

Regional Habitat Creation Programme (RHCP) Information Note for Awareness Raising

What is the North East & Yorkshire Regional Habitat Creation Programme?

An Environment Agency led programme to create UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) habitat within the North East & Yorkshire Region through all Flood Risk Management (FRM) activities and funded by FRM. The programme applies to all FRM Operating Authorities (EA, IDB and LA). Only priority UK BAP habitats can count towards FRM habitat creation targets and due to the nature of FRM activities the most likely habitats to be created include wetlands (wet grassland, reedbed, open water, fen, wet woodland), lowland meadow and, in intertidal locations, saltmarsh and mudflat.

Why do we need a Regional Habitat Creation Programme?

We need a RHCP to plan habitat creation in a strategic way to comply with legal and policy drivers. There are two key drivers for habitat creation, these being:

- A legal driver - Under the Habitats Regulations (1994), FRM are legally required to ensure the coherence, and no deterioration, of sites designated for their international nature conservation importance i.e. Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protection Areas (SPA). The greatest risk to these protected sites occurs in coastal situations where sea level is rising and existing or new flood defences prevent the natural inland movement of these habitats. As a result of sea level rise, designated intertidal habitats (saltmarsh and mudflat) in front of flood defences become squeezed (gradually lost over time) against a hard flood defence line whilst freshwater habitats behind a defence may get deteriorated by increasing saline incursion. In such circumstances, the Agency has a legal requirement to create new habitats to compensate for those damaged or lost and this is known as 'compensation habitat'. This is the key driver for Regional Habitat Creation Plans nationally. An assessment of the likely loss of SAC and SPA habitat based on current rates of sea level rise needs to be undertaken in the Region to identify our future habitat creation needs to ensure no net loss of SAC and SPA habitat.
- A policy driver – Defra has set the Environment Agency a target for the creation of UK BAP habitat associated with its FRM activities. The current target requires 800 hectares of UK BAP habitat to be created nationally through FRM activities over a 3 year period (1st April 2008 – 31st March 2011). Of the 800ha total, 300ha of habitat creation has to be intertidal habitat (saltmarsh or mudflat) to address coastal squeeze of habitats due to sea level rise where we are holding the flood defence line. Apart from the intertidal habitat creation requirement the target is not specific about what UK BAP habitats we should create. The Defra target applies to all FRM operating authorities i.e. the Agency, Internal Drainage Boards and Local Authorities.

What land is the Agency interested in and how do we intend to create habitat?

- The Agency is interested in creating habitat on any land where this also helps reduce flood risk.
- Inland of the coast, we are seeking willing landowners who are prepared to manage their land for flood storage or for slowing down the rate of runoff from their land. Examples include:
 - An increasing number of FRM capital schemes are using upstream flood storage options to help protect vulnerable communities from flooding and such land offers opportunities for habitat creation e.g. ponds, wet grassland, hay meadow, wet woodland etc. The cost

of creating habitat through specific FRM schemes must come from the scheme funding allocation. However, a FRM scheme having an element of habitat creation can increase its Outcome Measure score and likelihood of central funding.

- Targeted woodland creation slows runoff through intercepting rainfall and increasing the rate of rainfall infiltration into the soil and is one measure being used to reduce flood risk in vulnerable upland catchments with steep slopes. Thus, woodland creation in the right areas can have a flood risk reduction benefit but also creates new woodland habitat which can count towards our habitat creation targets.
- In coastal and estuarine situations the Agency would be interested in identifying any land that could be converted to habitat in order to provide 'compensation habitat' for designated saltmarsh and mudflat loss due to sea level rise.
- The Agency has the power to purchase land for creating habitat where internationally designated habitat (SPA or SAC) is being lost as a result of FRM activities or structures. This is almost exclusively associated with the loss of designated SPA and SAC habitat along coastal and estuarine areas due to sea level rise. The Agency cannot purchase land solely for any other habitat creation purpose.
- The Agency can fund habitat creation costs (feasibility and capital costs) on third party land where landowners are willing and the land serves to reduce flood risk i.e. through increasing flood storage or slowing runoff. However, the Agency cannot fund on-going maintenance costs and because of this projects tend to only be viable to most landowners if Natural England is able to provide Countryside Stewardship payments to offset the loss of income from their land. The Agency actively works with Natural England on such sites to make sure these projects are as financially attractive as possible to landowners.
- Working in partnership with interested organisations and willing landowners is key to delivering successful habitat creation in the Region.

Where will we be creating habitat?

Currently, opportunities are being taken to create habitat where this fits in with existing FRM plans, strategies and activities (Capital and Maintenance Programmes) and this can be almost at any location within the Region where there is a flood risk issue to be addressed. Apart from work ongoing on the Humber Estuary, it is likely we will need to expand our habitat creation activity along the coastline and in other estuaries in the Region which will be affected by sea level rise and where a loss of designated intertidal habitat is expected.

The Agency would prioritise sites for habitat creation which fit into a wider nature conservation network as this would provide added benefits from a wildlife and recreational perspective.

Why might you be interested as a landowner?

The Agency is interested to hear from any willing landowner who wishes to take part in habitat creation. You may be interested for a number of reasons:

- Your land may be becoming increasingly difficult to farm for various reasons, including that it is getting wetter or flooded for longer.
- You may have an interest in enhancing the wildlife on your land.
- You may see wider opportunities to diversify your business, such as managing natural habitats on your land for recreation.
- The opportunity for land purchase in certain coastal and estuarine areas.
- The potential to enter your land into Countryside Stewardship as a result of converting productive land to wildlife habitat.

For More Information contact:

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