



## **Natural England calls on Rodenator users to heed the law.**

---

Controlling rabbits, rats and other pests has never been easy but recently a novel pest control device (known as the "Rodenator") has made its way into the UK market.

Natural England, the Government's conservation adviser, is warning users that they could be committing an offence if they use devices such as the "Rodenator" in England as a means of killing pests

In recent years the range of control techniques available to manage some of the most problematic species affecting agriculture has narrowed, most notably with the loss of both "Cymag" (used for rabbits and rats) and strychnine (used for moles). Understandably, there has been growing interest in novel techniques to plug the gap.

The Rodenator has received widespread interest. It involves the use of a device that injects an explosive mixture of propane gas and oxygen into a tunnel system which is then electronically ignited. The claim is that the resulting shock wave will kill any animals that are present and collapse the burrows. Devices of this type were first developed in the United States in the 1990s to control a wide range of burrowing mammals and are now being imported into Europe and the UK to deal with rabbits, rats and moles.

Although designed to kill, as the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs made clear in a public statement in May 2007, Rodenator type devices must not be used for killing wild animals in this country. Legally, they can be used to collapse burrows and tunnels if there are no animals present, and used in this fashion they do not require a licence or Defra approval (no licences have been issued despite claims to the contrary e.g. Farmers Weekly 22 Feb).

Representatives of the pest control industry and animal welfare organisations have expressed concerns to Natural England following reports of apparent illegal use, and a case involving the deaths of wild rabbits was recently documented in the veterinary journal, Veterinary Record. Cases have also been drawn to the attention of the police.

The maximum penalty for using an explosive, other than ammunition for a firearm, to kill wild animals is £5,000 and six months in prison. There is a similar penalty for asphyxiating any wild animal with intent to inflict unnecessary suffering, which is a potential consequence of incomplete destruction of an occupied burrow system.

Natural England has serious concerns about the use of these devices to collapse burrows because of the practical difficulties of ensuring that burrows and tunnels are free of animals. Claims that it takes "one minute per burrow to do the job" and that the device can be used to destroy 250-300 rabbit burrows a day (Farmers Weekly 22 Feb) give rise to concern. Although a thorough and ideally repeated gassing operation using an approved pesticide could eliminate rabbits in a warren system it is unlikely that other techniques including the use of ferrets, would do the job sufficiently. The findings of one

study confirmed that on average, only 36% of the rabbit population was captured when one ferreting operation was undertaken.

Pest controllers, farmers or anyone else considering using such equipment to collapse empty burrows are advised to carefully consider whether or not they are confident that their proposed use of the device will be legal. Users should

- Take all reasonable precautions to minimise the risk that the burrows are occupied by ANY wild animals, making sure that you know which species that use burrows are found in the local area. Placing twigs across entrances can help assess burrow use by larger animals, but don't forget some species hibernate in other species' burrows.
- If burrows are occupied, or likely to be occupied, by a problem species, the burrow system will need to be cleared of animals before it can be collapsed. This should be carried out using an effective and legal control method. The most appropriate option will depend on the animal concerned and the situation.
- If the burrow system is occupied, or likely to be occupied, by other animals and especially by protected species, then the burrow should be left undisturbed. Remember that some species, including amphibians and reptiles, may use burrows belonging to other species.
- Make sure that the burrow system is not reoccupied by any animals before the tunnels are collapsed. This will mean preventing access to the tunnels and/or minimising the time interval between clearing the burrows and destroying them.
- **If you have reason to believe that there are ANY wild animals in the burrows or are likely to be in the burrows then do not collapse them.**

It is also recommended good practice to keep records of measures taken to assess presence of animals and any efforts made to ensure no wild animals were in the burrows when they were collapsed.

These suggestions are offered by way of guidance, and do not in any way lessen the responsibility of users of Rodenator or similar devices to ensure they comply with the law; if in doubt users are advised to seek legal advice.

The question is often "*could the Rodenator and similar devices ever be used to kill pest species in England?*" The simple answer is yes, but only under an appropriate licence as they utilise a prohibited method of killing. Natural England is authorised to grant such licences on behalf of Defra in England. The Welsh Assembly Government and the Scottish Government are responsible for this issue in their respective countries. To date, there have been discussions between Natural England and importers and purchasers to advise them of the regulatory requirements but no licences permitting the use of these devices to kill wild animals have been granted anywhere in the UK and no such devices are 'Defra approved'.

#### **Further advice and information**

Contact Paul Butt at Natural England. Tel: 01233 811265 email:

[paul.butt@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:paul.butt@naturalengland.org.uk)

## Sources

Defra position statement on Rodenator and similar devices, May 2007:  
[www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/vertebrates/pdf/rodenator.pdf](http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/vertebrates/pdf/rodenator.pdf)

Bidewell C.A., Cantwell, P.J., Scholes, S.F.E. and Duff, J.P. (2008) Deaths of wild rabbits associated with a novel method of pest control. *Veterinary Record* 162 (5): 163

Cowan D.P. (1984) The use of ferrets (*Mustela furo*) in the study and management of the European wild rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*). *Journal of Zoology*, London 203, 570-574

Sullins, M. and Sullivan, D. (1992) *Observations of a gas exploding device controlling burrowing rodents*. Proc. 15th Vertebrate Pest Conf. (J. E. Borrecco & R. E. Marsh, Editors) University of California, Davis. 308-311

---

February 2008

Email: [wildlife@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:wildlife@naturalengland.org.uk)

Website: [www.naturalengland.org.uk](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk)