

Cumbria Flood Factsheet

4. Frequently asked questions of the Environment Agency

Information for flood affected farms in Cumbria - Friday 26 February
Brought to you by all public sector organisations in Cumbria

The answers to these frequently asked questions have been provided by the Environment Agency.

What caused the November Floods? Was water released from Crummock Water and Thirlmere Reservoir? Did gravel build up cause the flooding?

The amount of rainfall that fell over two days on top of a saturated catchment caused rivers to swell, many to record levels, and overwhelm the flood plain and to inundate the local towns. No requests were made to United Utilities to release water from any of the reservoirs. Thirlmere Reservoir was already full due to the amount of rain that had fallen in the preceding months. Gravel removal would not have prevented the flooding that occurred.

Does the Environment Agency remove gravel from rivers?

We regularly monitor the river bed levels in urban areas where gravel accumulation occurs and we removed some gravel from Keswick and Cockermouth in July 2009. However, we only remove gravel where we need to in order to maintain the required level of flood protection. The November floods deposited a substantial quantity of gravel (8 – 10,000 cubic metres) in the River Derwent through Cockermouth. Our modelling shows that, as a result, the level of flood protection has been significantly reduced in this location, and we will be removing the excess gravel from a half mile stretch of the river to reinstate the flood protection.

Does the Environment Agency remove gravel on fields or repair banks?

Our funding is granted to us to protect people, their homes, and built property and so our priorities are protecting people and built properties in Cockermouth and other towns, whenever possible. We are working with farmers to advise them of their options for managing the gravel deposited on their land and damage to the banks as a result of the floods. We are trying to cut red tape and make this as straight forward as we can.

You seem to put wildlife before people and properties?

We always have to balance the need to protect local communities with the need to protect wildlife. If it is emergency or urgent then we will find a way to help straight away, but we never needlessly destroy fish or wildlife. We have decided to remove gravel deposited in the River Derwent in Cockermouth straight away as we believe the risk to spawning salmon is limited and out-weighed by the present risk to people and properties and the pressing need to take action.

Did the tide have any bearing on the November floods?

The flooding was caused by the sheer volume of rainfall. Tides did not have a significant effect on flood levels at Workington and cannot affect Cockermouth and Keswick as they are too far upstream.

Who legally owns the river and gravel?

The river belongs to the owner of the land, though the fishing rights can belong to someone else. Our role is to regulate how the river is managed – known as permissive powers. Likewise, it's not the Environment Agency's gravel.

What are you doing about bureaucracy?

We have cut the red tape around waste disposal for flood debris and gravel. We have met with farmers to reduce red tape, where possible, associated with minor work near rivers. We worked quickly with Cumbria County Council, the Highways Agency, Waste Authorities, Port Authority, Natural England and Allerdale Borough Council to ensure they could get on with necessary recovery work. We did not cause any delay and continue to work with these other agencies on recovery.

What are you doing to protect towns in Cumbria?

We have secured £2.5million to reconstruct third party assets in Keswick and Cockermouth that are not part of our formal defences but provide flood protection and we are also repairing our network of gauging stations that enable us to send out flood warnings. We have also brought forward planned improvements to defences in Keswick from 2015 to 2011 and are bringing forward funding to carry out a full investigation of the flood risk in Cockermouth and possible options for further reducing the flood risk in the town and the Goat area. This investigation is due to start in the Spring. We are also bringing forward studies in other areas that were affected by the floods such as Ulverston.

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