

Dry weather briefing for the River Wye

Context

The River Wye is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and a Site of Scientific Interest (SSSI) for its entire length. It is important for a number of rare and threatened species and habitats. The Environment Agency and Natural Resources Wales (NRW) must jointly balance the water needs of people, businesses and the environment throughout the catchment. During periods of exceptional shortage of rain leading to low river flows, we will need to seek additional measures as part of our duty to protect the SAC and restrictions may be necessary for licensed water abstraction, navigation and angling. Voluntary restrictions for all aspects of river use are encouraged before any additional measures are required.

Introduction

The Environment Agency uses 4 stages of drought to describe and manage our response: **prolonged dry weather, drought, severe drought and recovering drought.**

A combination of hydrological and environmental factors known as 'Trigger levels' across the Wye catchment trigger a move between these drought stages. These trigger levels help determine what actions need to be taken. A range of factors will be considered including the present conditions, forecast weather and how effective the proposed action would be. Local knowledge and judgement is also an important part of drought management.

Restrictions to navigation for the River Wye

Under certain drought conditions the Environment Agency, as the Navigation Authority for the Wye, may have to restrict navigation. We will give people and businesses likely to be impacted as much notice as possible of any plans with implications to navigation. We will also use social media to share messages. Any restrictions to navigation will be kept to a minimum as far as possible. NRW will follow the same approach for the Glasbury to Hay section.

Commercial canoe hire companies are encouraged to have contingency plans in place to deal with these extreme conditions and potential restrictions to navigation. A special meeting with the Wye Navigation Advisory Committee can be arranged if desired.

Phase 1: If river flows continue to fall and water levels are low, active monitoring of boating activity will be carried out by the navigation team. User groups will be informed and will be asked to monitor the situation themselves and to avoid the shallower sections where possible. We will ask to be notified of any sections where low water levels have made navigation impractical.

Phase 2: Active monitoring of the canoeing activity will continue. If water levels are low enough to be considered a significant risk to ecology, vulnerable stretches may be temporarily restricted to navigation by implementing Article 19 (c) of the Wye Navigation Order 2002. Any restrictions will be kept to a minimum. Advisory notices showing restricted areas will be displayed at the nearest upstream and downstream public access points. Affected user groups will be contacted and informed directly.

As a guide, we will use a trigger level of 133 million gallons per day (7 m³/s)* and a river height of 0.15m (2019) at NRW's Redbrook Gauging Station to initiate Phase 2.

Phase 3: Active monitoring of the canoeing activity will continue. If the additional pressure placed on the remaining stretches become a matter of concern, then user numbers may also have to be restricted. We will work with British Canoeing, Canoe Wales and canoe hire companies throughout this process.

Phase 4 (recovery phase): Any restrictions to navigation will be removed as and when conditions permit. User groups will be kept informed of any action taken.

Supporting information

The River Wye system acts as an important wildlife corridor, an essential migration route and a key breeding area for many nationally and internationally important species. The ecological value of the river and its tributaries is recognised through their national designation as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and as a riverine SAC under the European Union Habitats Directive (1992). The SAC designation applies to the River Wye itself and some of its tributaries. Disturbance of river bed gravels used by protected fish species as spawning grounds may cause a significant damage to the ecology.

The River Wye is known as a 'regulated river'. Water is released from the Elan Valley reservoirs to support public water supply in the lower reaches of the Wye, when flows, as measured at NRW's Redbrook Gauging Station, fall below a threshold of 1,900 Ml/day (418 mgd, 21.99 m³/s). Reservoir releases are managed under the Section 20 Wye Regulation Scheme, under an agreement between Dwr Cymru Welsh Water, Natural Resources Wales and the Environment Agency.

Many abstraction licences have "hands-off flow conditions" (HoFs) that require abstractors to stop abstracting when the river is below a defined flow to protect the riverine environment.

*We have agreed to use the level of 133 million gallons per day (604.6 Ml/day, 7m³/s) at Redbrook gauge as this corresponds with the lowest HoF (under EA/NRW abstraction licensing policy) to be enforced as river flows decrease.

Sprayline is the EA/NRW telephone information service in the Wye river catchment for licence holders who have HoF restrictions on their abstraction licences. On calling the Sprayline number (0870 905 6061) you can find out information on flows.

Canoeists are encouraged to use Sprayline to maintain an understanding of current flows, thereby an understanding of when flows are reducing to the 133 million gallons per day threshold and the likelihood of closures being put in place.

Information on Welsh river levels can be accessed by the public via the NRW website here:
<https://naturalresources.wales/evidence-and-data/maps/check-river-levels/?lang=en>

The Redbrook gauge can be accessed via this link: <https://rloi.naturalresources.wales/ViewDetails?station=4028>

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