

ITEM 14d

Somerset Rivers Authority Board Paper (for information)

Strategic Approach to Mitigation

Purpose of the item

This paper summarises the current status of the Strategic Approach to Mitigation project.

Background and context

The SRA Board commissioned Natural England to coordinate the development and implementation of a Strategic Approach to Mitigation for the environmental impact of SRA works. The aim of the Strategic Approach to Mitigation is:

- To develop positive solutions enabling delivery of schemes to reduce flood risk whilst making appropriate use of the flood plain to convey and temporarily store flood water and maintaining the special characteristics of Somerset.
- To provide greater certainty and clarity to Flood Action Plan project developers/deliverers, reducing costs and time spent, and provide a positive solution that works for flood risk, people and nature.
- To ensure compliance with relevant legislation.

The Somerset Levels and Moors contain the largest area of lowland wet grassland in England. Huge flocks of migratory waterfowl arrive in winter, more than at any other inland site in the UK. The site's importance is year-round as it is one of the UK's most important breeding areas for lapwing, curlew, redshank and snipe: wading birds that depend on extensively grazed wet grassland.

The floodplain's surviving biodiversity is recognised by a series of statutory designations. There are 17 Sites of Special Scientific Interest reflecting the national importance of 7,300 hectares (ha) for lowland wet grassland, breeding wader populations and aquatic invertebrates. Twelve of the SSSIs, covering almost 6,400 ha, have been classified as important for wintering wildfowl and designated a Special Protection Area under the EC Birds Directive. The tiers of conservation designations are completed by recognition under the Ramsar Convention that the best habitats on the floodplain are notable for rare aquatic invertebrates and wintering waterfowl, making it one of the world's premier wetlands.

Flood Management projects such as dredging and Sowy/King's Sedgemoor Drain improvement will result in the reduction in extent and duration of water on the floodplain. Dredging may enable pumps to be started earlier and change the speed at which moors can have floodwater removed. Low level flood events are essential for the health of the Somerset wetlands especially for providing the ongoing conditions for winter bird

populations. Reduction of these low level, near natural flood events reduces feeding habitat for winter waterfowl both within designated sites and associated ¹Functionally Linked Land.

Natural England is committed to the delivery of the Flood Action Plan and continues to work in partnership to ensure that Somerset maintains its special characteristics.

Natural England has identified the following initial strategic mitigation actions that are required to be funded and implemented over the next two years to ensure the compliance of SRA projects already delivered, and future projects.

Develop a robust and long-term monitoring programme. This programme should clearly demonstrate compliance with environmental legislation and maintenance of designated areas. This is required to ensure that there are no detrimental impacts to the Somerset Levels Special Protection Area (SPA) condition by SRA flood management projects (already delivered and future projects). This requires a funding mechanism to take action if monitoring shows an impact.

Review and update of all Water Level Management Plans (WLMPs). All WLMPs are out of date. Reviewing and updating is required to ensure that there is agreement and a clear process to follow to operate the system in such a way that ensures conditions required are being met without effecting homes or infrastructure. A review of each moor is required to look at options to manage into the future, for example managing the moor with fewer structures to reduce costs and create a less managed system.

Introduce Operational Protocols. Establish Environmental Trigger Points and set out procedures following winter and summer flood events. These protocols should ensure that wetland conditions remain suitable for wintering and breeding waterfowl without effecting homes and infrastructure. The operational protocols should be linked to the water level management plans. For example reduction of pumping in the winter period.

Identification and mapping of areas outside of designated sites. Project to identify land outside designated sites that is critical to wintering bird populations (Functionally Linked Land). This improved environmental mapping will be able to clearly show areas of land that will need to be considered through habitats regulations as functional linked land (and areas that do not). It will also show areas that have potential for mitigation. Natural England has started working on this project.

Longer term proposals are being drafted, for presentation to the SRA Board in June 2020.

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¹ Functionally Linked Land describes areas of land or sea occurring *outside* of a designated site which nonetheless are considered to be critical to or necessary for the ecological or behavioural functioning in a relevant season of a qualifying feature for which that site has been designated.