

FRIENDS OF THE RIVER FROME



News

January 2021

Sewage in rivers: campaign progress

More than 100 MPs from across different parties are supporting a parliamentary bid to stop water companies discharging untreated sewage into rivers.

Philip Dunne, the Conservative chair of the environmental audit committee, is seeking in a private member's bill to place a duty on water companies to ensure untreated sewage is not discharged into rivers and inland waterways.

Our local MP **David Warburton** met with Sue Everett and Mike Bull from FoRF to hear about the problem in Frome for himself. He wrote afterwards to Sue:

"I can certainly assure you that, when the Bill returns to the House of Commons for its second reading in January, I will be giving it my full support."

"Protecting our rivers and waterways is an issue of

huge importance to our communities in Somerset and it's always been of critical interest to me to address improvements to the maintenance of our waterways and also enhance flood prevention and dredging...

"I must thank you, along with the Friends of the Somerset River Frome group, for the crucial work that you do for the town and its wider environment. And I am delighted that, largely thanks to your efforts, discharges into the river are now being monitored."

The second reading of Dunne's bill takes place on 22 January. It will require water companies to set out plans to progressively reduce their reliance on the use of combined sewer overflows (CSOs), which discharge untreated effluent after heavy rain.

In 2019 Wessex Water revealed that sewage spilled into the stretch of the



Sue Everett, Mike Bull and David Warburton

river in Frome on 385 occasions, for a total of 411 hours.

The River Frome above Marston has been classified as being in 'poor ecological condition' by the Environment Agency. The stretch in Frome is classified as of 'moderate' condition but since the assessment it has been affected by two major pollution incidents.

The river also failed on its chemical assessment. The main reason for the river's poor quality is pollution from livestock farming especially nutrients from slurry (see page 2) and fertilisers used on land. In addition to direct health hazards, sewage causes bacteria to grow which remove dissolved oxygen from the water, in effect suffocating fish and other invertebrates.

New Year Resolutions from FoRF Committee members



Bob: Lose weight (by having less soil washed into me). Get more exercise (by being allowed to move back into floodplains and wetland areas). Improve my diet (less junk and waste - more biodiversity and healthy habitats) and make more Friends!

Sue: To finally see some of the river Frome's otters and wild Somerset Dippers.

Tony: Cut out the amount of cake I take when off wildlife watching.

Simon: To keep walking the lovely meadows between Wallbridge and Adderwell.

Jackie: To see the river and riverbank litter free and more wildflowers introduced.

Rich: Make much better use of my new wildlife camera (no more blue tits or robins).

Mike: To implement and develop the aims of our excellent river strategy.

Opinion: Slurry Worry

It's mid-winter. The fields are sodden, there's nothing growing and many are bare. Yet farmers are out spraying animal wastes and slurry across the fields despite the inability of the soils to absorb it and the absence of any need to fertilise crops at this time of year. And also despite the damage heavy machinery does to our clay soils when they are saturated - the destruction of soil structure, the compaction and resulting increase in runoff and soil erosion.

The reason for this madness? Farmers have a lot of animal waste to get rid of from their intensive rearing units. The number of beasts kept is no longer related to the ability of the land to support them, just to the size and number of sheds that can be built. The waste builds up and it needs to be disposed of.

What's going on in the upper Frome catchment right now, and every winter, is not husbandry but waste disposal. Unlicensed waste disposal.

The sort any other industry would be fined heavily for. Instead agriculture gets a free pass, partly because agriculture usually does - it is not regulated like any other industry would be but is instead heavily subsidised by us, the taxpayer.

And partly because the Environment Agency has been so emasculated and starved of funds by our Government that it cannot enforce the few feeble regulations on farming that do exist.

And the result is clear to see in our rivers. Excess nitrogen and phosphorus from the waste runs off into the stream to feed algae, reduce oxygen and reduce water clarity.

The river beds are blanketed with sediment eroded from the fields where the soil is compacted and left bare during winter.



Life is being choked out of our rivers. Only the basic organisms can survive and the rich biodiversity that should be there is gone - we've forgotten what our rivers should be like. Nowhere in the Frome catchment reaches good ecological status, or ever will if it continues to be treated in this way.

So would we allow any other industry to dispose of its wastes across large areas of our river catchment, unlicensed and unregulated, knowing that it results in the murky, sludgy and damaged drain that flows through Frome? Why do we let this one?

