Expression of interest form for licences to release beavers into the wild

Use this form to give Natural England information about your proposed beaver wild release before you can apply for a licence.

You can find out more about the wild release application process and timescales on GOV.UK.

The purpose of this form is to avoid projects (and Natural England) investing time on proposals that are unlikely to meet the wild release criteria.

You will have been sent a copy of the full licence application form, project plan template and risks and benefits table along with this form. Please note that these have been shared for information only. Please do not submit these or any other supporting documents with your EOI form: only the form is required, and nothing else will be read or taken into account at this stage.

Before you start

Read the wild release criteria before you complete this form to help you prepare your answers.

Submit your expression of interest form

Send your completed form and supporting evidence to Natural England by email before 02/05/2025 to wildlife@naturalengland.org.uk

You can also submit your report by post to:

Wildlife Licensing
Natural England
Horizon House
Deanery Road
Bristol
BS1 5AH

What happens next

Natural England will assess your form. Natural England will seek advice from the Environment Agency, and other consultees where relevant. Natural England will aim to respond within 45 working days. Natural England will decide whether your proposal is either:

- invited to proceed to submit a full application and further detailed assessment by Natural England
- a potentially viable project but not invited to submit a full application at this stage
- unlikely to meet the criteria or substantially missing information

If your project is not invited to proceed to full application at this stage, Natural England will explain why the project is not suitable or may give a summary of how you could improve your proposal. Further windows to submit an expression of interest will be advertised on Gov.uk in due course.

Section A: project and applicant details

All the questions in this section are mandatory.

Project name

Ennerdale beaver release (River Ehen catchment)

Project catchments

To find your project catchments, use the England Catchment Data Explorer

The catchment includes 14 waterbodies in the Ehen-Calder operational catchment: Liza Beck, Ehen upper including River Liza, Ehen lower, Dub Beck, Keekle upper, Keekle lower, Kirk Beck, Calder lower, Calder south west lakes, Worm Gill, Newmill Beck, Pow Beck, Lowca Beck and Ennerdale Water.

We are encouraging joined-up partnership projects within catchments. Would you be content for us to share your contact details with others expressing an interest in wild release in this catchment / these catchments (place 'X' in the box to indicate which).

☒ Yes, I am content for my contact details to be shared as above

☐ No, I am not content for my contact details to be shared as above

Applicant's full name

Hayley Dauben

Telephone number

07425 732513

Email address

hayley.dauben@forestryengland.uk

Organisation name

Forestry England

Project timescales

When would you be ready to submit your full application? (Please provide your likely earliest and latest application dates).

Earliest October 2025, latest December 2025.

Provide an estimate of when your project plans to release beavers into the wild.

If we are invited to apply for a beaver licence, engagement and preparation for an application would begin in July 2025.

We would submit an application by December 2025 to ideally have a decision on whether or not our application was sucessful by March 2026.

During spring and summer 2026 we would implement the steps in our beaver management plan to prepare for the arrival of beavers, which would include recruiting a beaver project officer, training landowners and volunteers in beaver management techniques and installing any proactive beaver protection infrastructure.

Beavers can only be translocated outside of breeding season from September to February. We would plan to be ready to release beavers by September 2026.

Section B: details of your proposed project

Each answer should not exceed 1500 characters, unless stated otherwise.

Project objectives

Explain the benefits of your proposed project. You should describe:

- the main goal(s)
- how beavers will contribute to achieving the goal(s)
- what you predict the outcome will be

Before you answer this question, read the Initial Considerations guidance in the wild release criteria

The goal of releasing beavers is to restore natural processes and enhance degraded habitats.

The upper half of the River Ehen is a protected site. It is a Special Area of Conservation because it is home to 90% of England's critically endangered freshwater pearl mussels. The mussel population is reproducing, but not fast enough. Overall the population is aging and declining. Atlantic salmon are critical to the mussel lifecycle and are also endangered.

River restoration, led by humans to benefit fish and mussels, replicates some functions that beavers could provide, like reconnecting straight channels to their floodplains, inserting trees and large woody debris into the river channel, planting willow and wet tree species and building leaky dams to create wetlands.

