

The Shoreline Management Plan & Blyth Estuary Strategy

Presentation to Walberswick Residents 6th April 2013

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The Shoreline Management Plan (SMP) is the means by which the Environment Agency delivers Government coastal policy. The SMPs were produced by the Environment Agency's consultant, Royal Haskoning and paid for by our District Councils. The SMPs are not quite what they seem. Whilst they do indeed list areas that will continue to receive protection, they are essentially a list of previously defended areas that are now to be abandoned. Since the modelled threat of 'climate change' appeared in 1990, the Government have been developing a complex system of raised benefit cost ratio targets, costing methods, outcome measures and dubious science, to remove the responsibility and cost of maintaining defences in rural areas. The unintended consequences of this policy are vividly demonstrated in the Blyth where our estuary walls are to be abandoned destroying our harbour and footpaths but our property is to be protected at a cost 15 times more than if our walls were not abandoned in the first place.

The Lowestoft to Felixstowe SMP is one of 23 around the coast of Great Britain. Ours incorporates the recommendations and options contained in the Blyth Estuary Strategy. Our SMP was approved unopposed by Waveney District Council in November 2011.

The genesis of the SMP begun when James Hansen of NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) claimed that he had detected a positive feedback mechanism in human carbon dioxide emissions and global temperature. "Global Warming has begun" he declared to the US Senate Committee in 1988.

Later that year the UN set up the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to turn Hansen's claim into a global emissions control policy.

The following year 1989 Margaret Thatcher appointed John Gummer as the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and in 1992 Secretary of State for the Environment, to take charge of protecting Britain from the effects of climate change.

In 1990 the IPCC published their first modelling report predicting that by 2100 global temperature would rise between 3 and 5 degrees C and the sea level would rise between 0.3 and 1m.

In 1992 John Gummer joins the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change to develop emissions control policy and in the same year he signs the EU Habitats Directive requiring Britain to protect 192 low lying coastal sites containing 32,000ha of internationally designated habitat – now called Natura.

In response to the IPCC's predicted sea level rise and the legal obligation to protect Natura sites, John Gummer sets up the Environment Agency and takes direct control of coastal defence. Without waiting for the evidence to match the predictions, the Government introduces a policy to limit its exposure to the expected rise in coastal defence cost. The policy created

would remove the cost of protecting rural areas through the application of an eight fold increase in benefit cost ratio.

The Natura sites contained in these areas would be moved inland and the move funded from the local coastal defence budget. Over the last 8 years more than £96 million has been removed from this budget to pay for bird habitat creation and Natura site relocation – sites the Government has a legal duty to protect in-situ.

The abandonment of Natura sites presented a serious legal problem to the Government as no precedent for this exists in the Habitats Directive. However, the Directive does allow Natura sites to be moved where a site is required for a purpose of overriding public interest e.g. motorways, railways, harbours and reservoirs etc. Clearly abandonment for reasons of overriding state cost saving would be an unlikely addition to this list but defences deemed 'unsustainable' would almost certainly not be challenged.

In 2005 the EA published their Draft Blyth Strategy outlining their preferred option – the abandonment of all our southern river walls and our south harbour arm, the relocation of Tinkers Marsh Natura site and a rock sill at the Bailey bridge.

On enquiring why our 400 year old river walls were to be abandoned we were told they were 'unsustainable' due to an expected increase in river flow.

In a letter to our MP John Gummer, Chairman of the EA's disastrous 2006 public meeting in Southwold, the EA's Regional Director stated that protecting the estuary from the expected increase in river flow would require £100 million of sheet piling and this was unaffordable.

Further enquiry revealed that the EA's claim was based on modelling by their consultants Black & Veatch. The model, we were told, demonstrated that the estuary was losing sediment and by 2100 the tidal prism (the estuary water volume) would increase by 63% resulting in a substantial increase in river flow and channel erosion.

To those who knew the estuary well, this sediment loss was absurd. So we decided to go out on to the mudflats and conducted our own sediment survey. We took 11 mudflat core samples on 3 marshes, breached in the mid 40s, and found an average of 600mm showing that over 1 million cubic metres had been deposited in the estuary in the last 65 years. After many emails, letters and meetings, the EA eventually agreed to fund a proper sediment survey – The Pye Report. This confirmed our findings and demonstrated that over the next 100 years the tidal prism would fall and not rise.

In the Blyth Estuary Group's opinion, it is at this point that the EA should have halted the strategy and reconsidered the sustainability of our defences. However, the EA decided to ignore the evidence, claimed the tidal prism and river flow was not important and suggested that the real problem, not previously mentioned, was that the walls would collapse if raised.

Despite many requests the EA declined to provide evidence for their new claim so we submitted a Freedom of Information Act request. We were then

informed that no documentary evidence existed and that the claim was merely the opinion of two EA coastal engineers.

Why the EA believe that raising our 400 year old highly consolidated river walls by 0.5m are more likely to collapse than new 3m high walls built on virgin marsh or raising 1.6Km of old creek walls by 1.5m to turn them into primary defences, has never been explained.

In 2011 the EA published their Final Blyth Estuary Strategy. Over the next 16 years the EA will abandon all our river walls, spend £5.3m moving protected Natura habitat to Snape and £8.2 million building unnecessary secondary defences. The loss of our river walls will increase the river flow by 144%, destroying our harbour, destroying our footpaths, destroying our link to Southwold and turning our estuary into a vast mudflat.

Furthermore, without the protection of a mature vegetated saltings, the secondary defences will all require high maintenance concrete cladding to protect them from a potential 3Km wave fetch.

Tinkers Marsh Natura site was abandoned in 2007, Reydon Marsh and the Hen Reedbeds Natura site will be by 2019 and Robinsons and Southwold Town Marsh by 2029. Should any of these river walls fail before the secondary defences are built, the high cost of building defences in water filled marshes may make them uneconomic.

It is difficult to understand the logic of a plan that believes building £8 million worth of secondary defences and destroying our footpaths and harbour, gives us better protection than raising our existing river walls – walls that we know can be raised for less than £1million.

The EA's Partnership Funding scheme, launched in 2012, has been suggested as a possible source of financial help. However, why the EA would want to fund walls they have spent £11 million abandoning appears to make little sense. We will of course investigate this suggestion to see where it leads.

Removing the 'unsustainability' claim is likely to be resisted by the EA as they would run the risk of EC infraction proceedings for allowing the unlawful abandonment of two Natura sites.

In 2009 the Blyth Estuary Group and Walberswick Parish Council received planning permission to raise the river walls to a height that will protect us from a 1 in 10 storm surge. The raising of Tinkers wall in 2011 by Sir Charles Blois – albeit 600mm lower than the planning application – means that the permission is now 'extant' and unless there is a successful objection, this permission will run for ever.

BEG Action plan.

1. Encourage Sir Charles Blois to raise Tinkers wall to the height agreed in the planning application.
2. Encourage Walberswick Common Lands Charity to raise Robinson's wall.
3. Encourage Waveney District Council to infill the south harbour arm with rock.

4. Persuade Suffolk CC to conduct an independent investigation into the sustainability of our river walls before the EA wastes £5.7 million building unnecessary secondary defences.

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