

Norfolk company fined £17,000 for work that harmed water voles

Paul Rackham Ltd. based at Manor Farm, Bridgham pleaded guilty to carrying out works on the River Little Ouse at Lodge Farm Estate, Gasthorpe near Diss. The work was carried out without a permit.

A 2.4 kilometre stretch of river was dredged and deepened with work also carried out to raise and re-profile the riverbank. Vegetation from the river and the bank was also removed.

The work was carried out between October and December 2018, but was only discovered in January 2019. A member of Environment Agency staff went to take a sample to monitor drought in the area. He noticed that the channel was deeper than usual and had to abandon his sampling because of this.

Officers visited the site again in February 2019 and found that vegetation and trees had been removed from the site. They later spoke with company director Paul Rackham senior on the phone, telling him to stop the work as it needed a permit. No further work was carried out.

Further visits to the site found that the work had, had a significant adverse impact on the habitats of water voles and invertebrates. Surveys carried out along the river showed evidence of water voles in the area. Officers concluded the unpermitted work had damaged their burrows and removed their food source and shelter, vegetation from the river and banks. The River Little Ouse was found to have slowed in flow leading to different plants and invertebrates. Numbers of freshwater shrimp in the area dropped to their lowest recorded numbers in the past 5 years.

Sentencing the company, Her Honour Judge Bacon QC found the level of harm caused was significant. She found that Paul Rackham Ltd had been reckless in carrying out the work without first obtaining a permit. The company said it was unaware it needed a permit but it had obtained flood defence consent from the Environment Agency in the past. It had also previously been advised to contact the Environment Agency in advance of doing any dredging.

A remediation scheme valued at £400, 000 has been carried out by the company. The scheme is to repair the harm caused and to reconnect the River Little Ouse to the floodplain. This scheme will most likely result in an overall enhancement to the local environment.

Norfolk flood risk officer, Naomi Daniel said:

Businesses should ensure they have the correct permits before they carry out work. Anyone that needs assistance with this should contact us for further advice.

Ensuring you have the correct permits ensures no environmental

damage is caused. In this case, the actions of the company caused serious damage to the local ecosystem and endangered water voles which will take time to restore.

Paul Rackham Ltd. pleaded guilty to operating a regulated facility, contrary to Regulation 12(1) and 38(1)(a) of the Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) Regulations 2016.

It was sentenced at Norwich Crown Court on March 30. The company was fined £17,000, which included a 20% credit for the company's guilty plea and mitigation in the form of significant remediation work. The company has also agreed to pay £49,000 towards prosecution costs.