

## **Keep Your Eyes on Catfield Fen – Could Broadland Irrigation be Causing Problems for some of our Rarest Habitat?**

*Anglian Water will shortly complete work on a new pipeline from Ludham to Horstead that allows drinking water to be moved through from Norwich to Ludham. Water abstraction issues have led to increased concern in the Ant Valley over the past decade and abstraction licence renewals have not been permitted. Here we take a look at what water abstraction is, how it is governed, how water abstraction may be affecting issues of conservation concern and how these problems can be mitigated as well as what the future may hold.*

Put simply, water abstraction is the act of taking water from a source such as groundwater or surface water so that it may be used for some benefit or other. Perhaps the two most obvious purposes are irrigation in farming and human drinking water. The rules governing water abstraction have a long history in common law. Since the 1960s the rules have however become etched in statute. This was initially through the enactment of the Water Resources Act 1963. The Water Resources Act 1991 then introduced a limit on the volume of water that could be abstracted by those who had the rights to do so (this was from both groundwater and surface water sources) with the Water Act 2003 then bringing about some further changes. Legislation and policy will continue to evolve in order to reflect changes in attitudes to water supply as well as technical developments in the harvesting and storage of water.

Currently, licences are required for abstraction which helps to monitor activities, though overseeing water abstraction volumes is very difficult. The Environment Agency is the non-departmental public body responsible for granting and reviewing abstraction licences. Disputes over water use are probably as old as disputes over just about anything else. Here in Norfolk, England we are fortunate enough to inhabit a relatively stable environment concerning water supplies; despite being in one of the driest parts of the UK. We also play host to some of the most intricate natural habitats in Europe and this is reflected in the levels of protection afforded by domestic and international law to certain sites within the county.

The problem that has arisen in the Ant Broads and Marshes SSSI has been the increasing dryness and acidity of its soil and water, combined with the fact that scientific data has been unable to conclude that these changes are not as a result of water abstraction in the area. Catfield Fen and Sutton Fen, both in the Ant Broads and Marshes SSSI, are home to thousands of species of flora and fauna with some notable rarities in the fen orchid and water beetle families. Some species confirmed present at the sites are critically endangered.

Concerns were raised by locals and organisations and, following a public enquiry, the EA refused to grant licences for abstraction for both farmers and the water company, Anglian Water, in May 2015. The groundwater in question supplies drinking water to the Broadland village of Ludham via a borehole. In recent months, as a response to this information, Anglian Water have been developing a pipeline from Norwich so that the drinking water supply can be brought in from the city of Norwich instead. The

company describe the development as ‘one of the first schemes to be implemented as part of a wider programme [sic] to manage customers’ demand for water and the needs of the wider environment’.

It’s important that positive news stories are included in the complicated menagerie that is environmental reporting. It is also important to think critically about the outcome here and understand it as part of a longer movement towards environmental controls and care for our natural world. The situation will continue to be monitored by interested parties (such as Butterfly Conservation who own a Catfield Fen site and the RSPB who manage sites and own land in the area) and the practicalities of enforcement are still to be played out. A conversation about the price of water and what we are willing to pay to protect our dearest sites of wildlife is taking place and it is important that this is an open discussion and well represented by those sympathetic to the conservation cause. There is also a wider question about how sites will be protected following the UK’s leaving the EU as site designations such as The Broads SAC (Special Area of Conservation) were derived from the UK’s status as a member of the European Union. It should be acknowledged that Anglian Water have shown great respect to a special area of natural interest and accordingly it makes for an interesting and welcome chapter in an ongoing story.

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