TECHNICAL OFFICERS'
WORKING PARTY REPORT

WYE VALLEY NATIONAL LANDSCAPE
AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY
JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

7th July 2025

RIVER WYE UPDATE

Purpose

To advise members of the latest activities to help restore the River Wye.

FOR INFORMATION

Key Issues

- DEFRA and Welsh Government ministers have committed over £1million towards research in the Wye Catchment and production of the Wye Catchment Management Plan.
- There is anecdotal evidence of some modest recovery of Ranunculus, Water Crowfoot, in the Wye. Friends of the River Wye have launched the 'Big Ranunculus Watch' to find out.
- DEFRA have published amendments to the Farming Rules for Water.
- There are numerous collaborative initiatives involving public, private and 3rd sector parties progressing surveying and practical projects to monitor and deliver water quality and river health improvements.
- The national launch of Welsh Government's new Ffermio Bro programme was launched in the Wye Valley National Landscape. Ffermio Bro augments other partnership work by the Wye Valley National Landscape Team to support farmers and land-managers including the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme, Wye Adapt to Climate Change?, Landscape Enhancement Initiatives (LEI) and Wyescapes Landscape Recovery.
- The Wye Valley National Landscape Team are collaborating with the Severn Vale Catchment Partnership on 'Forest to Sea - A Vision and Strategic Action Plan for water in the Forest of Dean'.

Reasons

Declines in water quality in the Wye are attributable to rural land use, predominantly diffuse pollution from agriculture, and a smaller contribution from domestic waste water treatment. The River Wye is meeting its nutrient targets and many of the pressures exist in the sub-catchment, particularly the River Lugg. Targeted farm inspections are carried out by the Environment Agency (EA) in England and Natural Resources Wales (NRW). However, it is difficult to quantify nutrient reductions with scientific certainty, unlike point source discharges from water treatment processing.

Recent research by Lancaster University indicates that the over application of nutrients can be seen as far back as 1870, which has led to a build-up of legacy phosphates. There is also an increase of climatic impacts from high and low flows and river temperatures. High flows have contributed to the loss of Ranunculus, Water Crowfoot, and increased river temperatures impact salmon and support algal blooms.

In mid March the Chairs of the Nutrient Management Board (NMB) and Wye Catchment Partnership (WCP), Cllr Swinglehurst & James Marsden respectively, issued a joint Briefing Note for NMB & WCP Members:-

On the morning of Tuesday, 11 March 2025, Minister Emma Hardy and Welsh Government Deputy First Minister Huw Irranca Davies held a roundtable meeting at Bridges Community Centre in Monmouth. Both ministers shared a strong, unified commitment to restoring the River Wye and its catchment to good health.

This was the second joint meeting between the Wye NMB Chair and WCP Steering Group members with the ministers in three months. Since the first meeting on 12 December 2024, significant progress has been made, including the extension of the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme, funding for Ffermio Bro, and the expansion of the Wyescapes Landscape Recovery 2 project area.

Ministers are actively engaged and making progress based on what they hear and see on the ground. During the meeting, they announced £1 million in new funding to develop the Wye Catchment Management Plan 2025 (CMP25) and to support a cross-border research programme. This research will help farmers understand how to stop the annual build-up of surplus nutrients, draw down legacy surplus, reverse biodiversity decline, and address other issues like water flow, temperature, and CO2 emissions.

The CMP25, along with a related programme of measures, will be evidence-led and subject to public consultation. Funding for these measures will need to align with the plan, be spatially prioritised, and well-targeted. It will also require baseline regulation and robust monitoring and enforcement. A schematic overview of CMP25 and its delivery mechanisms is included below. CMP25 and its targeted programme of measures will use the best available evidence to define actions needed to address known pressures, where to focus them, and by when to meet legally binding targets. Farm businesses will be directly involved in the research to gather data and test solutions, with the findings helping to review and refine CMP25 and its delivery measures.

