

# MP urges minister to decide stream plans

## NPA has 'conflict of interest' over Latchmore

BY BEN CRAIG

CONTROVERSIAL plans to transform a popular New Forest stream into its original wetland may ultimately be decided by the government after a local MP asked for it to be taken out of the national park authority's hands because of conflict of interest.

The Forestry Commission's £1.5m scheme for several miles of Latchmore Brook, between Fritham and Hyde, is currently being considered for approval by the NPA.

But it has now been put forward for a "call-in" by New Forest West MP Sir Desmond Swayne who has previously attacked the idea to create more mires as "vandalism".

It means that if the proposals are approved and Sir Desmond's request is allowed, the scheme will go before a planning inspector at a public inquiry. A recommendation would be made to the communities secretary, Sajid

Javid, to have the final say.

Sir Desmond told the A&T he wanted an independent decision because he feared the NPA had a conflict of interest as a board member of the Higher Level Stewardship environment scheme that is funding the project.

It was an issue of "national concern", he warned, because of the potential damage to internationally important habitat.

The size and cost of the scheme was disproportionate to the problems it aimed to solve, he added, and he questioned if the correct assessments had been carried out.

Already £250,000 has been spent on preparing for the scheme which involves raising the river bed with about 96,000 tonnes of gravel and clay, reinstating meanders, and clearing vegetation.

The Forestry Commission says it will boost wildlife and, without attention, several Sites of Special Scientific Interest could end up being classed by government adviser Natural England as "unfavourable declining", partly due to erosion from drainage works in the 19th and 20th centuries.

There have been 334 objections,

however, and Natural England has confirmed it will make a joint assessment with the Forestry Commission later of "the evidence that supports wetland restoration in the New Forest" — although the Latchmore Brook proposal will continue through planning.

Steve Avery, the NPA's executive director of strategy and planning, defended his departments' ability to make an unbiased decision.

He said: "We have been made aware of the request and are liaising with the Planning Inspectorate who manage these requests on behalf of the secretary of state for Department for Communities and Local Government.

"The application is scheduled to be considered by the planning committee on October 18th. We have been asked to advise the Planning Inspectorate of the committee's decision after the meeting and will then take further advice from them.

"Local planning authorities often determine their own planning applications, such as a district council considering its own planning application for a swimming pool, or a county council

for one of its schools.

"However, in this case, although the proposed scheme is funded by the Higher Level Stewardship scheme of which we are a board member, the applicant is the Forestry Commission."

During a meeting of the Verderer's Court on Wednesday, Official Verderer Dominic May reaffirmed his organisation's ongoing support for the project at Latchmoor.

He said it was right that HLS funds should be used to remove man-made drainage which was so damaging to the ecology of the Forest, thus encouraging the re-establishment of the flood plain, which will in turn deposit beneficial organic matter on the Forest rather than allowing it to be washed out to sea.

After explaining that another positive byproduct was the reduction of flood risk in more populated areas, Mr May said: "We are experiencing some concerted opposition to our wetland work. Happily we live in a democracy, founded on freedom of speech, so this opposition is entirely proper. It is therefore up to us to provide justification for our plans.

"Some opposition is based on scientific principles, some on the use of public money, and some is based on what people are used to seeing as their area, and of course there is a very basic human instinct to resist any change."

Forestry Commission deputy surveyor Bruce Rothnie also defended the proposed restora-

tion work stating: "Fish are a vital part of the ecology of the Forest and we all want their surroundings to be in a condition in which they can thrive. In many places across the Forest the streams have the natural diversity of conditions that are good for fish, bramble ripples, pools of vegetation in the water and along the bank, the stream life is in harmony with the natural processes of the site and robust to the weather variations.

"Unfortunately in some places Man's intervention by straightening and deepening the streams has upset natural processes and reduced the natural diversity on which fish and other stream life depend. Straighter channels increases water flow which strips them of gravel, vegetation and natural variation of water depth which are also vital to the fish's development.

"By restoring meandering streams we provide the physical conditions from which the natural processes can take over and stream life can return at nature's pace. These changes do not occur overnight and we have seen at sites restored in the past the benefits can show quickly or take years to emerge."

Brian Tarnoff, chairman of the New Forest Associations habitat and landscape committee also spoke in support, stating: "We've never made any secret of our support for the Forestry Commission's wetland restorations. But clearly, in some areas, we haven't made our case often enough, pub-

licly enough or possibly well enough. For that we must apologise to the whole Forest."

Referring to other completed restoration projects at Warwick-slade Cutting and Fletchers Thorns, Mr Tarnoff claimed that once bedded in, the areas had become lovely again.

He said: "There are many to choose from, but don't impatiently show up moments after the diggers have left and expect instantaneous transformation. Give nature time to do its magic. After all nature took its time creating those meanders before they were ruined."

However, Frogham resident Peter Clark, who described himself a civil engineer with extensive experience on the subject of stream meanders, claimed the Forestry Commission's consultants seemed to have little understanding of how streams and rivers behave.

He said: "Men do not make meanders but they dig out canals to make a bendy shape, often reinforcing the banks with large cobbles to stabilise them. The water is directed to follow these canals, which it does initially, but when a large flood comes down, quite soon these inherently unstable structures start to break down and fairly soon the whole lot will wash away. These canals tend to be unsightly and unable to support proper stream ecology."