Bob Sargent



Slurry - what to do

If you see slurry being spread on farmland now, it is in contravention of The Reduction and Prevention of Agricultural Diffuse Pollution (England) Regulations 2018.

These regulations mean that slurry and other fertiliser should not be applied to farmland when there is no nutrient requirement by a growing crop.

In essence, this means any nutrient applications between October and February are un-necessary and in contravention of the regulations, as are applications of slurry on to bare

ground (such as land where maize has been harvested the previous autumn).

It is also unlawful to spread slurry within 10 metres of a watercourse, over a hedge, within 50m of a spring, on waterlogged ground and where there is a risk of it running off into watercourses such as before heavy rain and on slopes. Any farmer applying nutrients to land is also required to have in place a nutrient management strategy.

Until the issue of farm based pollution is tackled, our river will continue to be in a poor state.

Friends of the River Frome is asking all our supporters to notify the Environment Agency hotline of any breaches of the regulations they observe. Please record the location and details, and take photographs if you can. The Environment Agency should follow up the reports with advice to the relevant farmers and local farm advisers may also follow up with a visit.

Sue Everett

**Report breaches to the
Environment Agency hotline:
0800 807060**

What is Slurry?

Slurry is mainly composed of the faeces and urine from intensively-farmed pigs and cows, together with the washings used to clean the milking parlour and other areas of the farm. Cows in large dairies may be fed high-protein diets leading to high nitrogen content in their excreta, which may also contain veterinary compounds as a result of any treatment administered. The washings will often include chemicals used for disinfection.

Slurry is not manure. Manure is largely solid matter mixed with bedding material and stored in large heaps that promote aerobic composting. In contrast, slurry is a semi-liquid which is stored in large tanks or lagoons which promote anaerobic composting. Intensive dairy farms produce more slurry than the land can take.

stopit.org.uk

Fallen Trees - eyesore or ecosystem in action?

At this time of year, when river banks are waterlogged, it's common to see riverside trees collapsed into a river. Whether they should be removed or left is more complicated than it might at first seem.

Matt Pang, a local **Environment Agency** officer, says "Fallen trees are part of natural river processes and play a number of positive roles for the ecology, habitat and in some cases flood risk management. Fallen trees should only be removed if necessary to avoid flooding, damage to infrastructure or safety risks. Ultimately it is the riparian landowners decision but we would promote the practice of leaving fallen trees in place where there is no obvious risk which needs to be managed."

He stresses, though, that it comes down to a case-by-case assessment of risk. The key risks would be flooding of property or infrastructure, blockage of bridges or culverts, or any public safety risks which may apply in some cases. Landowners however may have other concerns such as flooding of riparian land or erosion of the banks and channel movement.

Recent research (Thompson *et al* 2018) demonstrates that fallen trees improve river habitat quality leading to an increase in the diversity of insects. In turn insects control algae growth, leading to improved water quality and clarity, and, of course, provide a food source for predators, such as brown trout.

Fallen trees, called "snags" by ecologists, can also provide protection for fish from birds of prey and safe spaces for spawning. The researchers found



A split, or crack willow, (*Salix fragilis*) - nature's way of rewilding rivers?

that these effects were visible in as little as three years.

Fallen trees may also have a significant function in slowing the flow of water down a river, a significant issue for the River Frome which is subject to occasional spatey torrents, after heavy rain, which erode banks and scour the river bed of organic matter. Large woody debris (LWD) create an area of calm water in which sediment and organic matter can accumulate rather than be washed downstream. They may also help protect the river bank from excessive erosion and even play a role in regulating water temperature

LWD are seen a very beneficial for the river habitat by **The Wild Trout Trust** who recommend that we should not remove woody debris unless there is a pressing reason to do so. www.wildtrout.org

Clearly there are some circumstances where removal is necessary. The primary reason is to avoid debris accumulating on bridges and culverts with

Rewilding

"A key principle of rewilding is acknowledging that nature may not need our intervention and that it can lead its own recovery. Nature knows what it wants, and it has evolved instinctively to its niche. If humans can recognise, restore and harness these missing or damaged natural processes again, then nature will create its own natural abundance, and 'wilder' wildlife by default."

Fran Southgate

www.rewildingbritain.org.uk/explore-rewilding/ecology-of-rewilding/what-are-natural-processes

the potential for localised flooding or damage downstream if logs become dislodged. If LDW cause a build up of sewage or litter then there may also be a case for removal.

