

Sustainability Committee

SC(3)-14-10 Paper 5

Scrutiny of Environment Strategy: Additional Evidence from Environment Agency Wales

Dear Virginia

As promised in our letter to Mike German dated 18 May 2010 here is our a further response to the questions raised by Lorraine Barrett and Rhodri Morgan taken from the transcript.

Rhodri Morgan's questions about the indicators referred to below:-

[57] "I wanted to ask a question about the yardsticks that you use. There has been a lot of discussion regarding the claim that there are weaknesses in that system, and we have received a lot of written evidence that says that. Yardsticks can be misleading, and we do not want a tick-box culture to replace a real strategy. Therefore, with regard to some yardsticks, would slowing down a negative environmental trend be considered a step forward? Sometimes, holding your ground in the face of a negative trend could be a step forward. In addition, things could be going well, but the strategy would be telling you that you had to accelerate the positive trend. What is your general view on that? Do the yardsticks set in the strategy make sense to you in your work?"

[88]"Chair, I have a brief addition to your statement. In the review that the Environment Agency asked for, can we ensure that there is an answer to the question that I asked earlier on whether there is a way to avoid the tick-box culture?"

Response:-

We are a member of the Indicators Reference Sub-Group responsible for the Environment Strategy indicators. We have helped develop a number of the indicators and provide the data for 29 out of the 101 indicators - ten of which are improving. There are a further 25 indicators where we contribute data with others - 12 of which are improving. We recognise that indicators are not perfect and their efficacy varies. However, they are an essential tool to help us manage the environment.

The indicators make sense to us as we use them everyday in our work. However, we realise that they might not be clear to everyone. We recognise that it is important that the public and others with an interest in our work clearly understand what we mean by achieving progress. Developing a system that incorporates targets for each indicator and a traffic light system for reporting progress against each outcome would help provide this clarity. We are developing a similar approach in our outcome reporting systems and will happily share them with Welsh Assembly Government. In setting up such a system it is important to have a practical approach that does not take a disproportionate amount of resources.

In addition the process of setting targets will help define what we are aiming for especially where no target exists. Some outcomes, such as, biodiversity and climate change are very challenging. Therefore, it may be appropriate to set staged or interim targets, which help demonstrate the considerable achievement of "slowing down a negative trend". Although we must not lose sight of the long term outcome.

Minister's Scrutiny 26 May

Following the scrutiny of the Minister on Wednesday 26th May 2010, we would like to clarify our written evidence. As described above we are a member of the Indicators Reference Sub-Group. We find the indicators clear and understand the issues. We know how our work contributes to delivering the Environment Strategy outcomes.

We are only one of a number of organisations whose work will deliver the Environment Strategy outcomes, much of which is outside the Environment Strategy Action Plan.

We suggest that there needs to be a stronger focus on identifying and checking all of the actions on a regular basis across all of the organisations against delivery of the Environment Strategy outcomes. This will make it easier to ensure the right actions are in place to deliver the outcomes and identify any gaps, which can then be addressed.

Lorraine Barratt's question on biodiversity referred to below: -

[83] For CCW, I have a question about the loss of biodiversity and what you are doing to halt that, because the RSPB has said that the original momentum that progressed work towards the environment strategy to bring designated sites into a favourable condition appears to have waned. Would you tell us briefly what is being done on that?

[86] It would be very useful to have a note on that from both organisations, because time is pressing...

Response

Our biodiversity work focuses on improving water-related priority habitats and species. We outline our key aquatic biodiversity actions

through our high-level Corporate Plan and annual Operational Plan which directly links to the Environment Strategy's biodiversity Outcomes 19, 20 and 21.

We aim to minimise the negative impact on wildlife from our own activities and from those that we regulate, for example, by controlling pollution and regulating abstraction. We screen our activities to identify biodiversity improvements as well as ensure that we do not cause adverse impact. We have recently completed a review of our consents in relation to internationally protected sites and we are the competent authority for delivering the Water Framework Directive. We provide operational advice and guidance and deliver direct improvements through our flood-risk management work, fisheries management and local-level collaborative projects. Direct outcomes include habitat creation (primarily saltmarsh and wetlands) and in 2008/09 through our local-level collaborative improvement work we delivered over 60 projects resulting in 69 Ha of habitat gain, 54km of improved river habitat and 50 new ponds.

We are establishing a Flood and Coastal Risk Habitat Creation Programme and work with, support or influence others, to help deliver aquatic biodiversity improvements. Examples include providing advice and guidance on the development of Glastir; providing input to the Wales Biodiversity Partnership including the 'Outcome 21' Group; improving wildlife data management through pilot projects and our Welsh Local Record Centres work. This included being the first organisation to establish co-ordinated, standardised and Wales-wide access to their data. We are providing direct support for the developing Natural Environment Framework. We are actively supporting the International Year of Biodiversity via our media promotion work for our aquatic biodiversity delivery activities.

Below are examples of the improvement actions we are doing for specific aquatic priority species -

Freshwater Pearl Mussel - although considered extinct in 3 of the 13 the rivers in which they're originally known to exist, EAW recently discovered a new population on a River Wye tributary. Populations do not appear to be successfully re-producing and through the experimental breeding programme we set up, we are successfully rearing new mussels. This work will support targeted re-introductions to host rivers following habitat improvements via WFD, Fisheries, Glastir and collaborative local-level aquatic biodiversity actions.

Otter - indicative results from the EAW led 2009/10 survey confirms continued improvement in Wales - final results will be available once all data are processed. The improvement is attributed to banning specific pesticides combined with collaborative habitat and fisheries improvements undertaken by EAW and others.

Water vole - North Wales expansion of the water vole population is being achieved through successful collaborative effort between EAW and local partners. South Wales declines are probably due to mink predation and unfavourable development. In response, EAW is producing a Water Vole Conservation Strategy and we have established a successful experimental breeding programme linked to targeted re-introductions and collaborative local-level habitat improvements.

White-clawed Crayfish - status is affected by many factors including the invasive signal crayfish. Our recently established experimental breeding programme is successfully rearing white-clawed crayfish and we have contracted Cardiff University to provide an initial assessment and options to inform our work. We intend to scale-up our breeding programme and will be working with CCW and landowners to identify 'refuge' sites for targeted re-introductions linked to habitat improvements via WFD, Glastir and local-level actions.

I hope this answers the questions: please do not hesitate to get in touch if you want further information.

Kind regards

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