity. For example, extensive feeding.
- Describe the species' possibility of survival in Norwegian fauna without repeated releases.
- Identify which species in Norway have similar ecological niches as pheasants and partridges, and assess whether they can be negatively affected by the release.
- Identify and evaluate possible risk-reducing measures.

We request that the risk of negative consequences for biological diversity be assessed from a 50-year perspective.

Animal welfare related to the release of pheasants and partridges

We request VKM to:

- Describe the natural habitat requirements of pheasants and partridges. To what extent are such habitats present in Norway?
- Describe mortality in a natural habitat without hunting, feeding or other artificial influences.
- Assess differences in mortality for pen-raised pheasants and partridges and wild-born pheasants and partridges.
- Describe possible causes of increased mortality for released pen-raised pheasants and partridges.
- Describe the potential strains the released birds are exposed to.
- Assess the effects of hunting training on the birds' welfare
- If applicable, describe risk-reducing measures that may increase the degree of survival for the birds.

Animal welfare related to rearing and transport of pheasants and partridges

We request VKM to:

- Describe the welfare needs of pheasants and partridges in the rearing phase.
- Describe which environmental factors that are important for animal welfare in the rearing phase, both indoors and outdoors.
- Describe measures that can improve animal welfare when keeping pheasants and partridges.
- Assess the strain associated with transport of pheasants and partridges.

Animal health related to release, rearing, import and transport of pheasants and partridges

We request VKM to:

- Assess the probability of introduction of infectious agents when importing pheasants and partridges from Sweden into Norway.
- Assess the risk of spreading infection between different captive flocks of pheasants / partridges in Norway, especially related to the transfer of live animals and eggs for hatching between captive flocks.
- Assess the risk of captive flocks of pheasants / partridges spreading disease to wild birds, especially when the animals are released into the wild.

Legal background:

Act of 19 June 2009 no. 97 on animal welfare (Animal Welfare Act): §§ 3, 14 22, 23, 24 and 28

Act of 19 December 2003 no. 124 on food production and food safety, etc. (Food Act)

Act of 19 June 2009 no. 100 on the management of nature's diversity (Nature Diversity Act)

Regulation 19 June 2015 no. 716 on alien organisms

Regulations of 22 June 2020 no. 2122 on damage felling, dead game and use of game in farming, research and zoos (Game Regulations)

Regulations of 28 December 2011 no. 1616 on trade in live poultry and hatching eggs in the EEA

Regulations of 18 November 1994 no. 1020 on certification of poultry enterprises.

Regulations of 24 August 1990 no. 761 on a temporary ban on hunting exposed birds

Terms:

The risk assessment report must be written in English with a Norwegian summary. The report is published in dialogue with the Norwegian Environment Agency and the Norwegian Food Safety Authority. We also refer to the collaboration agreements.

The deadline for submission of the report is 31 November 2022. A division of the risk assessment into several phases can be considered.

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