

NEW FOREST

Throwing the brook

NEW FOREST residents hope to block an EU-funded scheme to re-route a brook to follow a more "historic" pattern, saying it will increase flood risk and harm the existing rare wildlife.

The wetland restoration scheme is the brainchild of the Forestry Commission, supported by the New Forest National Park Authority (NFNPA) and the New Forest Verderers, the two official bodies responsible for administering the unique common grazing in the New Forest. It would be paid for from what is now likely to be a final bite of the cherry from the Higher Level Stewardship Fund (HLSF), the EU's agri-environment scheme, which is supposed to be for restoring and enhancing internationally important habitat.

Officials say the current route of Latchmore Brook is the result of Victorian interference, which saw the brook cut deeper to act as a drainage ditch. They want to create a shallower, more meandering route by bringing in thousands of tonnes of "in-fill" (ie stony gravel, sand and clay) to fill in 7km of the existing brook. They believe this will bring back rare insects and encourage other wildlife.

Similar schemes elsewhere in the New Forest have not been a roaring success, say



the Friends of Latchmore Brook, who have collected photographs of water-free rubble paths across the countryside, which used to be fish-filled brooks supporting rare insect life.

Indeed, Latchmore Brook, in its current form, features in guides to where to see rare dragonflies and damselflies. It is already recognised as a site of special scientific interest and subject to the highest levels of environmental protection. Three fish species "of conservation importance" live in the brook, according to the Forestry Commission's own environmental reports.

Local MP Desmond Swayne dubbed the scheme "state-funded vandalism". He said the ponies and cattle grazing by the stream make for an iconic scene which draws many visitors to the area.

The plan is due to be considered by NFNPA planners later this year, with the consultation period due to end in early September. The friends group is already crowdfunding in readiness for a legal challenge, as no previous scheme has been refused and the planning authority is a partner of the Forestry Commission in the project.