Herefordshire’s council members unite in plea to MP George Eustice to save the Wye as algal blooms that wiped out miles of the River Wye’s ecology in 2020 return…

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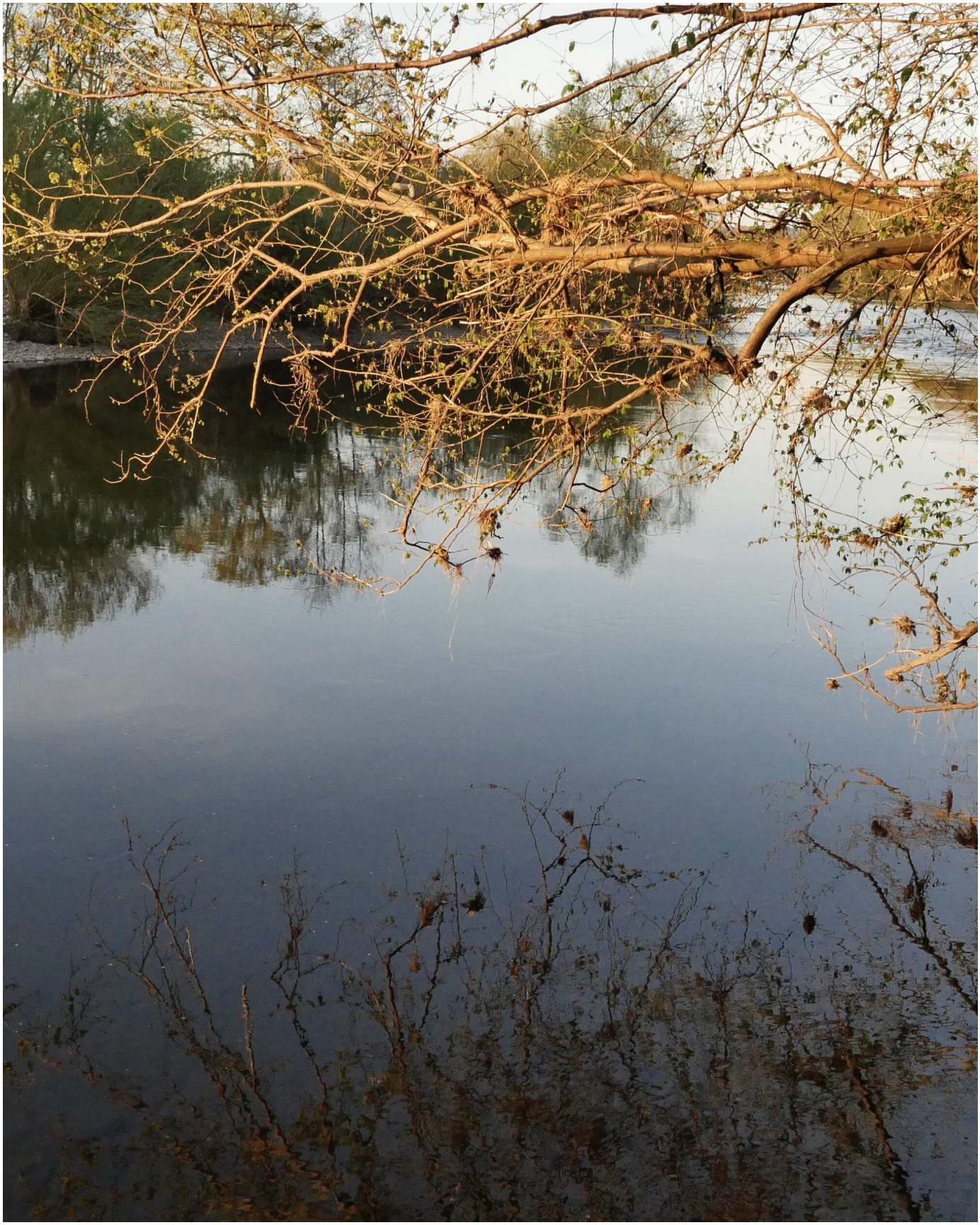

Desperate plea for help to Central Government to save one of Britain's most-loved rivers reveals that the County of Hereford only has 0.8 full time Environment Agency officer to combat the severe agricultural pollution of the Wye

In a devastating **letter** to George Eustice – the Secretary of State for the Environment and Rural Affairs – Herefordshire Council have raised alarm about the impact Intensive Poultry Units (IPUs) are having on the river Wye's ecological status. The letter has been prompted in part by a moratorium imposed by Natural England on building in the Wye catchment on all new developments that cannot prove they are phosphate neutral. The moratorium was imposed due to the deteriorating state of the river and the requirements are such that developers cannot meet them, therefore no new building has been approved. The impact of this decision on local communities and their economies has been significant.

Councillors believe that the moratorium on building is futile given the contribution to river pollution of new house building is minute (less than 1%) compared to that of phosphate run-off from agriculture.

In fact, as the letter highlights it is agricultural practices, not building developments, that led to the river being described last year by the Daily Mail as "a putrid algae-ridden swamp". Around 70 miles of river lost the protected plant water crowfoot (Ranunculus) due to algal blooms and therefore fish and invertebrate life were impacted as river keepers reported widespread loss of cygnets from starvation. The letter explains that this environmental calamity is a direct result of the now very high number of a new IPUs in this valley.

A recent study on the impact of these IPUs by the Universities of Lancaster and Leeds has estimated an excess loading of 2000 tonnes of phosphate per annum in the catchment. That is equivalent to 1.5m tonnes of farmyard manure being spread, over and above the crop requirements every year – an incredibly high number.

To date, Herefordshire has so far received no support from Government to deal with the problem. Described as an "unprecedented disaster" occurring in the Wye, Council members through this letter have escalated matters and called on government to take immediate action – with an initial ask of at least £3.9m to begin to tackle the problem.

With the funding, the councillors have called for the speedy delivery of phosphate reduction measure including reduced fertiliser spreading, reduced pathways for run off, increased soil structure and organic materials and increased field margins. Critically they also highlight the need for increased and more effective monitoring, noting *"Without a shadow of a doubt, we need a sturdy regulatory floor with a full commitment to enforcing existing regulations to achieve bringing the watercourse back into compliance".*

Currently, the Environment Agency has only 4 officers to do all regulatory work across the whole of the West Midlands, which equates to 0.8 of an officer for Herefordshire.

We hope that this letter will prompt decisive action at the highest level of government and result in additional emergency funding for agencies to ensure improved monitoring and enforcement along both sides of the border. River Action will be monitoring the response and outcome closely.