What to do if fish are dying

Fish health and management series

The sight of dead fish is devastating for any fishery manager, club or angler. Taking action at the first sign of dead fish can reduce the number of fish lost and allow the fishery to recover quicker.

What you should do

If you do have fish dying at your fishery there a number of things you need to do immediately:

Stop fishing!

This will reduce the stress levels within the fish population, helping the fish to recover. This will help to lower the total number of fish that may die. It will also protect other fisheries from the potential spread of disease on fishing tackle. Fishing should only start again when fish have stopped dying and all the remaining fish are healthy.

Report it!

Act quickly and report any fish deaths to the Environment Agency immediately on 0800 80 70 60. We will investigate by discussing the problem with you. If a disease outbreak is suspected then we will examine a sample of fish. Our examinations look for what disease is killing the fish. We will also give advice on how to reduce losses and prevent future problems.

Don't try to rescue the fish!

If they have a disease then they will take it with them and infect other fish elsewhere. The stress of moving them will also make them worse, leading to more deaths.

Never re-stock!

Do not put fish into a fishery with an on-going mortality problem. The new fish will only suffer from the same problems and may bring other diseases with them. It will also increase stress levels in the new and old fish causing more deaths. This will cost you more money.
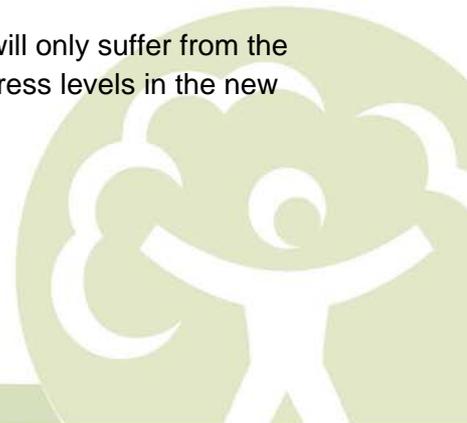
Why it is a good idea to get your fish checked

Getting the mortality investigated will help you work out what is killing your fish, whether it is related to a disease outbreak, the site management or both. This will help you make improvements to prevent future fish deaths. A full review of the management and conditions in the fishery is therefore essential. It should highlight any factors that would have caused stress to your fish and contributed to the losses, such as:

- were there too many fish;

- was there a problem with water quality;

- was the habitat or water quality unsuitable for the fish population;

- was there a risk of disease introduction to the site, either through lack of biosecurity or recent fish introductions?

Working out what caused the mortality is very important. It is likely that changes to the fishery management will reduce the risk of further problems. Remember that if the mortality occurred because of a disease then the surviving fish could still be infected. Though changing the management of the site won't remove the disease, it can help the fish stay healthy, making it easier for them to fight infection. It can even keep the number of pathogens lower, meaning fewer fish will be infected.

Can I use treatments to stop my fish dying?

The simple answer is no. Using treatments in a fishery is very difficult and can be illegal. The amount required can be very large depending on the size of the water and this will cost you a lot of money. When you use treatments you also need to make sure that every fish gets the same treatment, otherwise it won't work. In a fishery this is impossible.

Most importantly, the use of treatments is only a short-term solution. You really need to determine why there was a problem in the first place. Otherwise something else will just come along and cause problems.

In order to completely remove a disease from a fishery you need to de-stock, drain and lime the fishery. This is a drastic option and will be very costly, but for most diseases it is unnecessary.

Understanding how to prevent disease outbreaks is always better than looking for a cure.

This fact sheet has been produced by:

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