

# Severn Estuary Flood Risk Strategy



August 2011 Briefing note

## Update following the consultation

Following the consultation on our draft strategy earlier this year, the Environment Agency is taking 'time out' to review and assess the responses. In the meantime, we will not implement the draft strategy as it stands.

Since the consultation on the draft strategy closed, the Environment Agency has been in discussion with the Department of Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) Flood & Coastal Risk Management, Defra Protected Areas, Natural England, Welsh Government Flood & Coastal Risk Management and Countryside Council for Wales, about the issues raised.

The principal concern raised was the proposal to allocate areas of farmland for the creation of inter-tidal habitat to maintain a balance of wildlife habitat within the estuary.

Maintaining the quality of natural environment in the Estuary is a legal requirement. However we are refining our approach and hope to reduce the area of land required for inter-tidal habitat. We need to be sure that our proposals will not lead to European Union infraction proceedings (legal action leading to fines on Government).

We will also use this period of review to incorporate the latest range of predictions for sea level rise.

Once it is clear that Defra and the Welsh Government can support the proposed amended approach, we will contact consultees and those directly affected to advise them of how we intend to revise the strategy. We expect this to be in the autumn 2011.

Where realignment of defences is still considered to be the best option, we will aim to achieve this by agreement with landowners. In many cases this will be by purchase of land at market rates. Compulsory purchase would only be a last resort.

## Frequently asked questions from the consultation

### 1) Why is there so much emphasis on creating wildlife habitat in a flood risk management strategy?

Our existing flood defences are contributing to some habitat loss because the defences stop the estuary naturally adjusting its shape as sea levels rise. The Government is legally obliged to put back the habitat that is lost. Without the habitat being replaced we may have to stop maintaining or improving the flood defences.

### 2) What are you using to predict how much habitat will be lost in the estuary?

We start with predictions of sea level rise currently accepted by Defra and Welsh Government. We have used computer models to estimate how the estuary would change shape with higher sea levels and the extra water that would flow in and out on each tide. We then look at the different types of inter-tidal habitat that would form at each location. This is largely decided by ground levels and how salty the water is.

### 3) How does the Environment Agency decide whether to maintain or improve a flood defence?

We have a certain amount of money to spend on defences each year. We are expected to get best value out of every pound spent, which means directing our efforts to where flood damage is likely to be greatest, which is usually in urban areas.

We estimate what damage flooding is likely to cause using information that is standard for everywhere in the country. We add together the potential damage and the likelihood of that damage occurring to houses, industry, infrastructure and agriculture. We then compare that with the cost of

preventing that damage. Areas where we can prevent most damage for the least money will tend to receive more maintenance or improvements to flood defences.

There are some instances where we maintain a defence or build a new one for legal reasons, for example as may be required under Habitats Regulations. In this case we will find the least expensive way to meet these legal obligations.

#### **4) How is agricultural land valued within a flood risk management strategy?**

Land is valued at market value less an allowance for the agricultural payments or subsidies that may apply. Government policy is that farmland does not get special treatment, that is we don't count the value of food that might be produced from the land. This is similar to industrial land – we do not count the value of production from factories that might be lost without flood protection.

#### **5) Why are you proposing to realign some defences that could otherwise be maintained well into the future?**

We will need to move some existing defences to meet Government obligations to maintain certain wildlife habitats (see Q1), assuming sea levels rise as predicted. We propose realignments where it is least expensive to make the change and where the fewest number of houses and other infrastructure is affected.

#### **6) How do you go about turning farmland into an inter-tidal area for wildlife habitat?**

We look for areas where landowners are either willing to sell their landholding or want to enter environmental stewardship for managing inter-tidal habitats. We would then talk with the local community to discuss how the land can be re-designed to meet their needs after flood banks are

moved. We would design a scheme with new inland flood banks, where required, to protect buildings or road access. We would also try to move affected wildlife – setting aside areas behind the new flood banks.

#### **7) Why does the Environment Agency allow building in flood plains?**

We generally object to planning proposals to build new properties in flood plains. However the Local Authority make the final decision, not us. There are many cases where we have objected to development but it has been allowed because of other demands in the area. However the number of planning consents given for building in flood plains has dropped a lot in recent years.

#### **8) Why don't you dredge the river?**

There has not been a long history of dredging south of Gloucester because silt re-accumulates so quickly. Deepening the channel would not change the tide level.

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[www.severnestuary.net/frms](http://www.severnestuary.net/frms)