



press release

Middle Level Commissioners

5th September 2008

Fenland Water Voles To Benefit From Biffaward Grant

Middle Level Commissioners (MLC) has successfully applied for a £50,000 grant from Biffaward, a multi-million pound environment fund managed by the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts (RSWT), which utilises landfill tax credits donated by Biffa Waste Services. The grant will help fund a three-year project that aims to improve the fortunes of water voles in Fenland drains and rivers. Additional funding and support is coming from The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Biodiversity Partnership, The Environment Agency and Natural England

The larger part of the funding for the Middle Level Water Vole Support Project will enable MLC to promote a mink control scheme throughout its catchment. American mink, (releases or escapees from former mink farms), are a non-native predator that our native water voles have been unable to escape from on waterways throughout the country.

Although water voles are now thinly distributed in this area, the Fens hold better numbers than many other parts of the UK where distribution has been reduced to less than 10% of their former range. For this reason it is designated a UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) species. In other counties mink control has resulted in a recovery of water voles to former haunts. Reducing mink numbers, especially in early spring before the breeding season, benefits not only water voles but other creatures that mink prey on, especially moorhens, coot, grebes, reed warblers, pheasant, partridge, ducks and ducklings, in fact any waterside bird or animal with small young.

Approved mink traps and Game Conservancy Trust designed mink rafts will be available for loan to land owners and managers in the Middle Level area. The scheme will aim to encourage control of mink wherever they are known to be present. The mink rafts have a clay tray that shows the tracks of mink, indicating when they are in the area. Mink often favour sites such as pumping stations, bridges, culverts, boats and landing stages and reports of sightings will be welcomed by the MLC Environmental Officer.

Riverside habitat improvement is the other element of the project. Where surveys indicate water voles are absent and poor vegetation cover at the water margins is the problem, a solution in the form of pre-established coir rolls will be employed. These 'instant habitat' rolls will be installed on drain sides in a series of three-meter lengths and will come pre-established with sedges, grasses and other water plants that water voles are known to favour.

Surveys carried out before, during and after mink control to record the presence or absence of water voles on Middle Level drains and rivers will be carried out using another type of raft. Water voles will take every opportunity to climb on to a small piece of board if it is moored in their territory and

checking these indicator boards for the voles' distinctive droppings is a reliable way to confirm their presence. Several hundred boards will be placed throughout the catchment to monitor water vole distribution and the success of the project.

The Lord De Ramsey, a member of the Middle Level Commissioners Board, said 'I have much pleasure in supporting this project for helping the recovery of water voles and the control of American mink.

I have farmed in the Fens for 47 years and for 46 of them have been a member of various drainage boards in the Middle Level area. During that time I have seen the water vole population dwindle to small groups in the minor watercourses.

I am also chairman of the Kingfisher Bridge Wetlands Trust near Ely and we have transformed the water vole population in the project area entirely thanks to controlling mink. Not only had they decimated the vole population, they had also reduced the numbers of ground nesting birds such as plovers and avocets. This project will benefit not only water voles but wildlife generally in the Middle Level.'

A meeting of everyone interested in the mink control scheme is planned for the autumn. MLC Environmental Officer Cliff Carson can be contacted for further details or to express an interest. Tel. 01354 602902. Email: cliffcarson@fen-ditches.co.uk

For more information about Biffaward, contact Biffaward's PR Team on 01636 670000 or e-mail media@rswt.org.

A young water vole visits an indicator raft that will be used to monitor distribution during the project



(photo: Cliff Carson)

Notes for Editors

Middle Level Commissioners

The Middle Level is the central and largest section of the Great Level of the Fens, reclaimed by drainage during the mid-17th Century.

Its river system consists of over 120 miles (190 kilometres) of watercourses most of which are also navigations and has a catchment of just over 170,000 acres (70,000 hectares).

The Commissioners, together with local drainage boards, therefore operate a complex flood protection and water level management system to balance the various water uses and requirements and to alleviate the risk of flooding of land and properties.

The efficient operation of the system is vital to the safety and prosperity of over 100,000 people who live and work in the area. But for the operations of the Commissioners and boards, much of the fen land would be under water for much of the year, accesses from higher ground would be cut-off and many of the present land uses, which are taken for granted, would be impossible.

Cliff Carson was appointed as the full time Environmental Officer to MLC in April 2007. Another three-year MLC project to encourage the recovery of otters to the Middle Level waterways was started in November 2007.

Further information or images available from Cliff Carson, Environmental Officer, MLC Office, 6 Deerfield Road, March, Cambs. PE15 0NF. Tel: 01354 602902. Email: cliffcarson@fen-ditches.co.uk www.middlelevel.gov.uk.

Biffaward

1. In 1997 Biffa Waste Services agreed to donate landfill tax credits to the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts (RSWT) to administer under the fund name **Biffaward**. Grants made from the fund currently amount to over £90 million, supporting many worthwhile projects.

Biffa Waste Services Limited is a part of the Biffa Limited Group of Companies. Biffa Limited is owned by Waste Acquisition Co Ltd, an entity formed by Global Infrastructure Partners (GIP), Montagu Private Equity & UCIL (Uberior Co-Investments Limited).

Biffa Limited is one of the largest single suppliers of waste management services in the UK. It collects, treats, recovers and disposes of municipal, commercial and industrial waste nationwide.

The **landfill tax** came into operation in 1996. Its purpose is to reflect the impact of landfill on the environment and also to help achieve the targets for more sustainable waste management. The tax, levied on the tonnage of all material disposed of in landfill sites and collected by Biffa on behalf of HM Revenue and Customs, aims to encourage recycling and reduce waste by raising the cost of disposal.

The regulations allow landfill site operators to direct approximately 6% of the tax they have collected towards approved environmental projects. However, any approved project can only receive 90% of its desired funding from the landfill tax. The remainder must come direct from the landfill site operator or from a third party organisation or company.

www.biffaward.org