

RSPB briefing: A flood-resilient future

3rd February 2014

This winter's flooding on the Levels and elsewhere, is a stark reminder that Britain will face greater flood risk over the coming years.

The Somerset Levels:

1. The RSPB

The RSPB manages over 2,000 acres in the Somerset Levels. With staff, volunteers and supporters living in the area, the RSPB have been closely involved in flood management for over thirty years.

The damage and distress of the past month shows that a lasting solution needs to be found for the Levels.

2. The Levels Action Plan:

We welcome the Secretary of State's call for an action plan to address extreme flooding on the Levels.

The RSPB agree with many on the Levels that **there is a role for river dredging** within this plan, but out experience and the Environment Agency studies suggest that **dredging alone will not prevent flood damage** after the next prolonged rainfall.

Action will also be needed to make the floodplain less vulnerable to flood damage; defending homes and roads, adapting farm practices to occasional flooding, slowing floodwater upstream and spreading it into appropriate parts of the Levels once it arrives.

3. Five key principles for the Somerset Levels (developed and shared with Somerset Wildlife Trust)

- i. **Focus flood defence resources on protecting lives, homes and utilities.** Invest in: better local flood defences for vulnerable rural properties, improvements to key roads making them less vulnerable to disruption, and more support in preparing Level's communities for extreme events.
- ii. **Slow the water flow upstream to reduce peak floods on the Levels.** For example, upstream soils can be made less compact, natural habitats can be restored, more broadleaved trees can be planted and temporary flood storage created along drainage systems – in both upstream towns and the countryside.

This has been effective elsewhere in the country, and needs to be used to help the Levels as well.

- iii. **Use the existing water management infrastructure better by spreading flood water more appropriately when it reaches the floodplain.** Make better use of the Parrett Flood Relief Channel and the gravity floodplain across King's Sedgemoor. Plan and enable land-use change to provide more space for water.
- iv. **Build greater resilience in the floodplain land uses.** Incentivise the use of more flood-tolerant pastures, and encourage flood-sensitive crops such as silage and maize to be grown off the floodplain.
- v. **Maintain critical watercourses to ensure appropriate levels of drainage.** This includes dredging at the right scale to keep water moving on the Levels, but in planning how and where to dredge, don't damage the Level's wildlife-rich wetlands.

Nationally:

4. Long term resilience to flooding

With a **changing climate**, we can expect heavier rainfall and higher seas, and will need to adapt our landscape to cope with both. Government will need to plan for this, and help all parts of the country to adapt.

A shift to less intensive, more wildlife friendly farming will have a central role to play in building resilience back into farmed landscapes that are at most risk of flooding. For example, species rich wetland pastures are less susceptible to damage when flooding does happen, and are also better for farmland wildlife. New markets could be developed for energy production from wetland biomass while controlled flooding, over agreed areas of land that have been prepared for floodwaters, will give farmers and residents far greater confidence and security.

Natural habitats can also slow heavy rainfall as it moves through the upper reaches of catchments and reduce flood peaks as they move across floodplains. While at the coast managed realignment offers a way of recreating valuable natural habitat and protecting homes cost-effectively. For example, the RSPB's Medmerry reserve, which opened in November, protected 350 homes and an A-road in January's surge.

We believe that supporting farms to adapt in a way that also allows wildlife to thrive is a valuable use of **agri-environment funding**, and rural development support more generally.

Better use must also be made of direct subsidies under the CAP, which provide significant sums of public money to agriculture in exchange for meeting baseline requirements. Basic measures to reduce flood risk should be added to these requirements, including controls on activities that add soil to rivers or ones that increase flood run-off by compacting soils. Maize farming next to vulnerable rivers is the clearest example. Better enforcement of

existing requirements could also have significant benefits for the condition of land and thus flood risk.

The **Environment Agency and Natural England**, as the government agencies responsible for flooding and land management, have a vital role to play. Nationally, the Environment Agency have performed well in this winter's floods; their concentration on protecting households and people has defended over a million homes from the highest tidal surges in 60 years. However, this policy has left sparsely populated places like the Somerset Levels feeling abandoned. There is a need for Defra and the government agencies to offer a clear and positive future to these parts of the country, through constructive use of all of their powers and budgets including Agri-Environment and Local Economic Partnerships.

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