

£3.2 MILLION FOR LOUGH

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has agreed to allocate up to £3.23 million for regeneration projects in the Lough Neagh Wetlands. The funding will be made available from the Building Sustainable Prosperity Programme of DARD's Rural Development Programme.

The funding programme, called the Lough Neagh Strategic Fund (LNSF), will operate in a similar fashion to the Loughshores Area Based Strategy (LABS). The newly formed Lough Neagh Partnership Ltd. will be responsible for the distribution of funding to projects that will conserve and enhance the Lough's natural, built and cultural heritage whilst developing economic and social opportunities for local communities and visitors. Funding will be available for development of a Lough Neagh brand, and for promoting and marketing the Lough. It is anticipated that many of the recommendations highlighted in the Lough Neagh Management Strategy, produced by the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee in 2002, will be addressed through implementation of the LNSF.

Prof. Brian Wood, Chairman of the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee, said "Lough Neagh is one of Northern Ireland's greatest natural resources. I have worked around the Lough for many years and have seen the benefits that past funding initiatives have brought to this internationally important wetland. This additional funding will provide excellent opportunities for local people to further enhance the natural and built environment and to improve the economic potential of the Ramsar Site on their doorstep."

Whilst the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee has been leading this project from its inception, a steering group, including representatives from the Co-ordinating Committee, local community networks and the LABS will now be handing the administration of the LNP.

The LNP will have up to 24 directors. Nominations for the director posts have been sought from local authorities, special interest groups, statutory agencies and local community networks. The nominated directors will become full directors at a meeting to be held in the autumn. The Partnership will have three members of staff who will be based at The Marina Centre in Ballyronan. The new Manager, Mr Gerry Darby, will start in mid August. One of his first tasks will be to arrange the directors' meeting. It will be several months before there will be a call for applications for funding.

The Lough Neagh Advisory Committee is delighted that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has agreed to support this worthy initiative.

The Committee anticipated a very close working relationship with the Lough Neagh Partnership and looks forward to continued involvement in the management and sustainable development of the Lough Neagh Wetlands.

Contact details for the Lough Neagh Partnership and Lough Neagh Strategic Fund can be obtained from Sperrin House.

SAND TRADERS CODE OF CONDUCT

A Code of Conduct and training manual for sand barge operators is currently being drafted. Whilst this will be a voluntary code, all but one operator on the Lough has agreed to operate within the recommendations.

COLERAINE TOWN JETTY

Coleraine Borough Council is due to start work on the town jetty before the end of August. The Council will be managing the project and will be working closely with Waterways Ireland. It is envisaged that work will be completed by the end of September this year.

IWAI – NEW COALISLAND CANAL BRANCH

The Friends of Coalisland Canal have formed a new branch of the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland. This new Coalisland Canal Branch is the fifteenth branch in Ireland and the third in Northern Ireland. At the inaugural meeting, Jim Canning was elected Chairman and James Walshe as Vice Chairman.

The new branch hosted the biggest ever Coalisland Canal Walk on the evening of Tuesday 24th June when over 300 people walked the four and a half mile towpath, from The Point at the River Blackwater to the Cornmill beside the Canal Basin in Coalisland.

The event was very well supported by members from all three Northern Ireland IWAI branches. Tommy McIlvenna chaired a lively and interesting discussion session on the Canal. His forthcoming book on the subject is eagerly awaited by those with an interest in the local history of the Coalisland area and in canals in general.

Branch Chairman Jim Canning thanked all who attended the walk and who gave their support for the preservation and restoration of the Canal.

He also thanked those who tidied up the towpaths and made them more walkable, especially Willie Milligan of Rivers Agency and Bertie McMinn and his staff from Dungannon and South Tyrone District Council. Thanks were also extended to Colin Biggs who supplies free bus transport from the Cornmill to The Point each year.

Mr Michael Savage extended his congratulations to the planning committee, adding “If this turnout is a measure of public support for the reopening of the Coalisland Canal surely we wont have long to wait until boats and barges are once again visiting Coalisland.

