

P-06-1398 To act to increase the effectiveness of Natural Resources Wales in halting pollution on the Teifi – Correspondence from Petitioner to Committee, 2 July 2024



Petitions Committee Chair
Senedd Cymru
Cardiff Bay
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Dear Petitions Committee members

We thank Natural Resources Wales and the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs for their further responses to our petition of last year, and also the Petitions Committee for a chance to respond.

We continue to have concerns regarding funding of our regulator. The Demonstrator Project is a case in point. Time is slipping and the river does not have the time. We need action now. Biodiversity is still in decline – there appeared to be much promise of innovative and agile systems to tackle the situation on this and other failing SAC rivers, but at glacial speed. Another 6 months of waiting after the initial rejection of funding from Ofwat.

It has taken nearly a year for Ofwat to sign off DCWW's latest round of spending which includes the updated treatment plant at Cardigan, and that's before the building work even starts.

DCWW, although not by any means perfect, are starting to tackle the phosphate overload – albeit as some of our supporters say a little too late – and we hope their increasing transparency in working practice continues. We also trust that NRW will continue to hold them to account for breaches of permit and other pollution incidents, and will not cut corners on this.

We are pleased to hear that regulations of the agricultural sector are being strengthened – after DCWW this is the leading culprit for pollution in the Teifi. We strongly welcome financial incentives for farmers to move away from bare over-wintering fields and limit soil erosion into the river – this sediment issue is a big part of the problem around the loss of biodiversity. Increased inspections at high-risk farms are also welcomed, along with looking at innovative ways to dispose of slurry. However, an increase in peer-to-peer farmer-led change is essential if positive progress is to be achieved.

The Nutrient Management Boards, funded by the Welsh Government, would appear to be another cog in the wheel of agricultural change, with plans currently being drawn up, but again all happening too slowly. We all know change is needed but we fear Welsh Government doesn't have the will to tackle the farming bodies. The climb-down on the issue of 10% tree cover in the SFS is a case in point. Will the NMBs be another feasibility study when what we need is action now?

The concerns around NRW funding remain. They are continually having to cut contracts and re-fill posts due to financial constraints – at a time when they are needed more than ever. Our regulator needs teeth to conduct testing and inspections as well as enforce the existing regulations but it seems teeth are being removed. This is bound to have an impact on the planned delivery of scheduled water quality work – as seen in the timescale and frequency of testing for the Water Framework Directive. However, it is pleasing to know that the funding for the fish habitat restoration scheme and the 4 Rivers for Life project is ringfenced.

Is it too simplistic to believe that more NRW staff on the ground is the obvious way forward to mitigate the issues facing the Teifi? The regulations are in place. They need enforcing.

Save the Teifi citizen science volunteers are trying to fill in the gaps left by Welsh Government's lack of robust funding for NRW. We are working closely with West Wales Rivers Trust, the Nutrient Management Board and Ceredigion County Council on habitat/visual pollution monitoring as well as water quality testing. The Council is being proactive by providing equipment and indicating where additional data is required. Whilst we recognise that NRW have put in place a process to recognise citizen science projects we feel that a more proactive approach would provide them with greater support. They should indicate what data and which locations would support their activities and provide training (or outsource training) and equipment to deliver the work. The range of expertise within citizen science groups is considerable. People power works, but surely the issue is that our regulator needs to be working smarter?

In summary, the responses are all making the right noises but we continue to be concerned that meaningful action is too long in coming. The Teifi has no time to wait.

DCWW and the agricultural industry should have been tackled a very long time ago. Our rivers are suffering as a result. We continue to feel that the water companies, regulatory bodies and Welsh Government have failed in their responsibilities to this and future generations and must act faster to reverse the consequences of this inaction.

Save the Teifi community group.