

Stream 'restoration' opponents threaten judicial review move

CAMPAIGNERS against a controversial wetland restoration project near Fordingbridge could seek a judicial review in a bid to prevent work starting next month.

The £250,000 scheme, which involves importing 10,000 tonnes of gravel to fill in Latchmore Brook, has prompted widespread condemnation from local residents amid claims it will damage the area.

The Friends of Latchmore have now started to prepare for a judicial review of the Forestry Commission's intention to press ahead with the project without any site-specific environmental assessments.

Spokesperson Fiona Macdonald refused to give details about how any legal challenge would be financed, but told the 'A&T': "We are not going into this naively.

"We are currently looking at all our legal options and we are aware of the potential costs of a judicial review and have been planning for it for some time.

"We are willing to do whatever it takes to ensure that appropriate assessments are completed before this work is done."

The group, made up of around 100 local residents, claims the assessments are needed because the New Forest is a highly protected and environmentally sensitive area under UK and EU legislation.

Chairman John Shepherd, a leading research professor at Southampton University, claimed the relevant legislation imposes specific requirements, and also a general duty of care, to preserve and protect the environment, habitats,

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flora and fauna of the national park.

He added: "This includes a duty to ensure that activities undertaken within such areas are not significantly or unnecessarily damaging. The Forestry Commission and its partners have until June 15th to respond."

The Forestry Commission-led project is currently supported by the national park authority, the Commoners' Defence Association and the verderers, who all say it will improve grazing for livestock and result in major scrub removal.

Prof. Shepherd continued: "If the partners are prepared to suspend the work planned for this summer on the Latchmore Brook so issues we have raised can be properly investigated, the Friends will be happy to take part in discussions with independent experts to resolve these issues. Otherwise we now have no alternative to taking legal action."

The matter was also raised at the annual meeting of Hyde Parish Council on Friday in last week when members of the public called on the the authority to withdraw its support.

Prof. Shepherd explained that members of the public voted 35 to three in favour of a motion asking the parish council to rethink its stance.

He added: "This issue is important and it is now very urgent, since work may begin again in July. I hope that the council will not wait to resolve the matter."