

# Protecting our rivers

Information for landowners

August 2015

## Sustainable river maintenance

In the past river management has often worked against natural processes. However, in recent years a growing body of scientific evidence has demonstrated that a more naturally functioning river system will often afford greater flood protection to people and property and provide significant benefits to wildlife, water quality and landscape value as well as reducing the cost to the public purse of managing our rivers.

We review our maintenance programme based on the level of flood risk to people and properties in the catchment and where possible undertake minimal vegetation clearance both in the river channel and on the banks. This helps to maximise the amount of wildlife habitat that can remain whilst maintaining effective conveyance of water and land drainage.

This has meant in recent years we have not carried out as much of the routine maintenance work as we used to in many places across the country. As a landowner we want you to understand the reasons behind our change in approach and are keen that if you undertake river maintenance work yourself that it is carried out in an environmentally sensitive manner.

## What causes harm to our rivers?

Apart from the occasional pollution incident, in Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk harm is normally caused by dredging the bed and banks with the intention of aiding land drainage. This is different from the sustainable management of rivers involving well planned and carefully executed de-silting and weed-cutting work.

## What we are keen to avoid is:-

- Bed and bank material (e.g. gravel) being removed and deposited on the banks
- Fish and other aquatic organisms being removed from the water (e.g. freshwater mussels)
- Channels being stripped of all their in-stream vegetation
- All woody debris being removed (e.g. fallen trees and branches)
- Bare, steep earth banks that provide little wildlife habitat



These photos show a couple of examples of where bank and bed material has been removed from the river – the sort of damage we are keen to avoid.

### **What problems can inappropriate river maintenance cause?**

- Destruction of protected species and their habitats such as Water Voles and our native White-clawed Crayfish
- Long-lasting environmental damage – the gravels in many of our rivers are crucial to spawning fish. They are a remnant from the last glaciation and in our lowland rivers the natural processes that will lead to their replenishment could take thousands of years
- Breaching a suite of legislation including Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981, Water Resources Act 1991 and Water Framework Directive 2003
- It may lead to a deterioration in the ecological status of a water body
- Potentially increases flood risk to land and property

### **What are we doing to protect and improve our rivers?**

Causing damage to our rivers is illegal and we will investigate instances that are reported to us. However, we want to work with landowners such as you to improve the environment as much as we can.

We are always looking for opportunities to create habitat and restore straight, feature-less streams and rivers to a more natural meandering channel that benefits our native wildlife.

If you would like advice or support to improve a river on your land please contact Andrew Raine on 01473 706597.



The above pictures show a couple of the rivers we have returned to a more natural condition benefitting wildlife yet still ensuring land drainage and affording flood protection.

customer service line  
03708 506 506

incident hotline  
0800 80 70 60

floodline  
0345 988 1188

[www.gov.uk/environment-agency](http://www.gov.uk/environment-agency)