

Proposed Salt Marshes: Pawlett Hams

11:00:00

Derek Twigg (in the Chair)

I will call Sir Ashley Fox to move the motion and then the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates. At least one other Member has indicated that they wish to speak, and there may be interventions.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con)

I beg to move,

That this House has considered the environmental impact of the proposed salt marshes at Pawlett Hams and other sites.

It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Twigg. I welcome the Minister to her place.

I am grateful to have this opportunity to move the motion, which concerns an issue of great importance to my constituents in Bridgwater. I asked for this debate to discuss EDF's plans to establish a salt marsh at Pawlett Hams in Somerset. The proposal was highly unpopular with the local community. In fact, it was difficult to find anyone who thought it was a good idea, and when I met representatives from EDF, even they seemed a little half-hearted about it.

Why, one might ask, does EDF, which is building the Hinkley Point C nuclear power station a few miles down the coast, want to flood 800 acres of beautiful Somerset countryside and turn it into a salt marsh? The answer is complex. When EDF was given planning permission to build Hinkley Point C, it was required to take measures to mitigate damage to marine life caused by the water intake pipes, which are situated in the Bristol channel and, as one might imagine, there is a risk of harm to fish, which might get sucked into them.

EDF originally set out three proposals to minimise the risk of harm to marine life. The first involved designing special low-velocity, side-entry water intake pipes, with a capped head design. These reduce the number of fish that are sucked into the pipe as they swim past the end. The second was a fish recovery and return system, which means that a good proportion of the fish that swim into the intake pipe are returned to the sea, with minimal injury. That is not a perfect system, but it is certainly one that will save the more resilient species.

The third was that EDF was required to install an acoustic fish deterrent, or AFD. This involves the installation of a number of underwater sound projectors that play a constant loud noise that is designed to stop fish approaching the area of the intake pipes. EDF now says that it is unable to install the AFD, because of engineering difficulties and health and safety risks to the divers who would need to maintain the system. To deviate from the AFD proposals, EDF has to submit a material change application. As part of the application, it is working with the Environment Agency to agree several compensatory habitat measures to deliver benefit to the estuary's qualifying habitat.

EDF says that it is putting forward a mosaic of mitigation measures. Some of them seem sensible and beneficial to the natural ecosystem in and around the Severn estuary: for example, the creation of several hectares of seagrass in the estuary and a commitment to delivering 15 hectares of kelp forest. It is also considering upgrades to several weirs to benefit migratory fish. The most significant proposal, however, and the one that brings us to Westminster Hall today, is the creation of 800 acres of salt marsh.

At the beginning of this year, EDF consulted on the salt marsh being established in Pawlett Hams, in my constituency. Pawlett Hams is a precious ecosystem. EDF's plans to flood the area with saltwater would endanger not just the land itself, but the myriad species that call it home. It would transform the biodiverse habitat into barren, species-poor salt marsh and tidal mud. What is most extraordinary about EDF's plans is that the Hams is an area of great ecological importance. It forms part of the Bridgwater bay site of special scientific interest, which was first declared in 1989 and recognises the area as one of particular interest to science, due to the rare species of flora and fauna that it contains. There is a lush, biodiverse habitat for many animals in the Hams, including lapwings, redshanks, otters, water voles, water beetles, great crested newts and yellow wagtails. Those species would be driven out if the area was turned into a salt marsh. The Hams provide valuable grazing for local farmers that would also be lost.

EDF's plan was a disaster, and even if it went ahead it was not clear how it would mitigate the problem of the fish that would be lost. I made my views abundantly clear to EDF over the months, so I was delighted when, a day after making a request for this debate, it announced that it is pausing its proposal. EDF says that it is now considering four other potential sites for salt marshes in the Severn estuary, at Kingston Seymour, Littleton, Arlingham and Rodley.

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab)

I thank the hon. Gentleman for all his detail and his excellent summary of exactly what is being proposed in Arlingham. The proposal was put to the people of Arlingham, they had a large meeting on Monday evening and, almost universally, there was a feeling that this was not a good idea for people there or for their landscape. Many of the reasons that the hon. Gentleman has put across are the same in Arlingham. It seems rather strange that the Arlingham site and salt marsh will somehow compensate for or mitigate the predicted loss of about 182 million fish; I do not think there is any way we can say that those two match each other. Although I support the principle of habitat creation and acknowledge the benefits of the salt marsh, does the Minister share my concern that EDF's

application to modify Hinkley Point C's consent order seems like an unacceptably high price for an environmentally unique habitat to pay?