Application forms to become a member of the new Coalisland Canal Branch of the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland are available from any committee member or from the Cornmill.

LIGNITE EXTRACTION, BALLYMONEY

The planning application for lignite extraction and a power plant near Ballymoney has been lodged. The Lower Bann Advisory Committee forwarded its objections to the proposal, after studying the Environmental Impact Assessment. The Committee is concerned about the wider environmental implications, including the use of such a fossil fuel which is clearly against the principles of sustainability, but it has focused its concerns on water quality and quantity, fish passage and the potential negative impacts on tourism. To date the Planning Service has received between 34,000 and 35,000 objections to the proposal. Due to the major environmental implications of the proposal, the Committee supports the call for a public enquiry. The Committee also supports the idea that all relevant organisations should combine forces and resources and work together to inform the public enquiry. The Advisory Committee is happy to work with any relevant organisations to have an input into any forthcoming public enquiry.

LOCK KEEPERS COTTAGE – CUTTS

Waterways Ireland has reviewed the usage of the Lock Keepers Cottage at Cutts, Coleraine. It intends to make the property suitable for Mr Stephen Douglas, the new Area Engineer and a lock keeper. Waterways Ireland’s Construction Service is drawing up plans for a small extension to the cottage. Stephen will oversee the building work from his temporary office in the Rivers Agency offices at Castleroe, Coleraine.

LOCK OPENING EXTENDED

Waterways Ireland has announced that during the summer months of June, July and August the locks opening times will be operational from 8am – 8pm. This course of action last year resulted in significantly more lock passages than previously recorded. It is anticipated that this action will be warmly welcomed by local river users and may also assist in attracting more visiting boat traffic.

WHAT'S ON 2003

Waterways Ireland has produced a guide detailing activities on and around the waterways within their jurisdiction. To obtain a copy or to have an event included in the 2004 edition email them on info@waterwaysireland.org or telephone them on +44 28 66323004.

PILOT BOOKED LAUNCHED

The much awaited River Bann and Lough Neagh Pilot book, written by Mr Michael Savage, was launched in Ballyronan on Friday 25th April by Mr Michael McGimpsey. The book is not only excellent in terms of navigation, but also contains a wealth of information on local features, facilities, history and ecology. For each area Michael has given detailed navigational directions, backed up with photographs and annotated maps. The book also contains sections on boat and water safety, the environment, Lough Neagh Rescue, boat clubs and useful contacts. The pilot will not only be useful for all who currently use the River and Lough, but it will also be an excellent marketing tool to attract future visitors.

Michael realised that there was a gap in user-friendly navigational information. He said, “Apart from the 30 year old River Bann and Lough Neagh Association charts of the system, the only navigational information available were the Admiralty Charts of the Bann Estuary and Lough Neagh. These maps can be a bit intimidating for some users, particularly new comers to the navigation.”

The publication has already been highly praised by many organisations including both Advisory Committees. The book is priced at £20 and is available from Sperrin House or from Mr Savage (07715368050).

SAND BARGES

The Sand Barge, TRAMP, which sunk after a collision with the NORMAN in August 2002, has now been salvaged after several unsuccessful attempts. It has been raised and towed to Sandy Bay for possible refurbishment.

The SANDPIPER was launched in Toome Bay on 23rd May 2003. It is owned by Readymix Concrete NI, she was originally built in the 1950s as a hopper barge but is newly refurbished with a 500hp Cummins main engine and a Deutz 300hp pump engine. She has worked on the Continent and around England and Ireland and can carry in excess of 450 tons, which can be loaded in about 40 minutes. It is anticipated that she will be operational from the summer.

CHEQUE FOR LOUGH NEAGH RESCUE

Mr Michael Savage Presented a cheque for £1,000, proceeds from the sale of the Pilot book, to Mr Paul Magee of Lough Neagh Rescue.