Otherwise, as **Water for Wildlife** say, the message is "leave it in". They advise against removing or pollarding healthy riparian trees to encourage a higher proportion to mature and collapse in future. Some species, like the crack willow, do this naturally.

So next time you see a fallen tree in the river, remind yourself you may be witnessing natural rewilding in action.

Simon Keyes

Thompson M, Brooks SJ, Sayer CD, Woodward G, Axmacher JC, Perkins DM & Gray C. (2018). Large woody debris "rewilding" rapidly restores biodiversity in riverine food webs. *Journal of Applied Ecology* 55: 895-90

Trees Down Around Frome



Wallbridge meadow—beautiful in its own right and best left where it is?



A serious blockage adjacent to Frome Sewage Treatment works off Weylands.



A new bridge at Willow Vale?

Planning issues

Wallbridge Adderwell Path: The Planning Inspectorate has ordered Somerset County Council to make a decision on the FoRF's 2018 application for a Definitive Map Modification Order to confirm the path as a public right of way. Given its long-established history as a public path, we consider there is a prescriptive right of access and are contesting attempts by the new out-of-town land owner to close it.

Easthill Fields: The proposed social housing development on this site next to the cemetery is on hold pending further consultation. Whilst this is not a riverside site, it is close to the flooding pinch-point at Wallbridge so drainage and water run-off will be critical and the implications for wildlife in the river corridor need careful consideration.

Selwood Garden Community This controversial scheme has potentially significant implications for the river corridor in terms of water run-off and developments on the flood plain. We have raised concerns about the draft plans.

Saxonvale: The proposed "alternative community owned opportunity" - maydaysaxonvale.co.uk - appears to take care to protect the river with a large riverside park and interesting features such as a natural spring fountain. Let's hope Mendip have the courage to consider this as an enterprising alternative to the dense housing development put forward by Acorn.

Nature Notes from Rodden Meadow

2020 was again remarkable for the wealth of species recorded though the overall numbers of birds seems to be declining as forecast by the doomsayers of climate change and declining biodiversity.

Birds: Siskins those delightfully colourful resident breeders and occasional migrants from Scandinavia have in the past two years been present from January onwards but this year were not observed until March and in very small numbers. The colourful and gregarious Goldfinch which seems to be bucking the trend and increasing in numbers put on a splendid display when 60 plus were counted in one tree on 14 January and showed signs of breeding success with juveniles prominent later in the year.

Swifts which are seriously endangered and are regularly seen feeding over the Meadows, made a late return this year and were not seen until mid May. Perhaps a result of unfavourable winds during their passage from Africa. A max of 20 were recorded on 16 July. As in 2019, a cock pheasant made the Meadows his home from early February until early April.

Mammals: The pair of foxes resident in the south of the Meadows failed to produce young this year (having had six pups in 2019) perhaps due to the excessive disturbance caused by Network Rail on the Spur Railway. By contrast badger activity increased and night cameras revealed constant nocturnal feeding. Earthworms are reckoned to form about 80% of their diet. Common shrew were recorded for the first time and there have been regular otter sightings in Willow Vale.

Clive Stephens



Flooding at Adderwell—December 2020. The water meadows doing their job. The Walbridge meadows were similarly under water.

Friends of River Frome are delighted to have received Silver level accreditation from the **Wild Trout Trust** in recognition of our contribution to making the River Frome a better environment for trout.



Everyone needs Friends especially our badly-treated river

Be a Supporter Join our mailing list for free and help spread the word about what's happening down at the river.

Become a Member Get actively involved in our work by supporting it with a donation (£15 p.a) and engaging with our projects.

Our work revolves around the new **Frome River Strategy 2020-2030** whose aims are:

1. To maintain and improve the ecological quality of the River, its green corridor and tributaries.
2. To promote landscape improvements which enhance the urban River environment.
3. To prevent and remediate adverse human impacts on the River and its catchment.
4. To promote public enjoyment and health benefits by enabling environmentally sensitive access.
5. To nurture interest in and knowledge of the River and ensure its condition is monitored.

friendsoftheriverfrome.co.uk/become-a-member/

Get in touch

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 friendsoftheriverfrome.co.uk

 [friendsofthesomersetriverfrome](https://www.facebook.com/friendsofthesomersetriverfrome)

Friends of the Somerset River Frome is a registered charity 1062090 run entirely by volunteers

Chair: Mike Bull
Secretary: Bob Sargent
Membership: Simon Keyes