Sir Ashley Fox

I will leave the Minister to answer those points, if I may.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD)

I pay tribute, as I am sure the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) would, to the amazing community at Pawlett Hams, who campaigned ferociously, but in quite a gentle way, and single-mindedly to get its aims and dislike across. I hope that that is reflected in the comments made by the hon. Member for Stroud about the community; indeed, we have a meeting in the communities that I represent on Monday next week. It is the case that the communities feel that EDF and the Environment Agency may have been a little heavy-handed in their first approaches. They seemed to be rather fierce and not accepting of the fact that people have a view about their own community and its sustainability.

Sir Ashley Fox

The hon. Lady anticipates the next part of my speech.

As a new MP, it is tempting to believe that this change of heart by EDF is entirely due to my persuasive powers, but that is not the case. All credit must go to the Pawlett Hams Action Group, a genuine grassroots campaign that sprang up to defend the Hams. The group demonstrated the significance of the Hams by conducting wildlife surveys and collecting personal and historical testimonies. It also raised awareness of the issue through petitions, social media, community events such as a photography competition and collaboration with local schools. I pay tribute to the group's co-ordinator, Judith Ballard, and to the other leading members, Moira Allen, Rachel and Molly Fitton, and Joy Russell. There are many others who worked hard to save the Hams so that it might be enjoyed for generations to come. I thank them all—perhaps they can help the hon. Members for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) and for Stroud (Dr Opher) in resisting unwanted salt marshes.

Although my constituents and I welcome EDF's decision not to proceed with the plan, several outstanding questions need to be answered. My first question relates to the inclusion and, now, the planned removal of the AFD in the development consent order. That was included at the request of the Environment Agency. I want to know why it was included if, as we are now told, it is unsuitable for conditions in the Bristol channel. Related to that question, what was the process between the Environment Agency and EDF on agreeing that it should be removed?

To my local community, the process looks opaque. Some of my constituents believe that the AFD should remain as a condition of EDF being allowed to operate Hinkley Point C. I do not claim to have the technical knowledge to know whether it is a practical option or not—and the Secretary of State

has yet to make formal decision—but it seems to me that EDF and the Environment Agency are putting together a package of mitigation measures in the hope that the deal will be signed off.

I want to know why, once the decision to explore the establishment of a salt marsh was made, Pawlett Hams was designated as the preferred site. As I said earlier, the Hams is recognised as a wetland of international importance. Turning it into a salt marsh is not a mitigation. It would be an intentional decision to cause environmental harm. It is a completely illogical and extraordinary choice by the Environment Agency. The view of many of my constituents is that the Environment Agency chose Pawlett Hams so that it could flood the land and save money on maintaining flood defences. I want to ask the Minister for an assurance that the Government will continue to maintain all the flood defences on the River Parrett.

Finally, I want to ask the Government to consider whether there might be a better way of delivering environmental improvements than through the Environment Agency. It was the Environment Agency that wanted to include an AFD in the initial development consent order. Now it apparently agrees that it should be removed, and is the prime mover behind this unwanted salt marsh. Having retreated from Pawlett Hams, it now wishes to inflict this on other parts of the countryside.

If an acoustic fish deterrent is truly impractical—I remain to be convinced—I would like to see the money saved, which would be tens of millions of pounds, put at the disposal of the local community to fund genuine environmental improvements. I want to see those decisions taken by democratically accountable bodies, such as Somerset Council and the local town and parish councils. In my view, they are more likely to spend the money wisely than the agency that thought that turning Pawlett Hams into a salt marsh was a good idea.

11:12:00

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD)

Thank you, Mr Twigg, for the opportunity to speak in the debate. I recognise that I have very little time, because I wish to ensure that the Minister has an opportunity to respond to my questions and those of the hon. Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox).

I have already mentioned that this was a heavy-handed approach, which is how my constituents feel. The fact that there is little detail has caused enormous distress in my community of Kingston Seymour. I thank the hon. Member for Bridgwater for talking about the campaigners, many of whom I know. I also recognise the efforts of Claire Sully, who was one of the hon. Gentleman's opponents in the general election. In an effort at balance, I recognise that in 2011, when a proposal affecting Kingston Seymour came from the Environment Agency in a previous iteration, Liam Fox helped us to see it off.

I want to mention a number of things briefly. Some expert evidence was offered in 2011 by Dr Robert Kirby, a coastal geomorphologist and scientist. He advised that any salt marsh would eventually wash away or be eroded. As I already mentioned to the Minister, this piece of coast is on the Severn bore. The rise and fall of the tide will have an impact on every one of the communities. It is the second highest tidal rise in the world, and therefore that seems highly likely.

