

## RIVER WYE UPDATE

### ***Purpose***

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

FOR INFORMATION

### ***Key Issues***

- The River Wye is not failing its nutrient target for the Special Area of Conservation (SAC) but it is close at some locations, whereas the River Lugg is, which flows into the Wye at Mordiford at the northern extent of the Wye Valley National Landscape.
- New research from Cardiff University indicate that Phosphate is not the sole or main cause of algal blooms in the catchment.
- Since the General Election there has been much renewed focus on river restoration and water quality issues including high level meetings, correspondence, setting of priorities and recognition of the need for a cross-border approach.
- Environment Agency (EA) are working on the Wye Diffuse Water Pollution Plan (DWPP), as part of the Nutrient Management Plan (NMP) for England, which is on track to be completed by end of March 2025, and Welsh Government are funding the evidence base for the NMP covering the Welsh part of the catchment.
- The Wye Catchment Management Plan, covering the whole of the Wye catchment is also intended to be completed in Spring 2025, through the Wye Catchment Partnership.
- EA & Herefordshire Rural Hub held workshops over the summer with farmers and other stakeholders to consider what additional measures and mechanisms could support nutrient reductions.
- In November, Herefordshire Council is hosting a second Rivers Conference, with a focus on sustainable practices for arable farming
- Natural Resources Wales (NRW) recently launched the Upper Wye Restoration Project and is shortly holding a River Restoration Seminar.
- The March for Clean Water took place in London on 3<sup>rd</sup> November, supported by Friends of River Wye, Save the Wye, the Wye Salmon Association, CPRE and many others.
- The Wye Valley National Landscape Team continues to manage partnership projects and collaborative initiatives including through the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme, Wye Adapt to Climate Change? and Wyescapes Landscape Recovery to support farmers and land-managers in and around the National Landscape.

## ***Reasons***

Cardiff University, School of Earth and Environmental Sciences, have completed research on “Determining causes and solutions for harmful algal blooms on the Wye River” (2024). The initial report<sup>1</sup> indicated the overarching conclusion to date from the project that:

“Phosphorus concentrations in the River Wye are likely not the primary cause of algal blooms in the river itself (this does not include its tributaries). It is suggested that nitrogen forms are of significant importance, however the likelihood is that river flows (low summer flows and high peak winter flows), combined with high summer temperature are of high importance. This emphasizes the need for an holistic management approach addressing flow rate riparian zone management, as well as all nutrient fractions is essential, and that a focus purely on phosphorus management will not address the needs for river water quality improvement in the River Wye.”

The final thesis is due to be published in January 2025.

Since the General Election, the new Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Steve Reed, has set out five new priorities for this next parliament, to:

- clean up rivers, lakes and seas;
- create a roadmap to move Britain to a zero waste economy;
- boost food security;
- ensure nature’s recovery and
- protect communities from the dangers of flooding.

These can all be related to the issues impacting the River Wye and the Wye catchment. He also commissioned a rapid review of the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) to be completed by the end of the year.

In October the Friends of the River Wye convened a meeting in Hay-on-Wye for the MPs in the Wye catchment to discuss the challenges facing the river. Four of the 5 MPs were able to attend, all from different parties: David Chadwick, Ellie Chowns\*, Catherine Fookes\* and Jesse Norman\*. Matt Bishop\* sent his apologies. [\*constituencies include the Wye Valley National Landscape]. All agreed that we need to tackle this problem cross-border, working with the English and Welsh governments, and that we need to see far greater enforcement action against pollution. Jessie Norman also raised the question in Parliament of whether the treasury fines from enforcement action could be ring-fenced for river restoration.

The Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, Derek Walker, has committed to making river and water quality a priority for his role. He has written to Huw Irranca-Davies, Welsh Government Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs, to provide advice and recommendations on the workings of the Rivers Summits that Welsh Government have hosted. See below for the link to the letter.

