TECHNICAL OFFICERS'
WORKING PARTY REPORT

WYE VALLEY AONB
JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE
3rd July 2023

RIVER WYE UPDATE

Purpose

To advise members of the latest activities and proposals to improve water quality, reduce excess nutrients and help restore the River Wye.

Recommendations

That the JAC

A. Supports a proposed Landscape Recovery bid for the River Wye by the Wye Catchment Partnership

B. Welcomes the PhD placement with the AONB Unit on 'Water as a contested space - Improving the quality of our rivers'

Key Issues

- Natural England recently updated the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) condition assessment for the River Wye Special Area of Conservation (SAC) from 'unfavourable recovering' to 'unfavourable declining' due to a decline in key wildlife species.
- There remains widespread concern about high nutrient and pollution levels in the Wye catchment. The main excess nutrient that is causing concern is phosphate.
- With the recent hot weather, Environment Agency (EA) monitoring equipment (sondes) located along the River Wye have shown water temperatures that can be injurious and potentially lethal to salmon.
- There has recently been a bloom of brown algae in the River Wye in Herefordshire.
- Environment Secretary Thérèse Coffey met local farmers, councillors, environmental groups, MPs and the Welsh Government Members in Hereford in late May to discuss actions to improve the state of the River Wye.
- The Wye Catchment Partnership is meeting on 4th July and will investigate opportunities for a Landscape Recovery bid for the River Wye.
- A Swansea University PhD student will be on placement with the AONB Unit for 5 weeks in late summer researching their thesis 'Water as a contested space - Improving the quality of our rivers'
- The AONB Unit continues to manage partnership projects and collaborative initiatives including through the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme and the Wye Invasive Species Programme, to support farmers and land-managers in and around the AONB.

Reasons

The River Wye Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and River Wye Special Area of Conservation (SAC) was downgraded from 'unfavourable recovering' to 'unfavourable declining' by Natural England in May 2023 due to a decline in certain types of key wildlife: particularly Atlantic salmon, macrophytes and native white-clawed crayfish.

Phosphate originates from various sources, but the main sources in the Wye Catchment, as reported by the Environment Agency, are:

- Legacy phosphates stored in the soils that have built up over the decades
- Diffuse agricultural pollution, principally from livestock manure and nutrients washing into the river during rainfall events, accounting for approximately 72-74% of phosphates entering rivers
- Discharges from regulated sewage treatment works, accounting for approximately 21-23% of phosphates entering rivers
- Storm overflows that account for 1-2% of phosphates entering rivers
- Other sources, such as septic tanks and urban runoff, that account for 3-5% of phosphates entering rivers.

It is widely recognised that coordinated work needs to progress urgently on the restoration of the River Wye and River Lugg to conserve and enhance the catchment's biodiversity, natural beauty and to enable future sustainable development, in the context of the climate and environment emergency and pollution pressures.

DEFRA's Landscape Recovery scheme funds long-term, large-scale, bespoke projects designed to enhance the natural environment and deliver significant environmental benefits.

Implications

Environment Secretary Thérèse Coffey hosted a roundtable meeting of local farmers, councillors, environmental groups, MPs and the Welsh government in Hereford on Tuesday 30 May. Discussions focused on local concerns and ongoing implementation of actions to address the status of the river, particularly in light of its impact on wildlife, farming and development (see https://www.gov.uk/government/news/environment-secretary-holds-local-roundtable-to-drive-forward-improvements-in-river-wye)

The second round of Landscape Recovery has recently been opened by DEFRA with a focus on projects where farmers and landowners come together across at least 500 hectares to target protected sites, wildlife-rich habitats and net zero. The Wye Catchment Partnership will be investigating the opportunity to collaborate on and co-ordinate a Landscape Recovery application for the River Wye. However the application will need to be specifically tailored to the Landscape Recovery criteria. Land in the Welsh part of the Wye Catchment will not be eligible, therefore other initiatives will continue to be developed across the wider Wye Catchment.

The Wye Valley AONB Partnership and other partners are working together to address the causes and impacts of high phosphate levels, through a combination of advice and guidance, regulation and the delivery of projects to reduce phosphate inputs. For example, the AONB

Unit has been collaborating on a Climate Action Fund bid with Herefordshire and Radnorshire Wildlife Trusts, entitled 'Wye Adapt to Climate Change'. If successful the project will help mitigate climate change, improve habitats and biodiversity, increase wildlife connectivity and ultimately help in the creation of nature recovery networks across the Wye Catchment. Meanwhile the AONB Unit continues to work closely with the Wye & Usk Foundation, Farm Herefordshire and Natural England particularly on the advocacy of farm advisors and the promotion and delivery of the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme.

The Environment Agency (EA) are deploying a total of 10 sondes and 4 autosamplers across the Wye Catchment to provide continuous water quality monitoring throughout the summer months. There are currently 4 sondes deployed in the Wye. The EA publishes and updates information and data via the River Wye Water Quality webpages https://engageenvironmentagency.uk.engagementhq.com/hub-page/river-wye-water-quality-2. This includes the River Wye Management Catchment Integrated Data Analysis Report (see https://engageenvironmentagency.uk.engagementhq.com/integrated-data-analysis-reports).

Natural Resources Wales (NRW) has launched its corporate plan to 2030 'Nature and People Thriving Together', focusing on three objectives: By 2030 in Wales, nature is recovering; communities are resilient to climate change; and pollution is minimised. As public interest in the state of our waters intensifies, it demonstrates how NRW will prioritise its actions to ensure nature and people will be protected from the impacts of pollution by working with partners to clean up our rivers and seas, regulating business robustly and minimising waste.

A wide range of individuals, groups and organisations continue to lobby for and highlight the condition of the River Wye. Such action has helped maintain a high level of political and media coverage nationally, regionally and locally; including the 'Save the Wye' events Riversong@Redbrook on 25th June and the 'Wye July' event in Monmouth on 9th July.

A PhD student, from the Hillary Rodham Clinton School of Law at Swansea University, will be undertaking a 5 week placement with the Wye Valley AONB Unit from late August. Their thesis is on 'Water as a contested space - Improving the quality of our rivers' which will be supervised by Associate Professor Dr Victoria Jenkins. The PhD student will be treated as an AONB volunteer but they will have a small bursary from the UK Environmental Law Association (UKELA) for expenses to spend time "with an environmental organisation". The placement will not be focused on law but will be an opportunity to gain knowledge and insight of the concerns around river pollution and the institutional responses to this significant issue.

Background

The Wye Valley AONB covers the lower reaches of the Wye, downstream from the confluence with the Lugg. The AONB covers about one firth of the Wye Catchment and contains about one third of the River Wye in length. The River Wye and its tributaries are an AONB Special Quality as identified in the statutory Wye Valley AONB Management Plan. Most of the phosphates and contributing conditions for the algal blooms originate upstream of the AONB.

The Wye Valley AONB Partnership is committed to doing everything within its powers, purposes and resources to work with all individuals, groups and organisations to improve water quality, reduce excess nutrients and help restore the Wye Catchment, by convening, enabling and delivering on the restoration, conservation and enhancement of the River Wye, which is so central to the Wye Valley AONB.

The UK Environmental Law Association (UKELA) is the leading membership organisation for anyone interested in environmental law.