Watercourse Management on Farms

Agriculture is often at the mercy of extreme and changeable weather, and increasingly farms are experiencing the consequences of flooding and prolonged waterlogged conditions. Alongside this there has been a change in policy on centralised management of rivers and the management of land drainage for agriculture. There is considerable confusion and debate about what this means at the level of the farm and the river catchment, so this leaflet aims to clarify the current understanding on watercourse management, and what farmers can do to manage watercourses on the farm.

Weather and Flood Risk

The Environment Agency is responsible for managing the risk of flooding from main rivers, reservoirs, estuaries and the sea. You can check the flood risk forecast online at:
www.flood-warning-information.service.gov.uk

The Environment Agency prioritises the maintenance of rivers at structures that regulate the flow, such as at weirs, sluices and culverts where blockages can lead to flooding onto urban areas, roads and railways. The Environment Agency needs to focus resources on strategic flood defences and flood-risk management.

River Dredging and Flood Defence

Many rivers at low or summer flow in a narrow channel have silt deposited in the base of the channel. In normal winter flows the channel may be full of water and silt is often flushed down the river system. At times of extreme rainfall, the channel fills quickly but due to the very high volume of rainwater, the channel spreads out over a wide area known as the flood plain. The volume of water in a wide flood plain is many times more than the volume in the river channel. Due to the very high volume of water held in the floodplain, deepening the channel itself by dredging would add little to the capacity of the river to hold and drain water.

At times of flood, river silt is churned up and deposited in the channel when the flooding subsides, which is a natural process.

To dredge rivers as a way of providing flood defence would be very costly and of little impact on reducing flooding. Due to the natural deposition of silts after flood events, dredging would have to be repeated after every flood in order to have any impact on channel volume. This would be costly and of limited benefit to the farmer or the wider catchment. However there are also many other ways of managing watercourses on farms that can help to limit the impact of flooding, if not the extent.

Clearing ditches and land drainage

Dredging river channels at normal flows is often important to maintain land drainage on agricultural land. The removal of silts to improve agricultural performance is a permitted activity, with certain requirements and restrictions that farmers should be aware of. Dredging of silts can improve drainage at low and moderate normal flows, however it can do little to avert flooding which results from extreme weather events.
Managing watercourses

Watercourse maintenance can reduce the impact of flooding and improve land drainage. Maintenance must be carried out carefully to protect wildlife and fisheries and comply with the law. Your risk management authority (either the Environment Agency or your Local Authority) can serve you a notice if you have not maintained a watercourse on your land in accordance with the regulations. However these regulations have been relaxed, although sensitivity in watercourse management is still a requirement. On 6 April 2016 any activity with a Flood Defence Consent (FDC) came under environmental permitting rules.

Who is the managing authority?

You may need to check if you are farming along a main river (under EA management) or non-main river (under Local Authority control). You can do this by entering your farm postcode into www.environment-agency.gov.uk/wiyby

Consents and exemptions

Farmers in England can undertake low-level work on their own land without needing to seek Environment Agency (EA) consent. You don’t need permission from the Environment Agency to:

- remove in-stream debris and rubbish
- undertake minor tree works - you can cut back trees and other vegetation and remove fallen trees
- trim grass/vegetation on the banks and in the channel, provided you remove the cut vegetation so it does not pollute the river

Some other activities such as CLEARING SILT FROM DITCHES are exempt from needing an environmental permit, BUT ONLY IF YOU REGISTER THE EXEMPTION ONLINE (a simple application), and fully meet the description and conditions required for that exemption. Apply online at: https://register-flood-risk-exemption.service.gov.uk

Such activities include:

- Removing silt and sand from in-river structures e.g. culverts, bridges and up to 1.5km of drained farmland
- Installing drainage outfall pipes of 300mm or less
- Repairing / protecting up to 10m of river bank
- Repairing bank slips or erosion using the fallen materials or natural materials e.g. willow spiling
- Repairing or installing drinking bays
- clear out a purpose built sediment trap, as this is an excluded activity.

A full list of exemptions can be found on the Environment Agency website, details below.

Local Authority Managed Watercourses

If you have a watercourse under Local Authority management (non-main watercourses), you may need to apply for consent to undertake some activities.

Further Information

Manage water on land: guidance for land managers www.gov.uk/guidance/manage-water-on-land-guidance-for-land-managers#drainage-and-water-levels

Changes to your Flood Defence Consent since 6 April 2016 www.gov.uk/guidance/register-your-flood-risk-exemption-environmental-permits

For further advice, contact us at Reaseheath Farm Environmental Services
T. 01270 613195
E. hub@reaseheath.ac.uk