## ***Implications***

The Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) has provided its independent advice on the rapid review of the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP). It notes that greater scale and pace is needed if government is to secure the long-term improvements to its commitments. Five actions were identified that will deliver benefits across EIP goals:

1. Get nature friendly farming right
2. Maximise the contribution of protected sites for nature

3. Speed up action in the marine environment
4. Set out clear mechanisms for reconciling competing demands for use of land and sea.
5. Develop a circular economy framework.

plus three cross-cutting areas

6. Mobilise investment at the scale needed.
7. Regulate more effectively.
8. Harness the support needed to achieve ambitions.

Steve Reed, Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, has said “Nature will get back its voice at the very heart of this government because, as everyone...already knows, without nature there is no economy, no food, no health and no society.” Alongside this, the UK’s first ever Special Representative for Nature has been appointed. Ruth Davis OBE, a leading environmental policy expert will take on the joint DEFRA role with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. She will work with UK Government and stakeholders to drive forward nature recovery in the UK and overseas. Meanwhile the Wye Catchment Nutrient Management Board has agreed that there should be a seat on the Board for the river. These are pioneering efforts to translate into reality the concept behind rights for nature.

The Wyescapes - Food, nature, water - Landscape Recovery Project brings together 50 land holdings covering over 5000 hectares along the middle reaches of the Rivers Wye & Lugg, including about a third of the Wye Valley National Landscape. The participating farmers and land managers are working to identify actions and changes they can make to restore the river corridor, including reduced nutrient use, reverting high risk fields from arable cropping to grassland, creating new wetlands, floodplain meadows and woodlands. The project’s long-term aim is to restore as much of the Wye catchment as possible to a healthy condition, so its rivers and their tributaries can support the unique wildlife that depends on them, provide clean and plentiful water, be resilient to climate change, mitigate flood risk, provide places for people to enjoy – all while supporting sustainable food production. Wyescapes is funded by DEFRA’s Landscape Recovery Scheme and has now begun a 2-year development phase to outline how Wyescapes could be implemented over a 20-year period from April 2026. Wyescapes is run by the Herefordshire Rural Hib CIC with support from the Environment Agency, the Wye Valley National Landscape Team and local farming interests. For further information see <https://herefordshireruralhub.co.uk/5069-2/>.

The Duchy of Cornwall lead on the ‘Ridge to River’ Landscape Recovery Project centring on the Moccas Estate, near Bredwardine. It aims to unite around 20 local farms in collaborative effort to restore ecological health, enhance sustainability, and tackle critical environmental challenges in the Wye Valley. The anticipated outcome will be a resilient multi-functional landscape, boosting biodiversity, mitigating climate change and increasing social value.

The Environment Agency (EA) have identified that the River Wye is not failing its nutrient target for the Special Area of Conservation (SAC) designation, notably for orthophosphate, although it is close at some locations, whereas the River Lugg is. It is likely that there are Water Framework Directive (WFD) nutrient failures at the sub-catchment level, which EA are working on as part of the Wye Diffuse Water Pollution Plan (DWPP). The DWPP will be an interactive document and will be subject to further development and review. It is specific to the SAC target which is more stringent than WFD targets. There is a recognised need to focus on River Lugg nutrient data and its failing targets compared to the River Wye, apart from some key tributaries and sub-catchments. EA hosted Options Appraisal workshops with

partner organisations in July, looking at what additional measures and mechanisms could support nutrient reductions and deliver water quality improvements. In September they held a second workshop with farmers through the Herefordshire Rural Hub. Participants considered many constructive ideas, including wanting better tools for nutrient budgeting and more information about how farms might be contributing to nutrient issues.

The Wye Diffuse Water Pollution Plan is currently being prepared by the EA as part of the Nutrient Management Plan (NMP) for England, due in March 2025. Welsh Government have provided funding to deliver the evidence base for the Welsh catchment for the NMP. Powys County Council has awarded the tender for Enabling Nutrient Neutrality in Powys.

The Wye Catchment Management Plan (CMP) was last published in 2019. The Wye Catchment Partnership are leading on the review and preparation of the new CMP. It will cover the whole of the Wye catchment and consider the effects of all wider potential impacts upon the river, for example; flow, temperature, biodiversity and not just nutrients.