These interventions benefit fish and mussels by providing stable gravel beds for fish eggs and mussels, increasing vegetation cover to protect fish from predation, providing slower flowing rest areas, providing shade to keep water temperatures below critical thresholds, keeping water flowing during drought, reducing sediment runoff which can smother gravel beds and reducing nutrient run off which can limit oxygen availability.

We see beavers as an essential part of a healthy river system which can help restore the whole River Ehen catchment to conditions where populations of Atlantic salmon and pearl mussels can thrive. Beavers work at a greater scale and lower cost than humans alone can achieve.

Legal requirements

Summarise any specific legal requirements that could prevent your project from going ahead as intended and your high-level approach for addressing them. You do not need to include a list of legislation.

Example 1: if your proposal requires an instream structure to hold beavers in the upper part of a catchment, this will need a permit from the relevant flood risk management authority.

Example 2: would be that a Habitats Regulations Assessment is needed for the project due to likely impacts on European Site features, such as a migratory fish species.

Before you answer this question, read the Staying legal guidance in the wild release criteria

From the outflow of Ennerdale Water down to the confluence with the River Keekle, the River Ehen is a Special Area of Conservation. This designation requires a Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) to identify any risks to the freshwater pearl mussels and the Atlantic salmon they rely on.

Our project aims to benefit Atlantic salmon and freshwater pearl mussels. Through the HRA we would balance the risk of localised and temporary negative impacts on individual salmon and mussels against changes that bring positive impacts for their broader populations.

Atlantic salmon and freshwater pearl mussels have endured in the River Ehen due to the unique conditions and through significant human intervention. Their future is not yet sustainable. We are proposing to harness natural processes to improve the long-term outcome for the whole catchment, including the Special Area of Conservation.

The main risks are described in the Biodiversity Outcomes section and managing these risks would become part of our beaver management plan.

Catchment details

Give an overview of how the proposed catchment is suitable for beaver wild release. Include a summary of the:

- land uses in the catchment
- landscape of the catchment
- ecological habitat types that characterise the catchment

Before you answer this question, read the Maximise Success guidance in the wild release criteria

The catchment area is 242 square kilometres. The main channel length is 140 kilometres. The network of rivers, streams and tributaries is estimated at 800 kilometres. This is a relatively small catchment, so it is achievable to monitor beavers and support landowners effectively.

The catchment begins in Ennerdale Valley in an upland setting of mountains and moorland. Steep valley sides are often wooded. Land use is upland farming, with sheep and cattle grazing, and forestry. This area is sparsely populated with very low conflict between beavers and these land uses. Abundant beaver habitat would encourage the first beavers to make territories where they are released. 48 square kilometres are part of Wild Ennerdale, a multi-decade nature recovery partnership. Of this, 30 square kilometres are a National Nature Reserve.

The River Ehen begins below the lake. It runs for 27 kilometres to the Irish Sea through a rolling lowland landscape of the west Cumbria coastal plain. At its outlet it meets the River Calder, Newmill Beck and the Sellafield nuclear facility. Land use is mainly agricultural, dominated by livestock grazing with sileage and pasture and some arable fields. In lowland landscapes there is potential for beaver conflict, although the varied topography helps contain conflicts to localised areas.

"Preferred" and "good" vegetation for beavers, described by University of Exeter models, covers nearly half the waterways in the catchment, providing a food source for beavers.

If known, summarise:

- the likely catchment beaver carrying capacity in terms of territories or family groups
- how many beaver family groups you plan to release and when
- likely beaver dispersal routes beyond the project area, including any barriers to dispersal
- how your project will work with other beaver projects

Using the average size of a beaver territory as three kilometres of shoreline, the Ehen-Calder catchment could potentially hold over 100 beaver territories in good quality habitat.

We propose to initially release three pairs or family groups of beavers into Ennerdale valley from September 2026. As the River Ehen is isolated from other wild beavers, additional releases would be necessary to establish a genetically diverse founder population. These releases would be staggered over time to help us develop local management strategies before beavers become abundant. We would seek support for further release locations in the wider catchment during our engagement.

Our project area includes the River Ehen, River Calder and Newmill Beck catchments. They reach the sea at a similar point and there are no barriers to dispersal between them.

