

13th November, 2020.

Mr Malcom Noonan
Minister of State
Department of Heritage and Electoral
Reform



Re: Pheasant shooting season.

Dear Minister,

I refer to your recent statements in the Seanad and an email from your Official in the NPWS, Mr John Fitzgerald dated 12th inst., issued presumably on your behalf and with your authority.

Mr Fitzgerald's email was in response to our earlier email in which we confirmed our approach to the Covid Level 5 restrictions insofar as they have been stated to apply to pheasant shooting which is banned during the period of those restrictions. Furthermore, and in particular, we had confirmed the commitment of our members to comply with and support the restrictions as a necessary reasonable inconvenience to our game shooting clubs and members. Unlike some others, we did not seek to in any way undermine or hinder the intended objectives of the restrictions and made no demands of you or your Department or of any government institution for any easement.

Our approach was to ask for an extension to the end of the normal pheasant season by one month, subject of course to it not being necessary for a reimposition of Level 5 restrictions at that time.

The matter of our request was also raised recently in the Seanad by Senators Malcom Byrne and Joe O'Reilly and to which you made a statement in reply. The essence of Mr Fitzgerald's reply to us closely mirrors what you said in your statement to the Seanad. However, it did not answer the central request made by the Sports Coalition and its member, Country Sports Ireland i.e. a request to extend the season beyond the 31st of January for pheasant shooting only. In making that request we are conscious of, and accept, that extending the season for other huntable bird species could be legally problematic under the 709/409 Birds Directive of 2nd April 1979 on the hunting of migratory birds in particular, such as Woodcock and several migratory duck species.

As I am sure you are by now aware, the commercial estates routinely enjoy an extension to the pheasant shooting season into February. These shoots differ from the normal rough

pheasant shooting practised by virtually all the parish-based game shooting clubs in Ireland in that they are 'driven shoots' where the pheasants are driven, normally through woodland, towards the guns by beaters accompanied by dogs. Clubs, as distinct from the driven shoots, are voluntary and their game shooting normally takes the form of an individual member traversing the hunting farmlands alone, accompanied only by his/her dog. In general, there are no groups involved in the vast majority of cases as this would be self-defeating and where there is more than one, the group would be small, 2/3 people and they would normally split up and in effect hunt alone.

Having requested an extension to the season, we are disappointed that we have not received a more positive or definitive answer, especially in circumstances where the commercial estates have historically enjoyed such extensions and where we understand from our inquiries that it has been indicated to them they can expect an extension for the 20/21 season.

Game shooting clubs raise money through member subscriptions and fundraisers every year to run their affairs which include habitat management, bird rear and release programmes, pest control services to farming etc. They receive no state funding of any kind and it was a perverse inequity in relation to access to state funding which in effect resulted in the clubs being banned from participating in their chosen sport. It is clear that the view of the Government is that if you are lucky enough to be the recipient of state funding through only Sports Ireland, you will be allowed to participate in your sport, save some close contact exceptions e.g. boxing. But if you are disqualified from access to such funding, it seems the state will penalise you further, irrespective of other relevant considerations, by prohibiting you from practicing your sport especially in circumstances where the objectives of the Level 5 restrictions have nothing whatsoever to do with access to state funding for sport as a qualifying condition. Are we to take it from that position and the imperative for the state and its agencies to act fairly and without discrimination towards all of its citizens, that you would support an application to Sports Ireland for funding for game shooting sports clubs for grant aid in furtherance of their development as beneficial sporting bodies in rural communities which engender healthy lifestyles? Nowhere are the benefits of community interaction and togetherness felt more than in rural areas and the parish game shooting club is an integral driver of that sense of community in virtually every parish.

By the time the Level 5 restrictions were called, clubs' annual budgets had already been spent and in the case of Pheasants, the birds had been reared and released with all the attendant costs associated with that, all from voluntary community effort and support.

In consideration of all of the foregoing, we feel our request for an extension to the Pheasant season deserves a more considered and positive response than that which has been received. To do less would be to gratuitously discriminate against the voluntary rural clubs while taking care of the interests of the commercial estates. As I have already pointed out, we are already inexplicably discriminated against on the basis of being denied access to state funding. I need not dwell on the very negative appearance of this, much less the legal

implications. On a more human level, it would also constitute a slap in the face to the game clubs whose members have positively embraced and supported the restrictions. In all likelihood, they would see their reward from the state for doing their civic duty being the perpetration by the state of inexcusable acts of discrimination against them. While we would not for one moment condone any obstruction of whatever restrictions are necessary to protect society, future restrictions might nonetheless not be so willingly embraced. This is simply the human nature reality.

Minister, I would ask you to take account of all of the foregoing and recognise the responsible positive reaction of our game shooting members towards the inconvenience and disappointment at the cancellation of the Pheasant shooting season for the month of November, the inequitable and discriminatory qualifying conditions set for participation in our sport and the simple fairness of our request which does not set any new precedents. But neither does it aggravate what is at the very least, a perception of discriminatory practice.

As the temperature around this issue is likely to increase in the absence of some accommodation from you, the extension sought would be a very positive move which would take the sting out of the controversy without the state having to concede any new ground.

I look forward to receiving a positive response from you.

Yours sincerely,

Paul Walsh,
Chairman