Natural England are working closely with the Catchment Sensitive Farming programme with extra targeted activity on the Wye to encourage the voluntary measures in place to provide buffers, cover crops and other appropriate measures. Similarly, the Wye & Usk Foundation Catchment Advisers are busy making farm visits and providing advice on opportunities to improve farm infrastructure and land management that are beneficial to both the business as well as the environment. They also assist with applications to funding schemes, including Countryside Stewardship and FiPL in England.

The Wye Adapt to Climate Change? Project has visited over 30 farms and landholdings in and around the Wye Valley National Landscape in the last year to provide advice on Nature-Based Solutions (NBS). These NBS are aimed at tackling and mitigating the effects of climate change, addressing biodiversity loss, and improving the sustainability of land management. A number of NBS interventions have been delivered on the back of advice provided.

The Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme has supported a wide range farm projects and land management enhancements in and around the Wye Valley National Landscape, including floodplain meadow restoration, undersowing crops, hedgerow and shelterbelt planting and natural flood management (NFM) interventions. All of these actions contribute to water and/or soil quality improvement in the Wye catchment.

In November, both Herefordshire Council and Natural Resources Wales (NRW) are hosting a Rivers Conference and River Restoration Seminar respectively. Herefordshire Council's Rivers Conference will focus on sustainable practices for arable farming. NRW's River Restoration Seminar will covers issues across Wales with a range of speakers from NRW and partner organisations. Meanwhile NRW formally launched their Upper Wye Restoration Project at the Royal Welsh Agricultural Show in July.

Monmouthshire County Council (MCC) have published their Rivers & Oceans Action Plan as part of the Council's Climate and Nature Emergency Strategy adopted in May 2024. Herefordshire Council are preparing their Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS).

The Friends of the River Wye in collaboration with the Wye Catchment Partnership host a website mapping the nature recovery and river restoration projects which helps to illustrate implementation of many of the above mentioned initiatives. For the interactive map see:

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1PteRW91dY08xahb3hYPw98R9DMZctfs&ll=52.127374854105206%2C-3.3238581523437523&z=9>

## **Background**

The Wye Valley National Landscape covers the lower reaches of the Wye, downstream from the confluence with the Lugg. The National Landscape, an area of outstanding natural beauty (AONB), covers only about 8% of the Wye Catchment although it contains about one third of the River Wye in length. The River Wye and its tributaries are a Special Quality as identified in the statutory Wye Valley AONB Management Plan. Most of the nutrients and contributing conditions for the algal blooms originate upstream of the AONB.

The Wye Valley National Landscape 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.

### Further reading:

Understanding algal blooms in the River Wye:

<https://environmentagency.blog.gov.uk/2024/07/19/understanding-algal-blooms-in-the-river-wye/>

<sup>1</sup>Determining causes and solutions for harmful algal blooms on the Wye River:

<https://www.wyeuskfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Report-prepared-for-the-Wye-and-Usk-Foundation-06.24.pdf>

River Wye Water Quality: <https://engageenvironmentagency.uk.engagementhq.com/hub-page/river-wye-water-quality-2>

Wye Catchment Partnership: <https://wyecatchmentpartnership.org/>

Wye Catchment Nutrient Management Board:

<https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/ieListMeetings.aspx?CId=1161&Year=0>

Future Generations Commissioner for Wales letter to Welsh Government Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs: <https://www.futuregenerations.wales/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/2024-09-02-Letter-to-Huw-Irranca-Davies.pdf>

OEP letter on EIP Rapid Review: <https://www.theoep.org.uk/sites/default/files/reports-files/OEP%20EIP%20Rapid%20Review%20Advice%20Letter%2012%20September%202024.pdf>

Monmouthshire County Council (MCC) Rivers & Oceans Action Plan:

<https://www.monmouthshire.gov.uk/climate-emergency/#CLIMATEEMERGENCYMONMOUTHSHIRE>