Smaller catchments of Pow Beck at St Bees and Lowca Beck at Parton are not directly connected to the River Ehen catchment by water, but are included because they are closely surrounded by our project area.

The next major catchments are Lostrigg Beck and the River Marron to the north and the River Bleng and River Irt to the south. At their closest points, their tributaries are less than a kilometre by land from tributaries of the River Ehen.

There are no beaver releases planned in neighbouring catchments. We welcome working with other beaver projects throughout Cumbria, to support a Cumbria-wide population.

Biodiversity outcomes

Summarise the key biodiversity benefits your proposed release could have, specific to your project location, if not already covered in the Project Objectives question above.

The catchment-wide biodiversity benefits to Atlantic salmon and freshwater pearl mussels are described in our project objectives. We have volunteered Ennerdale Valley as the first release location because we welcome the biodiversity benefits that beavers also bring to their immediate area.

The Wild Ennerdale vision uses natural processes to shape the landscape and ecology. Natural hydrology and free-roaming herbivores are key features of Ennerdale valley. The dynamic, braided channels of the River Liza change with every flood. Mires are reforming where drainage channels have been blocked by man-made leaky dams. Disturbance by Galloway cattle is making space for seeds to grow. Arctic Charr have been brought back from the threat of extinction to a growing population. As natural processes recover, we see species diversity, abundance and resilience increase.

Beavers would accelerate and intensify this hydrological change and vegetation disturbance. They would create a mosaic of habitat niches in wetlands, wet woodlands, woody debris in the river, deadwood, forest clearings, bankside willow and shrubby regrowth on trees. We expect to see vegetation diversify and further increases in invertebrates, amphibians, birds and their predators.

We plan to release water voles into Ennerdale valley in August 2025. These endangered mammals benefit from beaver habitat. It would allow their population to expand and thrive, ready to disperse further into the River Ehen catchment.

Summarise the risks your proposed release could pose to protected sites and vulnerable or endangered species, specific to your project location. Include an assessment of the risk with and without management measures.

Before you answer this question, read the Biodiversity outcomes guidance in the wild release criteria

The greatest risk to freshwater pearl mussels is smothering with fine sediments if a beaver dam were positioned immediately downstream of a mussel population.

The pearl mussels are all in the main channel of the River Ehen. Modelling by the University of Exeter indicates that most of this is unlikely to have beaver dams as it is wide and fast-flowing. Only the slower flowing section immediately below the lake has potential to be dammed during low flows.

Management would include promptly removing all beaver dams if they appear in the main channel of the River Ehen to prevent long-term build up of sediment. There remains a short-term risk of sediment build up until the beaver dam is removed.

The greatest perceived risk to Atlantic salmon is beaver dams becoming a barrier to fish passage.

Salmon and beaver evolved together, so we expect these natural, permeable barriers to be a far lower risk than artificial structures. Gaps and side channels allow fish to pass

around or through beaver dams. This risk is reduced in the main river channels that are highly unlikely to be dammed.

We can assess impacts through annual monitoring to identify how fish numbers and egg-laying locations are changing upstream and downstream of beaver dams. Dams that are a long-term threat can be removed. There remains a risk that there could be a large time delay between identifying a negative impact and removing a dam.

Socio-economic outcomes

Summarise the key socio-economic benefits your proposed release could have, specific to your project location, if not already covered in the Project Objectives question above.

Before you answer this question, read the Socio-economic outcomes guidance in the wild release criteria

There are known urban flooding zones in Ennerdale Bridge, Cleator, Egremont, Beckermet and Braystones. Flood risk is expected to continue to increase over time.

The Environment Agency builds and maintains flood management structures, including earth embankments, storage ponds and flood walls, in Cleator and Egremont. Some additional or higher flood walls may be needed to manage the projected increasing flood risk.

Ennerdale Bridge, Beckermet and Braystones have no flood management infrastructure planned.

Beaver dams above these flooding zones would provide natural flood management. Each beaver dam slows the flow of water which helps to lower the peak height of floods downstream. This would reduce the cost to the Environment Agency of building and maintaining flood infrastructure. It would reduce the costs and disruption to property owners where flooding was avoided or reduced. Natural flood management by beaver dams could reach properties that currently have no existing or planned flood infrastructure.

