

BUFFERS: NATURAL RIVER RESTORATION CONCEPT PROPOSAL

1. VISION - OPENING STATEMENT OF A PRESS RELEASE ON 1ST JANUARY 2023

Following a successful pilot programme, Defra Ministers announced with business, farming and NGO partners the national roll-out of an annual £75million river buffer payment scheme to create a 100,000ha nature recovery network along 25,000km (x%) of England's rivers by 2030. Groups of farmers and landowners will enter permanent 'conservation covenant' agreements and be paid annually for the first 10 years to set aside buffers without agriculture along riverbanks and for the ecosystem services created by allowing waterways to recover naturally. Payments will blend public money using farm payments and private money using 'nature recovery credits'. The scheme will be planned and delivered between landholdings across catchments to boost biodiversity and public access/wellbeing while helping alleviate pollution, flooding, drought and sequestering carbon.

2. 2021/2 PILOT PROGRAMME - WHAT ARE THE PROPOSED OUTCOMES FOR THE RIVER BUFFER PROGRAMME?

Defra will lead a 2-year national river buffer pilot scheme in 2021/2 for a payment mechanism that takes 10,000ha of riparian land along +-2,500km of rivers out of agricultural production at a cost of £15million (£7.5million per year) using annual payments of £750+- per hectare - increasing current payments to farmers by approximately 50% (£512 per hectare is currently paid under Countryside Stewardship SW4).

A network of farmers, landowners, NGOs and communities will deliver voluntary buffer pilot projects resulting in policy, funding and regulatory change including integration/replacement of relevant national schemes, farmer support and public engagement.

3. NEED AND OPPORTUNITY - WHY THIS PROGRAMME AND WHY NOW?

Rivers pump the life-blood across a national system of wildlife corridors. Britain is the most nature-depleted country in Europe. Over half our wildlife species are in decline with 1 in 10 threatened by extinction. 1 in 6 houses are affected by flooding and the floods of 2015 cost £5bn. 86% of England's rivers are in poor ecological condition. All our rivers are polluted. One of the fastest, most effective and low-cost ways of removing conflict between food production, pollution and restoring nature is giving space for rivers to naturally regenerate their margins.

Investment in catchment-scale blended-finance solutions are needed urgently to restore damaged rivers, integrating Local Nature Recovery Strategies and Catchment Sensitive Farming. The Nature for Climate Fund has allocated £90million for projects in 2021. Defra is calling for a practical proposal that combines biodiversity, tree/carbon and water strategies, simplifies current payment schemes (Countryside Stewardship) and trials (ELMs), and leverages public finance with credits from the private sector. The river buffer scheme will be an ambitious exemplar scheme to be announced internationally at COP26 by ministers.

4. RIVER BUFFER SCHEME - WHAT ARE THE PILOT RIVER BUFFER PROJECTS?

Pilot river buffer projects across multiple landholdings across river catchments to form continuously connected nature recovery networks. They will test variants of a proposed payment mechanism, adapted to the local context and flexing to accommodate a range of upstream and downstream landscapes and land uses.

Farmers/landowners will be paid by the hectare for space created either side of a watercourse where agriculture stops and natural regeneration begins, aiming for 20m minimum on each bank, allowing for expansion/movement if the flow changes e.g. new braiding and ponds form as beavers and natural processes are restored and wetlands and riparian woodland form. Government may consider expanding the minimum compulsory 1m buffer under BPS cross compliance to 5m.

Natural recolonisation will be prioritised, with some targeted tree planting of suitable riparian species e.g. heeling-in willow whips. Fencing will be set back from the bank or removed. Assisted restoration will be used in places to 'rewiggle' the watercourse and form mosaic habitats. Public access will be encouraged and allowance made for livestock and machinery crossings.

The scheme's aim is to consider the whole systemic nature recovery value of catchments (rather than piecemeal small projects focused on protecting one species or enhancing one ecosystem service) and aim to connect buffers across landholdings along the lengths of watercourses. Pilots will target locations where groups of farmers/landowners wish to sell ecosystem services and private enterprises wish to buy credits/offsets, favouring areas where biodiversity and habitat restoration, carbon sequestration and downstream flood and pollution benefits are most likely.

5. PAYMENT MECHANISM - HOW WILL THE PILOT RIVER BUFFER PROJECTS WORK?

A simple way to align landholdings and nature recovery efforts will consist of an initial payment for setting aside the river buffers and then periodic payments for managing the buffers and selling the ecosystem services credits generated - nature



recovery credits. Payments will combine public (paid individually) and private money (held in a local catchment fund or nationally) ensuring prices are generous but controlled to maximise the range and size of river buffers across the country.

