

# Flood defence cash diverted to save eels

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THE humble eel could have become Britain's most expensive wildlife species, with measures to save it from extinction set to cost more than £100m, much of it from flood defence budgets meant to defend homes.

The Environment Agency (EA) is issuing hundreds of enforcement notices obliging landowners, drainage boards, water companies and others to replace the thousands of pumps that drain Britain's lowlands with "eel-friendly" versions that will let the creatures migrate between rivers and the sea.

The EA is obeying the eel regulations imposed on it by Defra, the environment ministry, which controls the agency. However, the rules are so obscure that ministers apparently failed to spot the huge costs – enough to protect several large towns, such as Doncaster, South Yorkshire, or Gloucester, from the inundations that have hit both places in recent years.

Much of the cost will fall on England and Wales's 114 drainage boards, the obscure but vital bodies that keep the 10% of land lying below sea level free of water. Their network of more than 500 pumping stations helps keep Britain largely flood free every winter, protecting almost 900,000 properties.

Gerald Allison, of the Downham Market group of drainage boards in Norfolk, said one member faced a £12m bill for features such as eel-friendly pumps that the creatures can swim through safely, and "eel passes" – channels around barriers such as weirs.

David Thomas, of Cambridgeshire's Middle Level Commissioners, which oversees another group of drainage boards, said one member faced a £1.8m bill for a single pump station.

"Upgrading all pump stations will take hundreds of millions of pounds from flood defence," he said.

Andrew Newton, engineer for the Ely group of 10 drainage boards, which has 29 pumping stations, was quoted £3m last week for making just two of them eel-friendly. "The board that owns them has an income of just £700,000 a year. The Defra ministers care more for eels than homes," he said.

The eel regulations were meant to reverse the catastrophic 95% decline in one of Britain's commonest fish. The problem is that eels are highly migratory, breeding in the Sargasso Sea and returning to UK rivers to mature – but the 26,000 weirs, sluices, pumping stations and other barriers in rivers block their way.



An EA impact assessment originally put the cost of making watercourses eel-friendly at £75m but insiders say it will be far higher – possibly more than £150m. The total amount spent by Defra on flood defences last year was £600m.

An EA spokesman said that it had drawn up nine national "eel-management plans". However, while trying to save the eel, the EA is also allowing its slaughter.

Last year the agency sold 550 licences to commercial eel catchers, who took 40 tons of the creatures from rivers and estuaries.

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