

# LYMINGTON

# TIMES

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## Minister set to decide Latchmore row

THE ENVIRONMENT secretary is set to have the final say on the controversial Latchmore Brook wetland restoration scheme because of fears the national park authority is seen as biased.

The Forestry Commission's £1.5m application has been

contested for months and is due to be debated by the NPA's planning committee next Tuesday.

Instead of advising members to give it formal approval, however, a report by NPA officers recommends they add their voice for it to be "called

in" for a ruling by the government — which could mean months before any decision is made.

The project between Fritham and Hyde would raise miles of river bed with about 96,000 tonnes of gravel and clay, reinstating meanders and

clearing vegetation. It is being funded by the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship scheme (HLS), a 10-year environment programme worth £19m.

But there is concern the NPA should not be making the

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### Latchmore Brook

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final decision because it is one the HLS partners, alongside the FC and the verderers.

As reported in the *A&T*, both New Forest MPs, Sir Desmond Swayne and Julian Lewis, have asked for it to be called in — a demand which is likely to be backed by NPA members next week.

A planning report said the works on Latchmore Brook, which includes 27 Sites of Special Scientific Interest plus several other layers of protection, would leave the national park "preserved and enhanced" and public access would be "largely unaffected".

Refusing the plans on ecological grounds would not be possible, it added, because government adviser Natural England had given the project its blessing as "best practice".

But the report concluded the NPA should not make the final judgement given the "unusually high number of objections and the widely perceived view that the authority has a prejudicial interest".

The recommendation was described as "extraordinary"

by Sir Desmond. He said: "I would have thought that the unusually high number of objections would be proper grounds to reject the application, or at the very least to examine why so many people are so opposed to it."

There have been more than 340 objections lodged against the scheme including that of Cllr Edward Heron, the NPA's own deputy chairman, who said it should be refused or a less divisive alternative drawn up.

The FC says the proposals are needed to protect internationally important habitat and boost rare flora and fauna. But opponents predict it will wreck a popular beauty spot and question the evidence for lasting effects and benefits.

The brook runs through Bramshaw, Godshill and Hyde, and each parish council has objected, as have bodies such as the New Equestrian Association, campaign group the Friends of Latchmore Brook, and the national Campaign for the Preservation of Rural England.

Godshill councillors warned of a "catastrophic impact on existing habitats, ecology and landscape which vastly out-

weighs the alleged benefits".

Backing the scheme are 85 letters of support and organisations including the RSPB, the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, the Environment Agency and the New Forest Access Forum.

The New Forest Association welcomed it, stating: "Confidence in stream restoration has grown as results have been seen and techniques evolved, and the association is delighted with the results of completed restorations."

The furore around the Latchmore Brook scheme has focused attention on the workings of the HLS scheme, which is overseen by Natural England.

The HLS is being investigated by government spending watchdog the National Audit Office after being referred by Sir Desmond for possible violation of rules banning the use of EU funds for statutory duties.

The Latchmore Brook application will be debated by the NPA's planning committee at 9.30am on Tuesday November 15th at Lymington Town Hall.