Key Opportunities:
Thanks to the maturity of the partnerships working to restore the catchment, we now have a unique opportunity to make meaningful progress:

- *A wealth of knowledge from passionate citizen scientists and community campaigners*
- *A growing number of farmers leading the way in sustainable, river-friendly farming*
- *An engaged supply chain working with partners to drive change*
- *An innovative rivers trust pushing for new solutions*
- *Academic partners contributing valuable insights and understanding*
- *A water company that has invested over £80 million in AMP7 (2020-2025) and will invest £115 million in AMP8 (2025-2030) to meet compliance targets*
- *Statutory agency officers who are personally committed and work closely with partners to support change*
- *Political commitment at all levels, with ministers and local authorities collaborating across the catchment, supported by the NMB and WCP*

- *A shared determination to restore the river, protect nature, and fulfill our obligations to future generations*

Together, we have a strong foundation to achieve lasting, positive change for the Wye.

Implications

DEFRA have confirmed that the £1million offered for in the Wye catchment will focus on land based research. The brief is being co-designed drawing on local knowledge and national expertise and will go out for formal tender in early autumn.

Meanwhile Welsh Government has offered £150,000 to fund the production of the Wye Catchment Management Plan. The Plan will encompass all aspects of river health including impacts of human activity, climate change and biodiversity loss. Production of the Catchment Management Plan will be overseen by the Catchment Management Partnership (CMP) and the CMP Steering Group. A brief for the Plan was drafted in the spring and tendering for the Plan production will be through Herefordshire Council, which should start shortly. It is intended that the Catchment Management Plan, when finalised and published, will present a series of costed opportunities identified on a catchment-wide scale to enable delivery of solutions and funding that address the following issues, among others:

- Flood and droughts - Increasing frequency of extreme high and low flows, and elevated water temperature, compounded by land management issues and abstraction;
- Water quality - influenced by sediment, nutrients, pesticides, herbicides and acidity;
- Biodiversity loss - declines in species abundance, distribution, habitat quality and connectivity, and invasive non-native species;
- Geomorphological limitations - weirs, overgrazed channels, channel straightening of the tributary network and restricted sediment supply;
- Elevated water temperatures – both summer and winter.

For further information on these issues, see https://wyeuskfoundation.org/issues/.

Over the summer, DEFRA has convened a task group to look at farming regulation and is expected to report in the autumn. The group has Ministerial support and includes agency and sector representatives. Government ambition is to improve the situation of the impact of agricultural pollution on water and air quality. Issues include Agricultural requirements regarding production; habitat creation and restoration; Water company distribution of sewage sludge; potential use of spot fines and agency remits, targets and systems.

Meanwhile, DEFRA has published new 'Statutory guidance on Enforcing the Farming Rules for Water'. The guidance relates to 'The Reduction and Prevention of Agricultural Diffuse Pollution (England) Regulations 2018', also known as the 'Farming Rules for Water'. These were introduced to reduce and prevent diffuse water pollution from agricultural sources. It covers applying and storing fertilisers and the management of soil and livestock. The guidance is for the Environment Agency, with respect to the Agency's functions under these regulations. For further information see https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/applying-the-farming-rules-for-water/applying-the-farming-rules-for-water

Citizen Science monitoring by volunteers in the Wye catchment continues with an active network of 333 sites co-ordinated through the Wye Alliance. This is the collaborative partnership of the Friends of the River Wye (FORW), the Wye Salmon Association (WSA) and

the Campaign for Rural England (CPRE) – Herefordshire Branch. Monitoring includes regular surveying of river water samples and measurement of the following:-

- Soluble Reactive Phosphate
- Total Oxidised Nitrate
- Turbidity
- Electrical Conductivity
- Temperature
- SAC species observations, &
- Fixed-point photography

These are all available on the WyeViz open-source interactive dashboard, with entries logged and quality assured before being published in weekly updates. The dashboard is here:- https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/mcarpenter/viz/WyeVizWyeAllianceCitizenScienceda shboard/ riverhealthmeasures . This can be searched by river and tributary, and by specific data measure, from July 2020 to the present. Consequently there is a huge amount of data that is now being utilised by the Environment Agency (EA) and Natural Resources Wales (NRW). The agencies are now able to follow up alerts of significant spikes in data and make investigations where appropriate and as necessary.