I have been informed by local historians that the existing seawall is of Roman origin in places, and I cannot understand exactly what the Environment Agency intends. If it intends to breach the seawall, that will increase the level of flooding. If it intends to build up the seawall, it will not create any more salt marsh, so I am really very unsure about this. I will pick up on exactly the point made by hon. Member for Bridgwater about why we were all told that the acoustic fish deterrent would be the absolute answer to all problems many years ago. Now it appears to be utter fiction, and I do not understand how it is that we can suddenly be looking at creating salt marsh and dismissing the number of fish that are going to be killed when that was a critical factor when Hinkley Point C was being discussed. Everyone threw up their hands in horror at the possible mass destruction of fish, but the acoustic fish deterrent was supposed to get rid of that problem.

In the area that we are talking about, Kingston Seymour, the residents have concerns. I have to say that 100% of the population is not against this, but people need the detail. There was a meeting and a number of constituents raised the following points with me. They are really concerned about solar farms, the sewage works in this area and the adverse impacts of saltwater on the three freshwater fishing lakes in Kingston Seymour. They are also very concerned about the increased risk of flooding, and they have already experienced increased insurance costs for their properties and businesses in 2011 as a result of the Environment Agency's proposals then. There is a brilliant coastal footpath, which is an opportunity for people to move back and forth along the coast. Shortly after being elected on this occasion, I went to the opening of the pier to pier coastal path, which is a multi-user path that connects Weston-super-Mare pier with Clevedon pier. It was massively well used even before it was opened a week after the election. It was incredibly popular in that first week and huge numbers of people were using it.

The other thing that the Minister might want to know is that Kingston Seymour contains sites of special scientific interest. It seems slightly perverse that, where we have conservation sites and we have all been working hard to protect that area, and there are a number of protected species there, we are now proposing to mitigate the mitigation that everyone has provided. It is absolutely bonkers. We will end up mitigating the mitigation of the mitigation of the mitigation if we carry on like this. I really do not see that it is particularly helpful.

I am aware that there are different and expanded tourist offerings in this area since the last EA scheme was got shot of in about 2012 or 2013. There has been significant investment in businesses, including barn conversions that have created tourism accommodation, office and commercial activities, new caravan and camping grounds and new golf course facilities, and several of those businesses have created all sorts of recreational amenity. I am really concerned and I wonder whether the Minister might enable local people in Kingston Seymour to understand exactly what it is

that the Environment Agency proposes and the impact it will have on them. That needs to be done really quickly before investigations take place as to the suitability of the land.

11:19:00

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh)

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) on securing this debate and on his excellent representation of his constituents' views here today. I begin by saying that this is the subject of a live planning case and I am sure that hon. Members will understand the limits on what I can say. However, I can assure hon. Members that I have listened carefully to the points raised, asked my officials some of the questions that they have asked, and have spent a considerable amount of time thinking about the issue. I hope that what I say will be useful to them and their constituents.

I will begin by setting out the facts of the case. The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 protects special areas of conservation and special protected areas. The regulations require an assessment of whether a plan or project could have an adverse impact on the integrity of a protected site. Any harm must be mitigated unless there are imperative reasons of overriding public interest and no alternative. In those cases, compensatory measures must be secured.

In this case, an acoustic fish deterrent was part of the approved mitigation for the impact of Hinckley Point C on the Severn estuary. Hinckley Point C has applied to remove the acoustic fish deterrent. That means that compensation may be needed for the loss of fish within the Severn estuary site. The species of concern are Atlantic cod, sea bass, whiting and herring.

In a pre-application consultation earlier this year, Hinckley proposed Pawlett Hams as a suitable compensatory salt marsh habitat. As the hon. Member for Bridgwater has said, Pawlett Hams was designated as part of the Bridgwater bay SSSI in 1989. It is particularly important for its network of freshwater ditches and their associated invertebrate communities—insects. Pawlett Hams is also part of the Severn estuary Ramsar—which is a wetland site—and special protection area, a European designation for bird sites. It has a triple protection.

In its response to the pre-application consultation, the Environment Agency was unable to agree with the suitability of the Pawlett Hams sites until further evidence and assessment has been completed. Hinckley approached the Environment Agency; to gently correct the hon. Member for Bridgwater, the Environment Agency did not suggest it. It is my understanding that the applicant makes a request to the regulator.

