

RIVER WYE UPDATE

Purpose

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

FOR INFORMATION

Key Issues

- Lead partners from the Wye Catchment Partnership and Wye Nutrient Management Board met with Ministers from DEFRA and Welsh Government and local MPs in December to discuss the situation in the catchment.
- The chairs of the Wye Catchment Partnership and Wye Nutrient Management Board subsequently wrote to the Ministers (letter appended), from which further cross-border discussion have been taking place.
- Monmouth MP Catherine Fookes opened a debate in Westminster Hall in January on 'water quality in rivers, lakes and seas'.
- Lancaster University continue to build on their RePhoKus research, with further studies on Phosphorus and wider nutrient loading in the Wye as one of four cross-border catchments in the joint Horizon Europe NEW-Harmonica project.
- Environment Agency (EA) are progressing with drafting the Wye Diffuse Water Pollution Plan (DWPP), as part of the Nutrient Management Plan for England and Welsh Government are contributing with funding for the evidence base for the Welsh Nutrient Management Plan.
- More farm-based and in-field research is needed to make technical advances and significant nutrient reductions in the catchment, and particularly in specific sub catchments.
- The Wye Valley National Landscape Team continue to support the Wye Catchment Partnership and manage partnership projects and collaborative initiatives including through the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme, Wye Adapt to Climate Change?, Landscape Enhancement Initiatives (LEI) projects and Wyescapes Landscape Recovery to support farmers and land-managers in and around the National Landscape.

Reasons

There were various roundtable meetings to discuss the state of the River Wye with interested parties in the autumn of 2024, maintaining a high political profile for the issues in

the Wye Catchment. In December, Emma Hardy MP, DEFRA Minister for Water and Flooding, and Huw Irranca-Davies SM, Deputy First Minister of Wales and Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs, invited key stakeholders from the Wye Catchment Partnership and Nutrient Management Board, along with local MPs, to a stakeholder meeting about the River Wye. Following that meeting the chairs of the Wye Catchment Partnership and Nutrient Management Board wrote to both Ministers reiterating the need for dedicated cross-border resources for the Wye catchment. The letter is attached below.

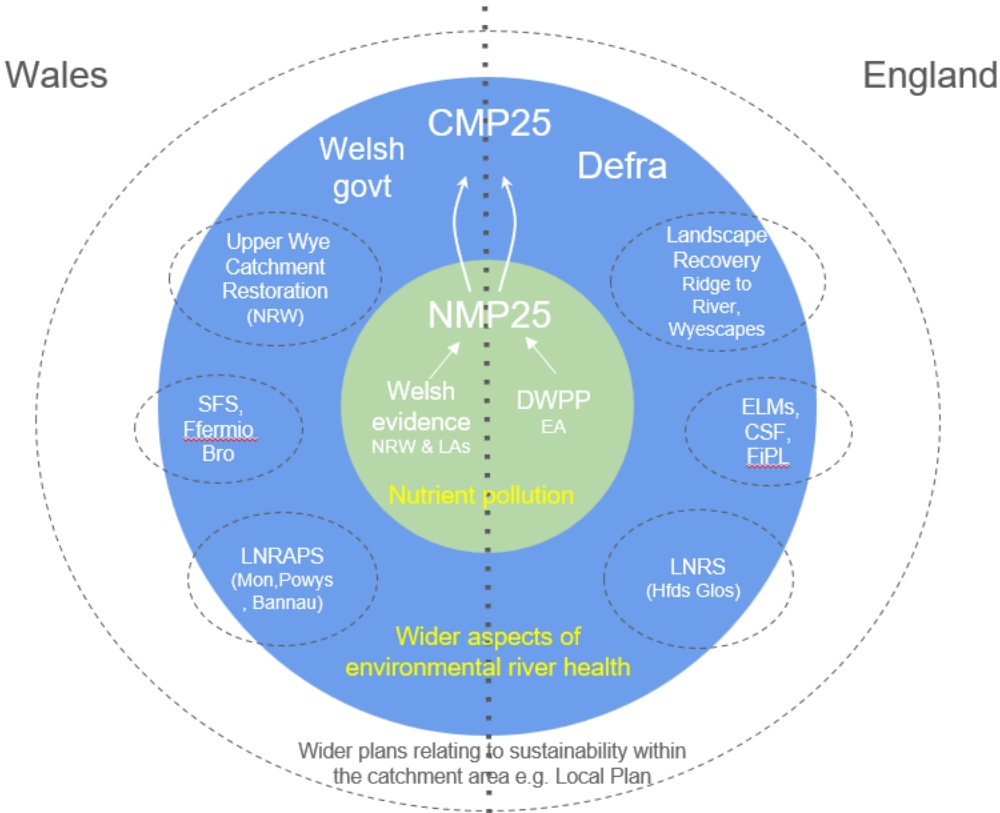
In a Westminster Hall debate in January on 'water quality in rivers, lakes and seas', Catherine Fookes MP for Monmouth, opened the session stating "Rivers know no boundaries. The Wye crosses four counties and two countries, so we need an integrated and coherent Wye catchment management plan that uses the best available evidence and a well-targeted programme of remedial measures to get our river cleaned up... The Government's mission is growth. We need to see the cleaning-up of our waterways as an integral part of our growth mission.... We know that tackling diffuse pollution from agriculture will be a hard nut to crack, with farmers already under pressure, but we have examples of good practice in the Wye. For example, Avara is already shipping out 75% of the chicken waste from its Herefordshire chicken farms along the Wye. That is to be welcomed, but it does not solve the long-term problems of too much phosphate in our rivers... By 2030, over 90% of the phosphate load will be from diffuse agricultural sources. It is not sewage that is our main problem here. I know this will be a hard conversation with farmers, but we need to start having it. We need to incentivise the right fertiliser applications and the right stocking rates in our river catchments on both sides of the border in order to ensure we remove the annual accrual and legacy surplus of excess phosphates and restore our rivers back to full health. Business as usual will not work." For the full debate see <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2025-01-15/debates/9D2B6284-1441-4BF8-ABC8-73A09798B551/RiversLakesAndSeasWaterQuality#main-content>