The EA surveys algae and water chemistry in the River Wye (in England) every month between April and September. The data suggests that algal blooms are not being caused by eutrophication or phosphate pollution, but water temperature and slower flows have much greater influence on the abundance of algae in the Wye. Generally the Wye meets its phosphate targets for both annual and growing season compliance, as monitored at 13 sites by the EA. However, the River Lugg consistently fails downstream of Leominster, at the 5 sites monitored. The Lugg is now being surveyed for algae and water chemistry to provide comparison with conditions in the Wye where nutrients are much lower. Currently in both the Wye and Lugg nothing toxic has been identified. Abundances of toxic algae in the Wye were recorded in a study in the 1980s.

Ranunculus, Water Crowfoot, in the River Wye almost completely disappeared following the floods in 2020. However, for the first time in 5 years flowering Ranunculus has been seem in a few places along the Wye. The recovery of this key species is important for the ecology of the river. The status of the Wye as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) is partly due to the presence of this keystone species which provides rich habitat for many fresh water species to flourish. Consequently, Ranunculus is one of the Wye Valley National Landscape's target species with a Species Action Plan being prepared. Previously, before 2020, Ranunculus beds covered large parts of the river, with their long fronds of green weed flowing under the surface and the carpets of white flowers sticking out of the water. Monmouth and Ross Rowing Clubs had special dispensation to cut the Ranunculus to open up their stretches for rowing races. That is no longer necessary, but the reasons for its decline in recent years are not well understood. What data there is suggests that the decline is not associated with nutrient pollution. But there is little information on where the Ranunculus beds were that have disappeared. Friends of the River Wye have therefore launch the 'Big Ranunculus Watch' and are asking people to share photos of Ranunculus, past or present, from anywhere in the Wye catchment. Much like the other Citizen Science data, this will be used to map the presence of Ranunculus through time to enable a better understanding of where it was and where, and whether, it is recovering or if it is still in decline. For me information see:- https://friendsoftheriverwye.org.uk/news/big-ranunculus-watch

Meanwhile the Wye & Usk Foundation (WUF) continue their advice and project work with farmers and landowners across the catchment. In partnership with EA and WSA and various landowners, WUF are testing and developing a tool to map the risk of erosion and soil loss in the Garren and Gamber sub-catchment, which comes into the Wye Valley National Landscape at Marstow. It is intended that the tool can assess the majority of the sub-catchment with the potential to risk score individual fields. Farmers can then use the information to determine the soil loss risk of each field, specific to particular crop times and land use management. This can also be used or presented to buyers in the supply chain, eg. to complement or augment assurance schemes. The tool is currently undergoing ground-truthing with the intention of further testing and roll out.

NRW's Upper Wye Catchment Restoration Project is funded by Welsh Government's Nature and Climate Emergency Fund, part of the Water Capital Programme, to restore the condition of the upper River Wye. The project is working to protect species and enhance habitats by addressing a range of pressures affecting the river. For the Project's latest newsletter, see: https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/UKNRW/bulletins/3d928c3

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 Valley National Landscape Team delivers 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. Staff are also actively engaged in the Wye Catchment Partnership and Farm Herefordshire.

On behalf of the Wye Catchment Partnership, the Wye Valley National Landscape Team are collaborating with EA staff and the Severn Vale Catchment Partnership on the 'Forest to Sea - A Vision and Strategic Action Plan for water in the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire'. The Forest to Sea strategic document covers the tributaries that rise in the Forest of Dean and flow into the Severn and Wye within the Forest of Dean. It therefore covers the Gloucestershire part of the National Landscape. The document sets out the environmental priorities and objectives for these rivers, brooks and streams through consultation with stakeholders. The plan seeks to include ambitious and specific objectives to be delivered by 2035, while allowing flexibility to consider other opportunities when they arise.

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 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.

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 opportunity for public scrutiny 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.