

Groundwork
Trevor Halpin
c/o 638 Levinstown,
Athy,
County Kildare,
Ireland

Mr Paul Speight
European Commission
Directorate-General Environment

31 May 2018

Re: CHAP(2017)02563

Dear Mr Speight,

I wish to bring to your attention details of a recent meeting between Groundwork (GW) and the National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS) regarding the ongoing reinfestation of the Killarney Oakwoods with *Rhododendron ponticum*.

NPWS acknowledges deterioration in Rhododendron Status of the Western Woods of Killarney National Park

As you are aware, since 2013 GW has periodically updated NPWS and the European Commission on the ongoing Rhododendron re-infestation of the western woods of Killarney National Park. The most recent update provided was the Updated Overview Document of June 2017. As NPWS had never addressed, or substantively responded to any of the evidence provided and continues to indicate/ state publicly that no re-infestation has occurred, GW agreed to attend a meeting with NPWS on 14 May 2018. NPWS undertook that the NPWS representatives would familiarise themselves with the detailed woodland by woodland evidence of re-infestation that GW had submitted. NPWS further undertook to substantively respond to this evidence at the meeting.

The NPWS representatives at the meeting were NPWS Director Dr Ciaran O’Keeffe, NPWS Regional Ecologist Dr Jervis Good and NPWS Regional Manager Mr Philip Buckley. In response to the detailed evidence presented, Dr O’Keeffe acknowledged that there had been deterioration in the Rhododendron status of these woods. When asked by GW if he accepted that a deterioration in the Annex I Habitat (Old Sessile Oakwood) had occurred, Dr O’Keeffe explained that he was not in a position to say so because of the legal implications of such a statement.

This acknowledgement of deterioration in Rhododendron status constitutes an acknowledgement of a significant deterioration in the Annex I Oakwood Habitat

Clearly Dr O’Keeffe would not confirm that a deterioration of the Annex I Habitat had occurred because this would be tantamount to an admission that NPWS was in

breach of the Habitats Directive. That a deterioration in a large area of the Annex I Habitat has occurred is however implicit in Dr O’Keeffe’s statement because in the official and legally binding Conservation Objectives of Killarney National Park, Macgillycuddy’s Reeks and Caragh River Catchment SAC published by NPWS in 2017, the “target” regarding invasive species in the SAC is that they must be “*absent or under control*”.

The Western Woods of KNP cleared and maintained by Groundwork, were clear (as defined to the stringent criteria specified in NPWS Published Irish Wildlife Manual No. 33) for a period of 10 – 20 years prior to 2005 when the continued maintenance of these woods by GW was disallowed by NPWS. The clear status of these woods was confirmed in NPWS KNP Management Plan 2005- 2009, which stated: “*Groundwork (a voluntary conservation organisation) workcamps have been very successful in dealing with rhododendron. Their clearly defined strategies and extremely well co-ordinated work programme has resulted in a significant proportion of the formerly infested oakwoods in the Park being maintained free of rhododendron. Most of this work has been carried out in the more inaccessible woodlands on the western side of the National Park*”. The clear status of the Groundwork cleared and maintained woods was also confirmed in the *A Strategy for Rhododendron Control in Killarney National Park (Higgins 2006)* etc. The documenting of many hundreds of Rhododendron plants which released seeds throughout these previously clear woods in the period 2013 to 2018 establishes that in the last 13 years Rhododendron is not and has not been “*under control*”; it has in fact been “*out of control*”. The deterioration has included infestation of oakwoods never previously infested and the re-infestation of woodland areas previously maintained at clear status for decades, which woods constitute the single most bio-diverse and undisturbed oakwood areas in the country, most of which qualify as ancient woodland, and some of which pollen analysis indicates have had unbroken woodland cover since the last ice age.

This indicates a widespread and prolonged failure to meet the “target” set out in the SAC Conservation Objectives.

NPWS acknowledges that commitments it made in 2014 have not been carried out

In the context of a previous meeting with Groundwork in May 2014, NPWS Director Dr O’Keeffe visited the eastern perimeter of Looscaunagh Wood, one of the larger Killarney oakwoods woods previously maintained by Groundwork. At this location c.10 Rhododendron plants had reached flowering stage but had not yet released seed. Dr O’Keeffe’s written account of the meeting stated:

“It was agreed ... within the woods that had been worked by Groundwork there is limited but nonetheless significant re-appearance of Rhododendron.”

“It was agreed that ...this Rhododendron needs removal, and sooner than the scheduled re-visit set out in the Long Term Strategic Programme.”

“It was agreed...NPWS would arrange visits to these sites in 2014 to remove Rhododendron, in particular plants at or near flowering stage.”

It was also agreed that NPWS would arrange for scientific trials to be carried out to determine the efficacy of new Rhododendron control methods that had been adopted in Killarney National Park”.

At the recent meeting of 11 May 2018, i.e. 4 years later, Dr O’Keeffe confirmed that none of these commitments by NPWS had been carried out.