LOWER BANN PARTNERSHIP AND PROJECTS

A new company, the Lower Bann Partnership, is in formation. It is anticipated that it will source funding for redistribution to projects that will contribute to the management and sustainable development of the environment, economy and social resources of the Lower Bann River. Work has already begun to draft a bid which it is hoped will secure funding for community group, private sector and local authority led projects. If you have projects that are currently being implemented or developed or are just at the initial ideas stage, please contact Sperrin House and ask for a 'Lower Bann River Corridor Project Update Form'. If you complete and return this form, it will assist the team in developing a realistic bid for funding.

MAKING LOUGH BEG REFUGE AREA

Three signs have now been erected as close as possible to the water boundary of the refuge area in Lough Beg. It is hoped that these signs will alert boaters to the presence of the refuge and help to avoid any controversy between wildfowlers, conservationists and anglers. If additional signs are needed this can be arranged. Please contact Sperrin House.

TOOME BY-PASS UPDATE

The construction of the steel bridge superstructure is well underway and should be finished by the end of the summer. The supporting dolphins that facilitate the segmental construction of the bridge will be cut off at river bed level when the bridge has been completed. As the river is between 4.5 and 0.5m deep at this location, cutting at bed level rather than the disturbance associated with complete removal is considered to be acceptable. The By-pass should be opened to traffic in spring 2004.

TOOME SLUICE GATES – UPDATE

Work is progressing well to strengthen the sluice gates at Toome. Rock armour is being positioned up and down stream and concrete is being poured downstream of the gates. The gates are being refurbished and painted. The fish pass whilst closed for a time, is now fully operational. Work on the gates is due to be completed by mid September.

FARMING IN THE WETLANDS

The South Lough Neagh Regeneration Association have launched its latest project – ‘New Approaches to Land Management.’ The objective of this project is to raise awareness of the contribution of each farm to the landscape, examine opportunities to maximise improvements, resources and knowledge, and to establish a forum between individual landowners, statutory agencies and community organisations.

A Wetlands Officer, Mr Donnell Black has been appointed for a two year period to work with the local farming sector. He will visit farm holdings upon request from individual farmers and assess the varied aspects of the farm holdings including the cultural, natural and built heritage and their importance to the local area. With the advent of agri-environmental schemes, Lough Neagh initiatives and new rural development opportunities, the farmer and his family can use the information provided to decide which schemes may be of benefit to them and most appropriate for their land. Donnell will also set up links and provide appropriate guidance if the farmer wishes to pursue matters further.

For further details, or to arrange a farm visit contact, SLNRA, Unit 1, Maghery Business Park, Dungannon. Telephone 028 3885 2550.

MOUNTSANDEL HISTORIC SITE

Coleraine Borough Council is working in partnership with Forest Service and DOE Historic Monuments with a view to improving access to and interpretation of the historic site at Mountsandel. Although plans are at an early stage, it is envisaged that more information will be provided on site about the historical importance, particularly in relation to the River setting. There are also plans for better physical access to the centre of Coleraine, with the possibility of a boat link from the Mountsandel jetty to the proposed new jetty at Christie Park. The Lower Bann Advisory Committee welcomes the initial proposals and anticipates that the final plans will have a positive impact on local people and visitors alike.

IMPLEMENTING THE EC NITRATES DIRECTIVE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The EC Nitrates Directive seeks to reduce or prevent water pollution caused by the applies, as high levels of nitrate in drinking water have been linked to Blue Baby Syndrome. The Directive is also designed to safeguard the natural environment against enrichment of water by nutrients often referred to as 'eutrophication'. Eutrophication can result in an accelerated growth of algae and other aquatic plants that can amongst other things lead to reduced biodiversity and conservation value, toxic algal blooms and reduced recreational use of watercourses.

The Directive requires Member States to take one of two possible approaches to control agriculture nitrates as follows:

1. To apply Action Programmes to manage the application of inorganic fertiliser and manure on farmland over the whole national territory; or
2. To designate areas where the nitrate level in surface water and groundwater is above or could exceed 50mg/L and/or where surface waters are or may become eutrophic as 'Nitrate Vulnerable Zones' (NVZs). Farmers operating with these specific NVZs must also apply Action Programmes.