Summarise the socio-economic risks your proposed release could pose in the project area. Include an assessment of the risk with and without management measures.

Unwelcomed foraging and tree felling, localised flooding from beaver dams and destabilised land or infrastructure from burrowing are common risks associated with beavers.

The River Ehen catchment is dominated by animal grazing rather than agricultural crops which may allow greater flexibility to accommodate beavers. The landscape is often undulating, so flooding may be better contained by the natural topography than in flatter parts of England.

Currently, we cannot accurately describe the site-specific risks in the River Ehen catchment. Landowner tolerance will be unique to the land use, landscape and topography at each site. We will use the engagement process to better understand the risks, so we can assess options for management.

Increased visitor numbers, especially from a commercial visitor attraction, was an objection to a partially-enclosed release. The perceived risk was that more people, vehicles, illegal camping and litter could impact the natural values of Ennerdale valley.

Ennerdale is naturally buffered from the tourist activity of the Lake District. It takes longer to get there and vehicle access is restricted in the valley. We expect initial interest in beavers to reduce as they become common in the catchment and in England.

To reduce the perceived risk, we have removed ecotourism as a benefit and are not promoting beaver-specific trails or activities. Free public access to discover Ennerdale will continue.

Engagement, consultation and transparent communication

Summarise who you plan to engage with and how, including the public and other stakeholders. Explain any stakeholder engagement you've already done and summarise the results, including whether there were strong objections and how these will be addressed.

Before you answer this question, read the Stakeholder engagement guidance

Our previous engagement for a partially-enclosed beaver release shared information at group events, including four online presentations and four drop-in events in 2021-2022 reaching over 300 people. Social media posts reached over 30,000 people.

The main concerns were increased visitors from ecotourism and problems for migrating fish due to the beaver enclosure fence. Both elements have been removed from our project.

Our engagement about free-living beavers begins by sharing this expression of interest widely through our website and networks. We welcome all comments of support or concern directly to our Species Reintroduction Project Officer by phone, email or site visit.

From July, if we are invited to apply for a beaver licence, our engagement would focus on connecting with landowners whose land is near rivers or tributaries that might be used by beavers, from Ennerdale valley to the Irish Sea. We would share modelling by the University of Exeter, showing habitat suitable for beavers and watercourses suitable for beaver dams, so landowners can view potential effects on their property. Site-specific risks that are identified would be the basis of our beaver management plan.

Information would be available on our website or as printed materials. Any feedback would be directed straight to the project officer by phone, post or email or through Citizenspace, an online platform.

We would seek partners to help implement fish, flood and beaver monitoring and future translocations.

Governance and resourcing

Summarise the proposed governance structure for your project. Include the:

- lead organisation(s)
- proposed key project partners
- summary of proposed local management arrangements, for example, will you be relying on employed field officers, relationships with other organisations or groups, volunteers or a combination

Before you answer this question, read the Governance and resourcing guidance in the wild release criteria

Forestry England is the lead organisation, who would provide the first release sites in Ennerdale valley and support the application process. For free-living beavers to succeed, a catchment-wide partnership from Ennerdale to the sea is crucial. A key part of the engagement process is to seek partners to represent the catchment and interests beyond Ennerdale valley.

The project steering group initially includes representatives from the Wild Ennerdale partnership. Established in 2002, the partnership includes the principal landowners in Ennerdale valley, Forestry England, National Trust and United Utilities, with support from Natural England.

A Species Reintroduction Project Officer has been funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs through Forestry England for three years until December 2025. This role would undertake all engagement activities and prepare and submit a licence application. A beaver project officer would be a paid staff member for the 10-year licence period.

Forestry England has four beaver enclosures including the Forest of Dean (since 2018) and the North York Moors (since 2019). Ecologists in these areas are qualified and experienced in working with beavers and could support this project.

A beaver management group, made up of beaver specialists and affected landowners and land managers, would form once permission to release beavers was confirmed. Its membership would evolve throughout the licence to resolve practical beaver issues.

Summarise the proposed funding approach, specific sources and whether these sources are confirmed or provisional.

