

Flooding and Flood Management – the way forward for Scotland

A briefing by the Freshwater Taskforce of Scottish Environment LINK for the Rural Affairs and Environment debate on flooding and flood management

Scottish Environment LINK is the forum for Scotland's voluntary environment organisations representing a broad spectrum of environmental interests with the common goal of contributing to a more environmentally sustainable society

Scottish Environment LINK's Freshwater Taskforce welcomes the recommendations of the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee's Inquiry into Flooding and Flood Management. Flooding is a big issue and likely to get worse due to climate change. Scotland is set to get wetter and stormier, and some coastal areas are likely to experience sea level rise, increasing the risk of both the coastal and inland flooding. The traditional approach for managing flood risk is proving inadequate in the face of changing climate. The forthcoming flooding legislation is promising to modernise the way we deal flooding, and introduce an integrated, sustainable way of managing the risk. The new flooding policy should aim to:

- Introduce integrated, catchment based flood risk management
- Ensure that natural flood management is part of response to flood risk management
- Introduce a new way of funding flood measures that supports long-term management
- Ensure accountability and delivery of flood measures on the ground

Introduction

The new flooding legislation is set to change the way we manage flooding in Scotland. We warmly welcome the recommendations of the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee contained in the inquiry report, and believe that these recommendations will strengthen the forthcoming legislation. The aim of the legislation must be to introduce sustainable flood risk management. This entails a shift from our predominantly piecemeal and reactive approach towards a catchment-based approach that takes account of long-term social and economic factors, and uses natural processes and natural systems to slow down and store water. The NGO sector has a wealth of expertise in flood management and has contributed constructively to the development of the new flooding policy. We hope this role will continue in future and throughout implementation.

Key opportunities in new legislation

- Integrated catchment flood management

The new Flooding Bill must promote the concept of integrated catchment-based management of flooding, and requires long-term planning to reduce flood risk. In Scotland, we have inherited a culture of hard-engineering and reactive approaches, and it is becoming clear that this approach will not be effective in the face of climate change. The forward thinking of the Committee, and the Scottish Parliament in general, has led to radical changes in flood policies and the introduction of a driver towards sustainable flood management.

Sustainable flood management includes measures that combine to reduce the risk of flooding and minimise the economic, environmental and social costs of flooding. This includes both structural and non-structural measures, such as natural flood management, hard engineering where necessary, flood risk mapping, flood warning, planning, preparedness, education, and emergency response. Investigation of links between, and

better co-ordination with existing plans and policies is also needed as part of integrated management. In particular a close relationship needs to be developed between river basin management plans, the Scottish Rural Development Programme, Scottish Forestry Strategy, Scottish Climate Programme/ Adaptation Strategy and the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy to ensure better and more widespread delivery of flood benefits where appropriate.

- Natural flood management

Natural flood management (NFM) is an integral component of sustainable flood management (SFM). It aims to work with natural river and coastal processes to restore the functionality and connectivity of natural systems, with the aim of slowing down the flow of water and storing water along catchments. Key to this approach is the assessment of flood risk at the catchment scale, including upland tributaries, middle reaches and lowlands and to restore the natural functionality of rivers, floodplains and wetlands. Techniques are varied, matched to the characteristics of specific catchments, and include upland restoration (bogs, native woodlands, woody debris), wetland and floodplain restoration, and riparian woodlands. There is now enough scientific evidence to support the implementation of NFM in Scotland, but further evidence is required on the benefits of a combination of NFM techniques at a catchment scale. It is now obvious that catchment based demonstration projects are needed as a matter of urgency.

- Funding

The new legislation should lead to a review of the current arrangements for funding and aim to introduce a new arrangement to support long-term management for flooding. SFM requires catchment-based planning, often crossing one or more local authority boundaries. For this reason such large-scale projects should be funded using a centrally held government budget. Smaller projects can still be supported using grant-in-aid allocations to local authorities.

Implementation of the new flooding policies and the requirements of EU Floods Risk Directive will require new research to be undertaken. The research requires financial support from the Scottish Government, which is currently inadequate to meet these needs.

- Ensuring delivery on the ground

Implementation and on-the-ground delivery will be key in protecting communities from flooding in a sustainable way. It is therefore essential that the new legislation ensures accountability and sets clear processes for the implementation of future flood risk management plans on the ground.

Additional issues

- Demonstration projects

Pilot projects to test the effectiveness of natural flood management measures are desperately needed. To this date, only one pilot has been set-up by WWF Scotland on river Devon in Clackmannanshire, with the aim to demonstrate and quantify the effectiveness of natural flood management techniques. These techniques include restoration of wetlands, gullies and riparian woodlands that aim to reduce the flow of water from the hills and store water along the catchment using natural techniques. The best example of a naturally functioning floodplain is Insh marshes, RSPB nature reserve. More projects are needed, led by SEPA and the Scottish Government, to apply these techniques on a larger, catchment scale.

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