Action Programmes include specific management measures such as:

- Limiting and controlling the spreading of organic manure including animal deposits,
- Limiting and controlling nitrogen fertiliser use to crop requirement only,
- Having sufficient slurry storage facilities during closed periods and
- Keeping adequate farm records

To date, the UK including Northern Ireland has adopted the second of the two suggested approaches to implementing the Directive. In March 1999, three small NVZs were designated, one of which was within the Lower Bann catchment as Clough Mills. The area covered by the three NVZs was considerably less in terms of surface area than the NVZs in England, Scotland and Wales.

The Republic of Ireland has adopted the first approach and is applying Action Programmes across their national territory. The UK including Northern Ireland are currently engaged in infraction (legal) proceedings brought by the European Commission because it believed that the UK had not designated all waters where monitoring had shown elevated levels of nitrate. If the Commission remains dissatisfied with the UK's approach then it has the power to recommend to the European Court of Justice that very substantial fines be imposed upon the UK in the form of a lump sum or daily fine (estimated to be in the region of £135,000/day).

As a result, the Department of Environment (DOE) and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) set up a working group and produced a 'Report on the Environmental Aspects of the Nitrates Directive in Northern Ireland'. This paper stated that nitrate plays a significant role in the growth of plants and algae in marine waters and that it could play a significant part in the growth of plants in Lough Neagh, which is classified as hypertrophic. As a result, the paper suggested that approximately 77% of NI may need to be considered for designation as a Nitrate Vulnerable Zone.

In Spring 2003, the DOE and DARD produced 'A Consultation Paper on Nitrates and the Protection of Groundwaters in Northern Ireland'. As a result of this paper, four additional small NVZs were designated in June 2003. Two of these are within the Lower Bann Catchment at Kilrea and Knockloughrim.

Whilst this approach may satisfy Europe in the short term, it is anticipated that more will have to be done to implement the Directive fully. As a result, DOE and DARD have set up a NVZ Stakeholders Group with membership from statutory agencies and interested organisations to advise on further implementation of the Nitrates Directive in NI. It is envisaged that this group will appraise the two options (targeted designation or total territory) and contribute to producing a strategy for implementing the Directive. The total territory approach would be similar to that taken by the ROI. It is envisaged that the Stakeholder Group will contribute to the production of a further public consultation document on this issue.

Whilst implementing the Nitrates Directive will have financial implications it should result in more farmers operating within the bounds of Good Agricultural Practice and will provide benefits for the people and the natural environment.

Mr Robin Evans and Mr Adrian Sains, from British Waterways, will speak on the UK Programme of Restoration and the Rural Benefits of Restoration respectively. Mr James McBarron from the Shannon Erne Waterway will review social and community development and Mr Godfrey McCartney from the Blackwater catchment will outline current research on the Blackwater.

Further details can be obtained from the UWG Secretary, 4 Brown's Bray, Hollywood, BT18 0HL. Telephone 028 9042 5230.

CREGGAN PRIMARY SCHOOL

Dear Caroline

Perhaps you'd like to enclose this article about our school in Eel Express.

We are a small primary school probably the oldest in Ireland (1832) on the shores of Lough Neagh. For the last fifteen years we have had a very successful canoeing club. We have a pool of seven canoes and during the summer and autumn terms all P.6 and P.7 pupils learn to canoe and take trips between Cranfield, Creggan and Blackrock. We believe we may be the only Primary school utilising the Lough like this. I am the headmaster of this school and last year qualified through "Awards for All" as a sailing instructor. We have now raised over £4,000 in grants and gifts and with some more similar donations we hope to purchase a keelboat like a Lugger or Drascombe Longboat for the school so that our pupils will be given the opportunity to learn how to sail. We believe that the resource on our doorstep should be utilised fully.

Yours Sincerely

Fee McGorman
Headmaster, Canoeing and Sailing Instructor.

LIVE TO RIDE

Ballymoney Watersports Festival was held during the first weekend in August at Drumaheglis Marina. The Live 2 Ride wakeboarding event attracted some of Europe's top competitors and local water-skiers and wakeboarders got the chance to pick up some tips from the experts. The weekend was considered a great success by competitors and spectators alike.