

EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE WYE CATCHMENT NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT BOARD (NMB)

Location: Herefordshire CC Offices, Plough Lane on Friday 26th April

WSA MEMBERS BRIEFING

At a meeting of the Wye Catchment Partnership (WCP) on 17th April the recently released DEFRA 'Plan for the Wye' was discussed. It was clear that no members of the WCP, including most, if not all, bodies active in the Wye catchment had not been consulted in its preparation.

Note! WSA are represented on both the WCP and the NMB.

Having had only a brief time to study it, the plan was released late on 12th April, WCP members requested via Elissa Swinglehurst, chair of NMB, a Herefordshire County Councillor, and a member of the WCP this meeting was arranged with the newly appointed (by Defra) Wye Champion and a DEFRA representative.

The meeting was constructive but quite clearly expressed the concerns by all over lack of detail, lack of performance metrics and missed opportunities to consult with many around the table who have years of experience of these issues.

A few headline points follow to provide a flavour of the debate, they are not minutes but simply my observations.....

Anthea McIntyre, the newly appointed Wye Champion. Is a former Conservative Party politician who served as a Member of the European Parliament for the West Midlands from 2011 to 2020. Born in London, now living in the Wye Catchment at Walford, Ross on Wye. A partner in the Wythall Estate since 1976.

Concern was raised over lack of consultation. No real explanation as to why not. Will Lacy was introduced as the Defra leader of the plan development.

Anthea was quizzed over the potential length of her appointment. She was clear that if the pending General Election resulted in a change of government her role would cease to exist. However, she would in that case be working hard to be retained in the role.

General consensus, welcoming the plan but agreement that this plan falls far short of what is needed to restore the Wye.

Plan is currently not cross border. Incredibly, this plan only seems to cover England, not Wales. Where is the cross-border plan for the whole river that everyone has long called for? Cathryn Osbourne, introduced as Welsh Government (WG) 'Guru for Phosphate' in Wales confirmed WG keen to work with Defra on the plan in line with SAC policy. This would include plans such as the current developing Upper Wye Restoration Project.

Part of Andrea McIntyre's role would be to work with WG and NRW on a whole Wye plan. She believes a 'one size fits all plan' was not the way forward. Members wary of another plan being added to the many others already in development, especially when it lacks timescales and delivery targets. A great deal of time, effort and money has gone into a new plan being developed, collaboratively, by the Wye Catchment Partnership. Will the government commit to aligning with this plan, which is being driven by the latest science? Andrea suggested she would see the inclusion of the best parts of current WCP and NMB plans delivering a more cohesive result.

Work of our citizen scientists acknowledged in the introduction to this plan, though disappointing we weren't consulted about its content. The best way to respect the work of our army of volunteers would have been to draw on their local expertise, a missed opportunity to create an ambitious plan, that could actually restore the river. Will Lacy intimated there may be some funding for CS activity, particularly for kit.

Glaring hole in plan is no mention of enforcement of environmental regulations. Environment Agency and Natural Resources Wales don't have sufficient resources to investigate pollution incidents and take enforcement action against polluters. This plan offers nothing to address this colossal failure. It was agreed this must be addressed.

The immediate thing needed on the Wye is a dramatic reduction in the application of fertilisers, no matter their source. This plan misses the mark. Such a policy must, at the very least, be accompanied by a moratorium on all new intensive livestock units, not just poultry, and a progressive plan to reduce livestock numbers in the catchment.

Concerns over 'emerging new chemicals and their impact on the river was raised. Plan must not focus wholly on phosphate or Phosphorus.

A farming representative suggested members should get out of their offices, celebrate successes and work together. Point was made that to do this we need evidence of resulting actions. Success and so failure is measured by metrics not hot air..

A wholehearted welcome for the news that Defra will support the creation of wide, wild river buffers.

Fear that focus on 'tech solutions' to deal with poultry manure risks locking in an unsustainable model of factory farming, reliant upon importing feed, exporting waste.

Concern shown over plan to equip livestock farmers with Micro Anaerobic Digesters (AD). AD plants are highly complex to run and when they go wrong, they're dangerous. Already issues in the Wye catchment with maize grown to feed into AD plants, a major source of soil erosion and run-off into rivers.

The plan focusses on 'permitted' poultry farms, which only applies to farms with over 40,000 birds, those with fewer birds don't require a permit. Many free-range egg farms fall below this threshold and therefore go unmonitored, despite posing a serious pollution risk. Why can't Defra reduce the environmental permit threshold to ensure these sites manage their manure responsibly?

Well publicised £35m funding was questioned and Will Lacy for Defra agreed that this was England only, included current progressing projects such as 'Restore Rivers' and 'Arrow Diversity', SFI/ELMS/Landscape Recovery, the rest existing in the Defra budget, so technically not new money.

Very little mention of salmon stocks except it recognises Salmon as an indicator species and that the 'DEFRA plan sets out commitments to stop the decline of the River Wye', and therefore presumably salmon stocks, but no ambition to ensure salmon will achieve conservation status. As a result WSA will be endeavouring to meet Ms McIntyre and Will Lacy as soon as possible to brief them fully on the state of the Wye salmon fishery and what is needed to ensure its recovery.

Based on the discussions that took place plus the responses from both Angela McIntyre, Wye Champion and Will Lacy, Defra, a formal response is being prepared by the NMB Chair Elissa Swinglehurst.

Stuart Smith
WSA