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Controversial wetland scheme ditched

NEW FOREST leaders have thrown in the towel on a £1.5m bid to transform a popular beauty spot into wetland.

Plans for the controversial intervention along five miles of Latchmore Brook, between Fritham and Hyde, were dramatically refused by the national park authority last year amid protests over the potential ecological impact, standard of evidence, and 340 objections.

Supporters' hopes that it might have been allowed on appeal have been dashed after it was announced the decision would not be challenged. More than £250,000 had been spent before it was rejected.

The intention had been to turn the clock back to more boggy conditions by laying 96,000 tonnes of gravel and clay to raise the riv-

er bed and reinstate meanders, as well as clearing vegetation and filling in man-made drainage from the 19th and 20th centuries.

Funding was from the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme, a 10-year environment programme worth £19m – the biggest in the UK – of which the NPA, Forestry Commission and verderers are partners.

The decision to give up on the wetland scheme was formally announced at the latest Verderers' Court in Lyndhurst by the Official Verderer, Dominic May.

He insisted it would have "greatly benefited" the New Forest but said resources would instead go to "less controversial" projects.

"This is a pragmatic decision which gives us the opportunity to press on with other very good

HLS projects, without committing staff to a further round of the planning process and stakeholder discussions at this time," he said.

"The purpose of our HLS funding is to maintain and enhance the Forest, and we will therefore now be able to increase our financial support for an even wider range of work that will improve our priceless environment and fragile ecology."

He added: "I am much in favour of river restorations in general, and the Latchmore project in particular, and I am disappointed that it will not go ahead.

"However, as I have said previously, there is more to unite both sides of the argument, than to divide us: we all clearly love the New Forest, cherishing its landscape and beauty."

The Latchmore Brook plan

proved to be one of the New Forest's most divisive issues in recent years. It pitted experts and conservationists against one another, before the NPA's planning committee went against officers' advice and – by just one vote – refused it in November last year.

Supporters included government adviser Natural England, the RSPB, the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust and the New Forest Association who said it was vital action to protect internationally important landscape from erosion.

But objectors doubted the evidence and warned it could cause more harm. They recruited experts such as Dr Jonathan Todd, of the Natural History Museum, and rallied local opinion against the scheme, including

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New Forest West MP Sir Desmond Swayne who described it as "vandalism".

Speaking for the Friends of Latchmore Brook campaign group, Ailsa Farrand said: "We are very grateful to our MP Sir Desmond Swayne and everyone who has supported us over the last five years.

"The decision is good news not only for wildlife and visitors to the Forest, but also for the quiet common sense that recognises the way the New Forest evolves, and has evolved over many hundreds of years.

"The Forest is far better served by thoughtful, gentle stewardship and local knowledge than by the heavy-handed imposition of European wetland targets inappropriately applied."

The project had been led by the Forestry Commission, whose Deputy Surveyor, Bruce Rothnie, said: "We understand and respect the decision taken by the HLS board to focus their future funding on a range of projects that will build on the success of completed conservation and restoration work across the New Forest.

"Obviously we are disappointed that the hard work of many people over several years to develop and communicate evidence-based plans, including making adjustments to proposals in light of concerns raised, will not be taken forward at this time.

"We'll now reflect on the impact of the decision on the threatened wetlands at Latchmore Brook and how we, along with other

public bodies, will further our duty to enhance the special features of this nationally important Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and to meet government targets for improvement of

biodiversity."

Asked if the project's funding would be retained by the New Forest HLS, which ends in 2020, he said the money would go on other schemes and allow for site

monitoring to inform "future management". The overall programme would be revised with Natural England to deliver other "vital work" to enhance SSSIs, he said.