

100 object to £1.5m Forest stream restoration plan

MORE than 100 people have written to the national park authority urging it to stop £1.5m plans to turn a popular New Forest stream back to historic wetland.

The Forestry Commission's proposals for Latchmore Brook, near Hyde, have been described as "vandalism" by local MP Desmond Swayne and now scores have joined the call for it to be abandoned.

The work along several miles of river would reverse the 19th and 20th century deepening of the stream by raising the level of the river bed with 96,000 tonnes of material, as well as reinstating meanders and removing vegetation.

The Forestry Commission has already spent more than £250,000 and says the partly EU-funded work is vital to stop erosion and seasonal floods from damaging habitat rated as internationally important. It runs through a series of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

But opponents say the four-year project is unnecessary, a waste of funds, and will spoil a much-loved beauty spot described as a Mecca for walkers, naturalists and artists.

Among those fighting the scheme is the Friends of Latchmore group which is already fundraising to build up a war chest for a fight in court, if necessary.

On their side is Professor John Shepherd, from the National Oceanography Centre at the University of Southampton. He wrote there is "very little wrong with the present environmental state" and the problems the Forestry Commission aimed to

solve were "of little ecological significance".

There was no evidence to prove the works would improve the environment, he added, which was a "scandalous failure" to ensure value for money using public funds.

Godshill Parish Council also objected, saying: "The catastrophic impact of the 'restoration' on the existing habitats, ecology and landscape which vastly outweighs the alleged benefits." Similar restoration projects had left "ugly scars", it said.

In favour of the scheme are 25 letters, including one from Dr Pam Taylor of the British Dragonfly Society, who said removing trees and scrub would help the insects to flourish. The Environment Agency also said it gave its "full support".

To prove its case, the Forestry Commission has invested in a full Environmental Impact Assessment to go with its application to the national park authority for planning permission.

The in-depth survey admitted there would be short-term harm, such as fish having to be relocated, but after two years' plant growth the impact on the area's character would "not be significant".

It said the work would stop seasonal flooding and erosion damaging the river banks and unique surrounding landscape. It would also ultimately encourage rare species such as the southern damselfly, smooth snake, birds, fish and otters.

Without the restoration, it warned, the area's SSSIs could be negatively classified by government adviser Natural

England as "unfavourable declining" instead of "recovering".

Bruce Rothnie, Forestry Commission Deputy Surveyor for the New Forest and South District, said last month: "It's a rare opportunity to conserve our fragile landscape and support the commencing community.

"Independent research has shown that wetland restoration brings significant benefits to a vast number of wildlife and plant life that inhabit New Forest's waterways."

The proposed works would last four years in stages of up to 12 weeks each summer. If approved the project will start at Islands Thorns Inclosure in July 2017 and finish at Latchmore Shade in September of 2020.

The project is part of the mainly EU-funded Higher Level Stewardship scheme to restore internationally important habitats and is the largest of its kind in Europe.

The national park authority will make a decision after the end of the consultation period on September 2nd.