

Future farming in Devon's Axe catchment

The film 'Future farming in the Axe catchment' is available now on YouTube

[Future Farming in the Axe Catchment](#)

The River Axe is of national significance as a designated Special Area of Conservation. It is in poor condition due to degraded ecology, siltation and nutrient enrichment in the form of elevated phosphate.

Since 2016 we have been carrying out a regulatory project working with farmers in the catchment to achieve compliance with the aim to bring the river back to good condition.

Land management has changed dramatically in the Axe catchment over recent decades. The intensification of farming means that heavy agricultural machinery is on the land a lot more than it used to be, often at inappropriate times when the soil is wet. As many of the soils in the catchment have a high clay content, they are vulnerable to compaction, which generates run-off as little rainfall is able percolate through the soil.

Richard Smith, Soils Technical Specialist for the Environment Agency said:

Because of the state of the land we have run off, and soil, phosphates, nutrients and dung are all washed into the backwaters of the river and deposited on the gravels. They then behave like an enriched field – certain things thrive, but sensitive plants don't – so we end up with what is a muddy pond.

Where farms are found not to be compliant with regulations – the Silage, Slurry and Agricultural Fuel Oil (SSAFO) regulations and Farming Rules for Water (FRfW) – the Environment Agency works with the farmer to draw up a plan to move them into compliance and offers advice on how they may be eligible for grants from Catchment Sensitive Farming.

Stuart Hunter, Senior Advisor for the Environment Agency, said:

We work with farmers to find the most efficient way of making them compliant and protect the environment. It's made clear to the farmer that they need to be compliant, and that we expect progress to be made, if not we would look to regulation and enforcing the necessary improvements.

The film illustrates how many farmers have taken on-board the Environment Agency's advice and guidance. There are simple improvements, such as

covering silage clamps to avoid rainwater draining into a slurry store. And other more long-term changes, such as changing to a completely grass-based system of feed or reducing the density of their dairy herd.

Stuart added:

With climate change, impacts are going to be more extreme – intense rainfall, drier periods – farming needs to adapt and change on the Axe, to become more sustainable as a business and to protect the environment.

We hope the film shows how we work with the people we regulate in order to improve the environment. People are often aware when they are not doing something right, which means they are not complying with the regulations. It's not a surprise when we discuss what is required in order to comply. Most farmers react well to advice and take the right actions to become compliant, however with the minority who don't engage and remain non-compliant we will not hesitate to use our enforcement powers – we want to work with farmers, supporting them to make changes and in doing so protect and enhance this precious river.