

Wye Navigation Advisory Committee (WyeNAC)

Date of meeting: Friday 12 April 2019

Item

INFORMATION PAPER: Dry weather briefing for the River Wye

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Members are invited to provide advice and comment in particular, on the procedures for managing navigation.

Context

The River Wye is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and a Site of Scientific Interest (SSSI) for its entire length. It is important for a number of rare and threatened species and habitats. The Environment Agency and Natural Resources Wales (NRW) must balance the water needs of people, businesses and the environment. During periods of exceptional shortage of rain, we will need to seek additional measures as part of our duty to protect the SAC and restrictions may be necessary for water abstraction, navigation and angling. Voluntary restrictions for all aspects of river use are encouraged before any additional measures are required.

Introduction

The Environment Agency uses 4 stages of drought to describe and manage our response:

- **prolonged dry weather,**
- **drought,**
- **severe drought and**
- **recovering drought.**

A combination of hydrological and environmental factors known as 'Trigger levels' across the Wye catchment trigger a move between these drought stages. These trigger levels help determine what actions need to be taken. A range of factors are taken into consideration including the present conditions, forecast weather and how effective the proposed action would be. Local knowledge and judgement is also an important part of drought management.

Restrictions to navigation for the River Wye

Under certain drought conditions the Environment Agency, as the Navigation Authority for the Wye, may have to restrict navigation. We will give people and businesses likely to be impacted as much notice as possible of any plans with implications to navigation. We will also use social media to share messages. Any restrictions to navigation will be kept to a minimum as far as possible.

Commercial canoe hire companies are encouraged to have contingency plans in place to deal with these extreme conditions and potential restrictions to navigation. A special meeting with the Wye Navigation Advisory Committee can be arranged if desired.

Stage 1: If river flows continue to fall and water levels are low, active monitoring of boating activity will be carried out by the navigation team. User groups will be informed and will be asked to monitor the situation

themselves and to avoid the shallower sections where possible. We will ask to be notified of any sections where low water levels have made navigation impractical.

Stage 2: Active monitoring of the canoeing activity will continue. If water levels are low enough to be considered a significant risk to ecology, vulnerable stretches will be temporarily closed to navigation by implementing Article 19 (c) of the Wye Navigation Order 2002. As a guide, we will use a trigger level of 133 million gallons per day (7 m³/s) at the Redbrook gauge* to initiate Stage 2. The closures will extend from the nearest upstream and downstream public access point of the vulnerable stretch affected. Temporary closure notices will be displayed at the relevant access points.

Stage 3: Active monitoring of the canoeing activity will continue. If the additional pressure placed on the remaining open stretches becomes a matter of concern, then user numbers may have to be restricted. We will work with British Canoeing and canoe hire companies throughout this process.

Stage 4 (recovery phase): Any restrictions to navigation will be removed as and when conditions permit. User groups will be kept informed of any action taken.

Supporting information

The River Wye system acts as an important wildlife corridor, an essential migration route and a key breeding area for many nationally and internationally important species. The ecological value of the river and its tributaries is recognised through their national designation as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and as a riverine SAC under the European Union Habitats Directive (1992). The SAC designation applies to the River Wye itself and some of its tributaries. The trampling of gravel used as spawning grounds may cause a significant damage to the ecology.

The River Wye is known as a 'regulated river'. During dry weather water is released from the Elan Valley reservoirs to support public water supply in the lower reaches of the Wye, when flows, as measured at Redbrook gauging station, fall below a certain threshold. Reservoir releases are managed under the Wye Regulation Scheme under an agreement between Dwr Cymru Welsh Water, Natural Resources Wales and the Environment Agency.

Many abstraction licences have "hands-off flow conditions" (HoFs) that require abstractors to stop abstracting when the river is below a defined flow. To restrict historic spray irrigation licences without HoFs (Section 57 restrictions) a Notice has to be issued when river flows drop to a significantly low level, based on an exceptional shortage of rain.

* A trigger level of 133 million gallons per day (7m³/s) at the Redbrook gauge is the last HoF to be applied and has previously been used as the trigger for considering the need to enforce s57 restrictions if flow continues to fall below this threshold. The Environment Agency will inform licence holders before this flow level is met so they can make provision for such restrictions.

Sprayline is the EA/NRW telephone information service in the Wye river catchment of spray irrigation licences. On calling the Sprayline number (0870 905 6061) you can find out information on flows.

Users are encouraged to use Sprayline to maintain an understanding of current flows and therefore any likelihood of restrictions being put in place.

Information on Welsh river levels can be accessed by the public via the NRW website here:
<https://naturalresources.wales/evidence-and-data/maps/check-river-levels/?lang=en>

The Redbrook gauge can be accessed via this link:
<https://rloi.naturalresources.wales/ViewDetails?station=4028>

Wye Navigation Order 2002, Temporary closure of principal rivers:

19(1) Subject to the provisions of this article, the Agency may temporarily prohibit, restrict or regulate the navigation and use of any part of the principal rivers for any of the following purposes -

(c) to conserve the natural beauty of the principal rivers and their flora, fauna and geological or physiographical features of special interest;

(7) The Agency shall not exercise its powers under paragraph (1)(c) so as to create a serious obstruction to the navigation or use of the principal rivers.

(8) The Agency may exercise the powers of this article in relation to all classes of vessel navigating and using the principal rivers, or in relation to such class of vessel as it thinks fit.

(‘principal rivers’ means – Hay Town Bridge to Bigsweir Bridge and that part of the river Lugg from its confluence with the river Wye to Presteigne Bridge)