Implications

Since the Ministerial meeting in December, officials have been working cross-border on proposals to take forward research in the Wye catchment. It is anticipated that this will help identify the sorts of actions needed to tackle pollution of our iconic river and support the Wye Catchment Management Plan.

Meanwhile Lancaster University have continued to build on their RePhoKus research, on Phosphorus loading in the Wye, through the joint Horizon Europe NEW Harmonica project. The project has the goal of bringing in complementary knowledge and expertise, skills and networks to reduce nutrient emissions in four cross-border catchments: Meuse (Belgium and the Netherlands), Neagh-Bann (Northern Ireland & Republic of Ireland), and Wye (England & Wales). The catchments are all commonly characterized by intensive agriculture, high N and P pressures to water and subsequent exceedance of (WFD) water quality targets. Within the project, existing models and tools are being applied and tested, Best Management Practices are being evaluated, and governance and policy scenarios are being developed and assessed to achieve multiple desired environmental outcomes. For more detail see <https://newharmonica.eu/>. The project concludes at the end of the 2025, but preliminary findings indicate that massive reductions, and even cessations, of nutrient inputs are required to restore the Wye: hence this is not just a farming problem but a food system problem.

The Diffuse Water Pollution Plan (DWPP) continues towards publication (due spring 2025) and the Welsh Nutrient Management Plan is also underway. Both will need to be brought together to form a cross-border Nutrient Management Plan 2025 (NMP25). The NMP25 will synthesise current best available data and evidence, options appraisal and recommended actions to recover the nutrient balance of the catchment by stopping annual accrual and drawing down the legacy surplus of nutrients in the river and catchment soils. The Wye Catchment Management Plan (CMP25) has been scoped and costed to adopt a whole ecosystem, catchment-wide approach, integrating best available evidence into a coherent overarching plan to address all pressures on the catchment with a spatially prioritised and targeted programme of measures. However, CMP25 awaits confirmation of funding before it can progress. A schematic 'doughnut' overview of the related plans and cross-border delivery mechanisms is shown below.



Further research and farm-based testing of new management practices is needed in the catchment. Technical advances and significant nutrient reductions will only be achieved if and when farmers and land manager are confident that they can continue to live and work and be part of the landscape.

The Wye Valley National Landscape covers about one third of the River Wye in length, the lower reaches, and only about 8% of the Wye Catchment. Most of the nutrients and contributing conditions for the algal blooms originate upstream of the National Landscape. However, the Wye Valley National Landscape Partnership has the opportunity to test and trial projects and collaborative initiatives including through the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme, Wye Adapt to Climate Change?, the National Grid Landscape Enhancement Initiatives (LEI) projects and the Wyescapes Landscape Recovery scheme.

Background

The River Wye and its tributaries are a Special Quality as identified in the statutory Wye Valley AONB Management Plan. 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 outstanding natural beauty of the Wye Valley National Landscape.

The Wye Nutrient Management Board (NMB) is as a cross-border democratically accountable body with a particular focus on nutrient pollution issues within the catchment. It provides the only opportunity for public scrutiny of the use of public funds in the catchment. For further details see

<https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/mgCommitteeDetails.aspx?ID=1161>

The Wye Catchment Partnership (WCP) is a cross-border stakeholder group with more than 70 members and a catchment wide remit which takes a holistic ecosystem view of all pressures on river catchment health. For further details see

<https://wyecatchmentpartnership.org/>

The NMB and WCP work collaboratively to avoid duplication although there will always be areas of overlap.