I understand that following the consultation, Hinkley Point C is investigating new locations for salt marsh creation as an alternative to Pawlett Hams. It is holding early conversations with stakeholders ahead of public consultation, as we have heard from colleagues today. Any additional sites being put forward are sites identified and selected by Hinkley Point C, not the Environment Agency. The Environment Agency agrees that the marine measures proposed are an appropriate option within a wider compensation package. It has not agreed on the scale of the measures to off-set the predicted adverse effects. To the question raised by the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt), flood modelling and flood risk assessments would be required for identified sites.

Tessa Munt

As I understand it, the Environment Agency is helping the integrity of the seawall by building it up at Kingston Seymour, so it seems incredibly perverse that it might agree that that should change. Currently, it is making it better by creating more flood protection for the villagers in Kingston Seymour.

Mary Creagh

Let me come on to flood protection, and I will say something about salt marshes later. If the hon. Member is not satisfied with my response, then I am happy to write to the Environment Agency on her behalf.

The application for a material change is currently in the pre-application stage. That involves consultation and engagement with various bodies, including statutory consultees such as the Environment Agency and Natural England, which looks after our SSSIs. Those bodies will be able to provide valuable information on environmental impacts. That will include the sufficiency of the compensation package and its ability to compensate for the impact on protected fish species—let us not forget that this is about protecting the fish.

To comply with the pre-application consultation requirements under the Planning Act 2008, Hinkley Point C must carry out an appropriate consultation about any proposed changes. The decision relating to the project will ultimately be for the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Ed Miliband) to make. I am confident that he will do so correctly, in line with the requirements of the Planning Act. However, in doing so, he will need to consider all relevant issues. They include whether the proposed compensation is required and if it is, whether it is proportionate to the detrimental impact on fish populations of not fitting the acoustic fish deterrent. The planning guidance is clear: Ministers and officials should approach all such decisions with an open mind, based on the evidence presented to them, objectively and without having or giving the appearance of having any predetermined views on the merits or otherwise of the case. I am sure that we are all, in this room, seasoned politicians in planning applications.

I cannot discuss the particular merits of this case, but I want to raise some broader points prompted by some of the issues, because I too have asked questions. I have heard what the hon. Members for Bridgwater and for Wells and Mendip Hills have asked and that has made clear that we must deliver our infrastructure goals in a way that is positive for our natural world and for our wider landscapes. If we are to meet our ambitious targets on nature restoration while accelerating to net zero, we will have to think carefully about how we use our land. That is why the forthcoming land use framework for England will consider cross-governmental issues, such as energy and food security, and how we can expand nature-rich habitats, such as wetlands, peat bogs and forests.

Spatial planning will play an important role in the delivery of the Government's growth and clean energy missions, and the land use framework will work hand in hand with the strategic spatial energy plan. The Government will also explore the opportunities for spatial planning to support the delivery of other types of infrastructure. I recognise that in some cases the planning regime acts as a major brake on economic growth, which is why the Government will make the changes we need to forge ahead with new grid connections, roads, railways, reservoirs and other nationally significant infrastructure.

The proposed Planning and Infrastructure Bill will accelerate house building and infrastructure delivery and streamline the delivery process for critical infrastructure, including accelerating upgrades to the national grid and boosting renewable energy. That will benefit local communities, unlock delivery of our 2030 clean power mission and net zero obligations and ensure our domestic energy security. We will simplify the consenting process for major infrastructure projects and enable new and improved national policy statements to come forward. We will also establish a review process to provide the opportunity for them to be updated every five years, which will give increased certainty to developers and communities.

We are just as committed to protecting and restoring nature. In England, we are committed to halting the decline in species abundance by 2030 and reversing it by 2042. We are also committed to reducing the risk of species extinction and we will restore and create more than half a million hectares of wildlife-rich habitat by 2042. Delivering those targets sits at the heart of our mission to ensure nature's recovery. We will look to reduce pressures on species and protected sites, such as pollution and climate change, and we will take action to recover specific species.

I will say a quick word about solar farms, because I know there has been a lot of talk about them, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills. My understanding from conversations with my biodiversity net gain team is that when we put in a solar farm on grazing land, the actual biodiversity net gain is up to 140%. I understand there are concerns about solar farms, but actually, it is an interesting way to diversify farm income while providing a boost to nature.

Salt marshes have had a bad rap in this debate. They are incredible valuable habitats. Wonderfully mysterious places on the border between land and sea, they are a liminal landscape in constant change, shifting with the tides. They are often overlooked and undervalued and, as we have heard,

they can be talked down. I want to speak up for the salt marshes. They play a vital role in supporting species. For many fish, including sea bass and herring, those wetlands serve as essential nurseries—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11:30:00

Sitting suspended.