NPWS failure to meet commitments has resulted in massive Rhododendron reinfestation

As a result of this failure, the wood which Dr O’Keeffe visited in 2014 (Looscaunagh Wood) rapidly deteriorated in the following 4 years. Groundwork assessments established that in winter of 2016/17, 120 Rhododendron plants widely distributed throughout the wood, released seed. In the following winter of 2017/18, 249 plants released seed, 120 of which were releasing seed for a second consecutive year. This means that the wood was blanketed with several million tiny wind-blown seeds in the winter of 2016/17 and was then blanketed by tens of millions of windblown seeds in the following winter of 2017/18. It should be noted that if the commitment made at the May 2014 meeting had been honoured, the wood would in the nick of time have been saved from a massive rhododendron re-infestation. In the case of Looscaunagh Wood, NPWS gave Groundwork a specific commitment to prevent seed production in that wood. As described above, this commitment was not acted upon, and even if the entire wood were now to be cleared of all visible rhododendron, many thousands of new Rhododendron plants will inevitably emerge in this wood in the coming five years from the millions of seeds that have already been disseminated. Thus, in this substantial oakwood which had achieved clear status in 1986 and been maintained at clear status for two decades, rhododendron seed production recommenced in the winter of 2014/1,5 and has increased exponentially since, rendering the wood comprehensively re-infested.

The grounds for the European Commission closing the original Groundwork complaint file

You will recall that the Commission closed the original Groundwork complaint file in the summer of 2016. The reason for this closure was communicated in your letter of 19/8/16 which stated: “*We maintain our view that the necessary measures are in place to ensure compliance in the future and therefore the CHAP file ought to be closed*”. In the same letter you stated: “*You are welcome to submit a further complaint if you have evidence of a breach of EU law in future*”.

The Evidence of a breach of EU Law subsequent to August 2016

EAMONN’S WOOD - MAY 2017

Oakwood Name	Eamonn’s Wood
Location	Transects in west, east and middle section

	of wood
Area surveyed	c.7ha.
Number of rhododendron \geq 1m recorded	Too many to count in the time available
Number of plants recorded which had flowered in 2017	169
Number of plants recorded which had released seed in the previous winter 2016/17	67
View Photos using this link (Only flowering plants were photographed)	http://groundworkireland.smugmug.com/Eamonns-May-2017/n-BhxMLb
NPWS Classification of Rhododendron Status in January 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Low Density” • “Low level of seed sources remaining on cliffs in woodland”

LOOSCAUNAGH WOOD - MAY 2017

Oakwood Name	Looscaunagh Wood
Location	South western half of wood
Area surveyed	c.15ha.
Number of rhododendron \geq 1m recorded	Too many to count in the time available
Number of plants recorded which had flowered in 2017	249
Number of plants recorded which had released seed in the previous winter 2016/17	120
View Photos using this link	http://groundworkireland.smugmug.com/Looscaunagh-May-2017/n-cKwvLx
NPWS Classification of Rhododendron Status in 2015	“Fair low level seed source on site” (O’Toole 2015)
NPWS Classification of Rhododendron Status in December 2016	“Low level seed source remaining on site” (Cahalane December 2016)
NPWS Classification of Rhododendron Status in January 2018	“Low density” - “Low level of seed source on site” Cahalane (January 2018)

GALLAVALLY WOOD - MAY 2018

Oakwood Name	Gallavally Wood
Location	Two person transect for 4 hour c. 1.5 km long through most of the length of the wood
Area surveyed	c.8ha

Number of rhododendron \geq 1m recorded	Too many to count in the time available but thousands of plants in the size range 1.5 – 2.5m were observed within the wood. Flowering commences at a younger age at the woodland margins where light levels are higher. Most of the plants recorded with flowers/ empty seed pods were on margins of the wood. If left uncleared, >1000 additional plants will reach flowering stage in 2019 & 2020.
Number of plants recorded which were flowering in May 2018	276
Number of plants recorded which had released seed in the previous winter of 2017/18	178
View Photos using this link	https://groundworkireland.smugmug.com/Gallavally-Wood-May-2018/n-qCqR3G
NPWS Classification of Rhododendron Status in January 2018	<p>“Low level of seed source on site” (Cahalane (2018) Rhododendron ponticum. Control & Eradication Management Plan For Killarney National Park 2018-2023)</p> <p>N.B. 1 At the precise time this plan was issued hundreds of Rhododendron plants were in the process of releasing 10s of millions of Rhododendron seeds throughout Gallavally wood.</p> <p>N.B. 2 Cahalane (2018) states that contractors carried out maintenance sweeps of Gallavally Wood in 2015.</p>

Updated details of the evidence of deterioration in the Killarney Oakwoods is contained in the attached “*Updated Summary of Evidence of Loss of Rhododendron “Clear” Status in Selected Oakwood Areas Of Killarney National Park – 30 May 2018*”

It is now evident that the Commission’s faith in the NPWS in June 2016 was misplaced, because as is illustrated above, the necessary measures were evidently not in place to ensure compliance in the future, and accelerating reinfestation of the Western Woods of Killarney National Park has been ongoing from June 2016 to the present.

Yours sincerely,

Trevor Halpin,

On behalf of Groundwork