'Withdraw Latchmore application’

Campaigners say it should be included in wetlands review

BY BEN CRAIG

THE PROMISE of a review of controversial wetland restoration in the New Forest has led to campaigners against the £1.5m project at Latchmore Brook calling for the planning application to be withdrawn pending the outcome.

Opinion is divided on the scheme proposed at Latchmore, between Fritham and Hyde, with some branding the scheme “vandalism” and others hailing it as work vital to protecting internationally important habitat.

The latest twist comes after Natural England, the government’s environment advisor, confirmed this week there would be an overall review of “the evidence that supports wetland restoration in the New Forest.”

However, both Natural England and the Forestry Commission, which is leading the project, insist that plans for Latchmore Brook already submitted to the national park authority will go through for a decision. The details and timing of the review have not been finalised yet.

It is aimed at improving the habitat by returning the stream to its state before it was straightened to act as a drainage channel by Victorian engineers. There have been 84 letters of support, including from the verduners and the New Forest Association.

But against it are more than 330 objections, including the New Forest Equestrian Association and the New Forest History and Archaeology group, who say it is a waste of money which will spoil miles of a much-loved beauty spot.

The latest high-profile objection has come from Dr Jonathan Todd, a senior curator at the Natural History Museum who in 1999 studied the brook where it passes through Studley Wood. He warned filling the watercourse would cover sediments important for geological research.

Meanwhile, New Forest West MP Desmond Swayne has raised the issue in parliament, quilzing the environment secretary over the cost of the project and whether there has been habitats regulation assessment to check its likely impact.

Junior environment minister Theresa Coffey confirmed the estimated cost was £1.5m but said a habitats regulation assessment was not needed because it had the consent of Natural England and was “necessary for the management of the site”.

An environmental impact assessment had been voluntarily undertaken by the Forestry Commission, she pointed out.

A Natural England spokesperson said: “Natural England and the Forestry Commission will be undertaking a joint assessment of the evidence that supports wetland restoration in the New Forest with a view to learning lessons for future projects, both locally and nationally.”

The project is part of the mainly EU-funded Higher Level Stewardship scheme to restore internationally important habitats.

If approved it would be carried out over four years during 12-week phases of work each summer. The national park authority was scheduled to make a decision this month.

Natural England and the Forestry Commission say the Latchmore Brook restoration scheme would improve the habitat by returning the stream to its former state. Below: Campaigners oppose the move