

Habitats protected in Norfolk through stricter abstraction limits

The Environment Agency has today (23 June) announced changes to water abstraction licences held by 20 businesses in the Ant Valley on the Norfolk Broads.

This means that farmers and local businesses will be required to develop alternative and more sustainable sources of water, rather than take it from rivers, lakes or groundwater.

The Ant Valley – which is home to a number of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) – is facing significant water pressures, with evidence showing that current abstraction levels may be causing damage to the environment.

The Environment Agency has therefore announced it will revoke, reduce or constrain licences used by 20 businesses in order to bring abstraction back to sustainable levels. It is proposed that four new abstraction applications, for activity that was previously exempt from the licencing regime, will also be refused.

The proposed changes will see up to three billion litres water returned to the environment each year, benefiting a wide range of plants, invertebrates, fish, birds and other animals.

These include swallowtail butterflies, Norfolk hawker dragonflies and a number of rare plants such as the Fen Orchid which are rarely found outside of the Ant Valley.

The move is part of a wider abstraction reform programme which has returned 47 billion litres of water a year to the environment since 2008.

Environment Agency Chief Executive James Bevan said:

“We need to move beyond stemming the loss of biodiversity and take action to help nature recover. Today’s decision will play an important part in protecting the Ant Valley from the significant water pressures that it is facing.

“If we don’t address these pressures now, the additional challenges from the climate emergency will bring even greater impacts on the environment and our water resources in the future.

“We also know that businesses need time to adjust, which is why we have worked with the affected licence holders and are giving them up to 2024 to make the necessary changes.”

The Environment Agency has been working closely with Natural England, which has provided expert advice to help inform the decision on this issue.

Natural England Chief Executive Marian Spain said:

“This decision marks an important step in helping nature recovery of this unique mix of habitats, which are home to over 350 priority species of plants, insects and birds.

“By addressing water abstraction pressures in the Ant Valley we expect to see significant benefits over time to its unique landscape and its flora and fauna.

“We will continue to provide specialist advice to partners to help them adjust as we work together to protect our precious protected sites and all the life they support.”

RSPB Operations Director Jeff Knott said:

“The RSPB welcomes the Environment Agency’s proposal to review, reduce and cease water abstraction close to the Ant Broads and Marshes SSSI. This is a welcome step being taken towards responsible and sustainable water management for both farming and the natural environment.

“Once enacted, it will help secure the future of this special place and the many rare species which call the Broads home. We look forward to working with EA and local farmers to ensure a sustainable future for nature and farmers, to help tackle the nature and climate emergency.”