Detailed costs for this project will be developed in parallel with the engagement process and the beaver management plan. Costs will consider risks, physical mitigation structures, monitoring, training and support for landowners, potential translocation sites in the wider catchment and support from volunteers.

The Wild Ennerdale partnership organisations have collaborated to fund a part-time (22 hours per week) Partnership Officer role for the last 21 years, along with project costs for volunteers, training, communications and engagement events in Ennerdale valley. This commitment is renewed annually. It demonstrates the partnership's ability to collectively fund a role over the long-term, even though each organisation only allocates funding for shorter periods. This model could be applied to the Beaver Project Officer role.

Forestry England is committed to financially supporting beaver reintroduction across the land it manages. Nature restoration is funded by internally generated funds, direct funding from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and other grants. Forestry England made a bid for beaver project funding from the current DEFRA Spending Review (2026-30) and is awaiting confirmation of the outcome. Beaver reintroduction is a very high priority for Forestry England, and funding from all sources can go towards the long-term financial sustainability of this project.

Monitor and evaluate

Summarise how you propose to gather baseline data and how this will inform your project design, management and monitoring proposals.

Before you answer this question, read the Monitor and evaluate guidance in the wild release criteria

At a catchment scale, monitoring would analyse two external on-going datasets to compare changes in the River Ehen catchment to nearby catchments without beavers. At a local scale, we would continue long-term surveys for birds and vegetation in Ennerdale valley.

The West Cumbria Rivers Trust have collected fish data in West Cumbria since 2015, including 198 sites from Wastwater to Thirlmere. They have surveyed fish numbers and spawning areas in Ennerdale Valley since 2022. These results can be benchmarked against National Classification Grades. Fish monitoring is a faster method of monitoring change than monitoring slow-growing pearl mussels directly.

The Environment Agency has seven river level, three river flow and five rainfall monitoring stations in the River Ehen and River Calder catchments, with data collection starting between 1973 and 2023, which could help identify changes in hydrology.

Bird surveys took place in 2008, 2015 and 2023 and recorded present and breeding birds. The vegetation at our proposed release sites has been described using the National Vegetation Classification in 2004 and 2024.

Monitoring beavers relies on landowner permission by land or water access by canoe. To monitor beaver health and confirm breeding, we would use non-intrusive wildlife cameras each autumn in known territories. To understand beaver dispersal, we would investigate reports of new beaver activity as they occur. In winter, we would survey field signs to map beaver territories.

Management plan and exit strategy

Summarise plans for beaver management after the end of the project licence period (which will normally be for 10 years).

During the first 10 years, the beaver officer and beaver management group will help support the adjustment to living with beavers and build skills and resources in partners and volunteers.

By the end of 10 years we hope beavers become a normal part of our countryside with many landowners confident in managing beavers on their own land. By then, we will better understand the on-going level of support needed.

Bavarian experience in Germany shows that there is a need for a long-term beaver management role. Without a significant natural predator, in a developed country with few unused spaces, beaver numbers will exceed our tolerance before they run out of suitable habitat. A long-term beaver management role could cover multiple catchments.

While populations are establishing, there could be opportunities to mitigate beaver conflicts by translocating beavers to other catchments throughout England. As available catchments fill up, lethal control, though not currently available, should be an option. Humans would take on the role of a natural predator.

The home or funding of a long-term beaver management role is not yet clear.

If a long-term beaver management role cannot be secured, or if beaver mitigation becomes unsustainable, all beavers will be removed from the catchment. Adequate funding, proportionate to the beaver population, would need to be set aside for this purpose. The beaver project officer would be trained and licenced to be able to complete this role if necessary.

Additional information

Tell Natural England about any other information that’s important for them to know. For example, aspects of the project that are unusual or distinctive.

Ask Natural England anything you would like advice or feedback on.

Declaration

- I have read and understood the guidance provided in this expression of interest form. I declare that the particulars given are correct to the best of my knowledge and belief, and I apply to be registered for a licence in accordance with these particulars.

  I agree to the declaration above

Signature: Date: 1 May 2025

For expressions of interest submitted electronically, please either insert an electronic signature above or insert 'X' in this box to confirm agreement with this declaration ☒

Name in
BLOCK LETTERS: HAYLEY DAUBEN