

SOUTH COAST LEADER

4/8/06

SOUTH COA

MP sparks probe into cash spent on beauty spot plan

GOVERNMENT inspectors are investigating the amount of money spent on drafting proposals to allow a beauty spot to flood.

The Environment Agency wants to remove flood defences at the Cuckmere Estuary near Seaford and allow the land to return to salt marsh and mud flats.

The agency, supported by English Heritage, the National Trust and the South Downs Joint Committee, says the controversial plan would create a wildlife haven and return the estuary to a more natural state.

However, figures uncovered by Lewes MP Norman Baker in April revealed the agency had already spent £440,000 researching the possibility.

The National Audit Office – the Government's spending watchdog – is investigating whether that money has been well spent.

A spokesman said inquiries began as the result of a letter to the House of Commons public accounts committee.

He said: "We are examining the steps being taken by the Environment Agency to maintain the Cuckmere Estuary."



Critics of proposals to flood the Cuckmere Estuary have questioned the amount of money spent

Residents are unhappy at the idea of the estuary, which attracts 350,000 to 450,000 visitors a year, being swallowed up by the sea.

Mr Baker said: "It is wrong for an unelected Government body to pursue a policy which hasn't been approved independently and which local representatives, Eastbourne MP Nigel Waterson and I, have objected

to. It is not acceptable for them to spend a sum of this magnitude."

Roger Frost, vice-chairman of Seaford Residents Association, said: "We have always supported the opposition to this idea of abandoning the Cuckmere Valley to become mud flats.

"I hope the National Audit Office gives them a spank on the wrist for wasting so much money."

Rupert Clubb, Sussex area manager for the Environment Agency, who has met National Audit Office inspectors, said the money could save many millions in the future.

If the agency were to try to defend the estuary it would have to spend about £17 million for the life cycle of the defences, probably 100 years. A managed retreat, he said, would cost only about £2 million.

He said: "Sometimes when you have to take decisions you need the information to back up that decision. A lot of the work we have done has been to get those facts."

Better to flood the estuary

AN open letter to MP Norman Baker:

We have listened carefully to the various opinions about the future of the Cuckmere Estuary. Having first seen the beauty of it back in the 1960s it has remained a favourite beauty spot. It has altered over the years and will continue to do so, without human intervention.

It is unbelievable that you, Wealden District Council and Lewes District Council, are ignoring the advice of such experts as the National Trust, English Nature, the South Downs Joint Committee and the Environment Agency. You are all very quick to seek their backing and advice in times of tragedy. Think back to 2000 when they were asked to help put pressure on the government to fund the clean-up and flood defences needed in the relevant council's areas. Now you ignore them? If the 30cm bank scheme goes ahead, has the worst case scenario been looked into, ie high tides, strong winds and torrential persistent rain? What will happen to the drainage of land behind the bank, or is the scheme attractive because Mr Newton is prepared to fund it?

Call in flood water experts, coastal erosion experts etc. Let them create computerised simulations of worst case scenarios. Then make an informed decision at a public meeting. Better to flood the estuary rather than people's homes and businesses. — MR AND MRS WOOD, Landsdown Road, Seaford.

SEAFORD GAZETTE

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