First payment: Conservation covenant of £750/ha + in year 1 to enter permanent covenant agreement with annual payments over 10-years participating in annual payments

- Based on area of land (hectares) set aside without agriculture and allowing/assisting natural regeneration
- Single payment paid to individual farmers/landowners through public money e.g Nature for Climate Fund
- Payment increases to cover initial capital costs such as moving fencing, blocking land drainage or riparian planting
- Farmers/landholders must participate in related regenerative agriculture initiatives to reduce chemicals, slurry, heavy machinery etc. on their land

Periodic payments: £750/ha +- per year throughout the covenant starting in year 2, with rate to be reviewed every 3 years

- Payment for covenant and environmental management: £500/ha+- per year from public money e.g. ELM
 - To cover on-going costs such as public access, controlling invasive plants or beaver dam management
 - Farmers/landholders must participate in related regenerative agriculture initiatives to reduce chemicals, slurry, heavy machinery etc. on their land
 - Payments increase as more land is taken out of agricultural production and buffers/wetlands grow
- Payment for ecosystem services: £250/ha from selling nature recovery credits/offsets to the private sector e.g. to water companies, developers; and institutions and NGOs
 - Farmers/landholders sell simple combined ecosystem services 'nature recovery credits' with blended return combining biodiversity, public access/benefit with flood, carbon and nitrate/phosphate value
 - Sell at a fixed price which works as an average across the catchment and country
 - Credit/offset money paid directly to individual farmers as part of local/catchment plan and agreement
 - Performance-based to qualify through local (and/or remote) monitoring, inspection and verification E.g. biodiversity and water quality
- Example: 100 hectares over 10 years generates £1million for a cluster of farmers in a catchment

6. ADMINISTRATION AND DELIVERY - HOW MUCH AND WHEN WILL THE PILOTS BE IMPLEMENTED, AND BY WHO?

To deliver 10,000ha of river buffers in the pilot over 2 years, £15million+- is required for the conservation covenants and second year management payments (2 years x £750 x 10,000ha), with £7.5million from Nature for Climate Fund, £2.5million from private sector credit/offset sales, and £5million from ELMs. A budget of £1.5million will be required to plan, promote, coordinate, deliver and report the pilot programme. A total of £16.5million will fund and deliver the pilot schemes.

The proposed 2-year pilot programme timeline is:

- Phase 1 January - June 2021: Plan and develop payment mechanism/platform, secure funding, develop pilot locations (in a range of landscapes across England), engage key stakeholders (e.g. farmers, credit/offset purchasers)
- Phase 2 July 2021 - December 2021: Fund and launch pilot projects with conservation covenants across river catchments in England, set-up and trial the payment, farm support/advice, monitoring (include citizen science), inspection scheme, public engagement etc.
- Phase 3 January 2022 - July 2022: Assess pilot projects after first year and administer payments and credit/offset sales
- Phase 4 August 2022 - December 2022 - Review payment mechanism and report findings

The initial conveners of the programme are James Wallace, Ben Goldsmith, Feargal Sharkey, Richard Benyon. A core advisory group of partners could include: All Party Parliamentary Chalk Streams Group, Beaver Trust, CLA, National Trust, Rewilding Britain, Rivers Trusts (Catchment Partnerships), Severn Trent (representing industry), The Wildlife Trusts, Wildlife and Countryside Link (Blueprint for Water), Woodland Trust.



NB **This is an imaginary press release for two years time to guide our vision**

PRESS RELEASE: River buffers - pay farmers to give space to nature. Embargoed 00.01 01/01/23

Defra Ministers [Enter name] and [Enter name] and partners from business, farming and NGO groups made a joint announcement today of the national roll-out of a new £75million scheme to create a 100,000 hectare nature recovery network along 25,000km of England's rivers. Groups of farmers and landholders will enter permanent 'conservation covenant' agreements and be paid annually for the first 10 years through to set aside buffers that without agriculture along riverbanks and for the ecosystem services created by allowing waterways to recover naturally. Payments will blend of public money using farm payments and private money using 'nature recovery credits'. The scheme will operate across river catchments and boost biodiversity and public access/wellbeing while helping alleviate pollution, flooding, drought and sequestering carbon.

At £750+ per hectare per year the scheme has already attracted considerable attention from the farming and landowning community. [Enter name] of the [Enter name of landowning membership organisation] said "Our members will find it hard not to consider this offer from the government and industry. With 100s of 1000s of hectares of potential land available for river buffers, this could provide a much-needed source of income for small and large landholdings and a good news story showing the public that farming is a key part of the Green Recovery."

