A First Ray of Hope for the Wye?

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For the first time, one of the major poultry producers admits to “being part of the problem”

On the 27th of September the Wye Nutrient Management Board convened for one of its regular sessions. Created to try and find a common solution to the horrendous phosphate pollution crisis which has the River Wye in recent years, the Board includes representatives from: the river catchment’s County Councils; the farming community; Natural England, the Environment Agency & Natural Resources Wales; the construction industry; the Wye & Usk Foundation and many of the NGOs across the catchment who have been campaigning to save the river. The latter includes the Radnorshire and Hereford Wildlife Trusts, The Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales and the Friends of the Upper Wye.

These meetings (taking place on Zoom over the last 18 months) have been described by their

many critics as talking shops, which tend to go over the same old agenda month in, month out. Indeed, the lack of any progress by the Nutrient Management Board in agreeing any positive way forward has been seen by some as almost scandalous as, with another summer of algal blooms having passed by, the state of the river only deteriorates further.

Then on Monday 27th something potentially significant happened. John Reed, Head of Agriculture at Avara Foods, was asked to address the Board. Avara, a £1.2 billion agri-business, is one of the UK's leading poultry suppliers and supplies poultry products to all the major UK supermarkets and restaurant chains from its Hereford processing plant (the biggest employer in the county).

Avara has been subject to considerable criticism (including from River Action) for its role in the river pollution crisis. Almost 14 million of the 20 million chickens which are believed to be produced across the Wye river catchment are directly controlled by Avara's supply chain. Whilst they are reared in sheds which have concrete standings, historically the huge quantities of manure these birds produce (estimated by Avara to be c.150,000 tons per year) get spread across the land of the catchment. Recent work carried out by the University of Lancaster is indicating an unquestionable over-saturation of phosphates in the soils of the Wye Valley – which in turn will inevitably run off into the river. Together with the big free range egg producers such as Noble Foods there is a growing body of evidence that these major poultry producers are the key cause for the pollution crisis facing the river.

However, at the latest Nutrient Management meeting Board Avara openly acknowledged that they were indeed "part of the problem" regarding the pollution of the river – and therefore need to be "part of the solution". Accordingly, it was announced that the company is currently in the final stages of evaluating a range of major initiatives to remove its chicken manure from the catchment. These included using it as a fuel source for generating renewable energy, incinerating it into ash and biochar that can be easily transported to parts of the country that need phosphate-based fertiliser for arable farming – and treating it via new (not yet public) anaerobic digester-based technology. The company also indicated that it was looking at ways of importing less phosphate into the catchment within its chicken feed in the first place. Avara confirmed that if these initiatives went ahead, then all its chicken manure would be exported out of the valley.

The company was subjected to extensive questioning on the timescale and financial backing for these initiatives.. Here there were no firm answers – with confidentiality agreements and the speed by which planning consents to build the necessary facilities would be granted by the local council – being cited as the cause for this uncertainty. Indeed, many of the NGOs who listened to the presentation expressed considerable scepticism afterwards about the company's claims due to this lack of detail.

However, if Avara really is genuine regarding these intentions, and if the other major poultry producers are prepared to follow their lead – then we might have just witnessed the first ray of hope of how the pollution crisis of the Wye might be solved. River Action is now engaged directly

with the major poultry producers, including Avara, and will be pressing hard for time and investment commitments to be announced as soon as possible. But if what we heard last Monday really is a genuine and deliverable commitment, then it will have our wholehearted support.

If it is not, then we will be returning to the campaign trail against the poultry agri-businesses with vigour, as we will do if the County Councils procrastinate over fast tracking planning permission to build these much-needed facilities.

A YouTube recording of the Nutrient Management Board meeting can be found here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEuzyiK0vBY

The section during which Avara speak is at 0.04.54. This is followed at 0.40.27 by another interesting presentation from Gamber, a logistics company which gives an overview on the task of exporting the chicken waste out of the river catchment.