A series of river buffer pilot projects began in 2021 through a collaboration between business, NGO's, government, farmers and communities. Each project aimed for at least 20m buffer strips either side of the waterway, flexing with the type of landscape, watercourse and land use. In some places whole wetlands will reappear with the buffers swelling out to the valley sides as ponds and braided channels form, and in others narrow buffer strips provide a much-needed gap between the water and high-grade farm land.

A total of 2,500km of rivers and streams and 10,000 hectares of land has been taken out of agricultural production in 2021/2 for the river buffer scheme at an annual cost of £7,500,000. A small price to pay for creating nature recovery networks to help restore wildlife and heal our rivers. This was the first time projects have been delivered across whole river catchments nationally that combine the resources and goodwill of stakeholders from the public, private and charity sectors.

[Enter name], of the water company [Enter name], said "Having trialled local schemes ourselves, we can now scale our efforts across all our river catchments and help other water companies and regions too. As a business we recognise the need to offset the impacts of England's imperfect Victorian water management system. River buffers and nature restoration credits are a fantastic way of ensuring that the money we spend leads to real improvements in our riverscapes: increased wildlife, cleaner water, happier customers. We have already seen an increase in shareholder value as the market responds to local offsetting - helping our community, both human and natural. One thing all life needs is clean and plentiful water."

Secretary of State [Enter name] featured the river buffer scheme as an exemplar at COP26, the international climate conference hosted by the UK government at the end of 2020. An ambitious programme will be implemented as a bold statement for England's leadership in the climate and ecological emergency. [Enter name] of the Environment Agency said, "River buffers and associated natural river restoration projects in the right place can reduce the impacts of flooding downstream and help store water in times of drought, building climate resilience across our waterways."

Britain is the most nature-depleted country in Europe and over half our species of wildlife are in decline with 1 in 10 threatened by extinction. 1 in 6 houses are affected by flooding and the floods of 2015 cost £5bn. 86% of England's rivers are in poor ecological condition and all our rivers are polluted. Investment and cross-sector solutions are needed urgently to restore our dying rivers. Rivers pump the life-blood across our land. Without healthy waterways, our farming, fishing, forestry and water industries will fail.

Healthy, naturally functioning rivers provide tangible benefits to business, government and society. By giving space to rivers, buffers can help restore biodiversity by providing essential habitats and food for our endangered wildlife. Buffers allow space for wetlands, water meadows and wet woodlands to regenerate which sequester greenhouse gases like carbon too. Buffers can help clean water and reduce the impacts and costs of agricultural and sewage pollution. And buffers give space for people to reconnect with nature and develop healthy relationships with the land, water and wildlife that sustain us. Native species like the beaver will play a key role in restoring our rivers as they re-engineer the way water flows through valleys and wetlands reform, full of water and the opportunity for life.

Payments will be made to farmers who have grouped their commitments to set aside land along watercourses in river catchments, forming continuous nature recovery networks. Public money from the Nature for Climate Fund will start the process by paying for conservation covenants for taking land out of production. These are followed by annual payments from Environmental Land Management funding (ELM that replaces European farm payments) combined with fixed price river buffer



offset money from businesses like water companies and developers seeking to offset their impacts on biodiversity, water and the climate.

Why? The return on their investment in river buffer credit/offsets is measured through the value of the ecosystem services generated by naturally restoring rivers. The conservation covenants pay for the capital costs associated with river buffers like moving fencing and assisting rivers to flow more naturally, deploying ecosystem engineering beavers, people and machines where necessary. On-going payments will incentivise continued participation in the scheme and cover the costs of management and on-going restoration - although proponents of the scheme are keen to emphasise the need for hands-off natural regeneration and recolonisation of wetlands wherever possible rather than planting unless using fast-growing pioneer riparian species like willow, sallow, alder and birch.

[Enter name] said on behalf of the [Enter name of farming organisation], “River buffers are just the tonic we need for resolving conflict between the need for farming to feed our nation and the need to give space for nature to create public goods like pollinators, removing pollution and providing water for our crops and livestock. The blend of government and business funding means farmers will be incentivised to alter land use and usher in the next generation of farming in England as we work towards the Agriculture Bill and Environment Strategy targets.”

Convener of the programme, [Enter name] of [Enter name of NGO organisation], said “One of the pilot projects was on the River Avon near Bristol and Bath. Resident wild beavers had an important role to play as ecosystem engineers in a challenging peri-urban environment and lowland farming. The project proved that farmers willingly gave back space to nature with the right financial incentive, while reducing potential flood risk and giving new access to countryside to people living in local cities, towns and villages. Our vision is to have river buffers in suitable places along all 25,000km of waterways in England by 2030. The ecological time bomb is ticking. We have proven that if we rally behind simple and cost-effective natural climate solutions like river buffers then our grandchildren can hope for a bright future.”

-----ENDS-----

