

Work with nature to tackle flood risk and reduce costs

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Increased intensity of rainfall and rising sea levels are creating added risks to the security of people and properties in Scotland. The Scottish government and Scottish Environment Protection Agency (Sepa) have identified the areas at greatest risk and allocated capital funds of hundreds of millions of pounds for flood protection schemes. Selkirk is complete, Hawick is under way, Dumfries, Langholm and Musselburgh are in the planning stages, and there are many others.

With large cost rises such schemes are proving a poor use of public money. The legislation, the Flood Risk Management (Scotland) Act 2009, is out of date. It focuses on flood protection without considering other measures, such as maintenance of soil quantity and quality, measures to reduce the loss of biodiversity and to capture carbon through tree planting. The world has moved on and the act stifles more integrated and multi-benefit approaches.

Ministers, for example, ask councils to take into account appropriate working with nature in developing flood schemes. Weasel words. Again, a failure to recognise that flood risk reduction planning and action has to move on.

Flood protection schemes are capital projects. Out of date again. Concrete is the solution, despite the energy intensity required to produce it, whereas nature can help in part at less cost and to greater wider benefit. The current approach means that operational expenditure to remove obstacles and to bring in long-term solutions to slowing water flow, including blocking drains and planting trees, are not part of flood protection schemes.

There is a fixation with providing “future proof” solutions valid for a century. Climate change science cannot provide the basis for such long-term forecasting, but engineering companies do!

There is no independent scrutiny of schemes against the public funds required. And affected communities and property owners are treated to the “talk at” type of consultation. Where is the dialogue?

A radically transformed approach is needed, one that focuses on greater public benefit at lower cost and working with nature. This means new legislation as part of the Environment Bill, more integrated policy and implementation nationally and locally based on whole river catchments, greater focus on how nature can help reduce flood risk, mix of capital and operational expenditure, broader based consultancy rather than traditional engineering, and real engagement of affected communities in decisions.

Roger Crofts was the founder chief executive of Scottish Natural Heritage, now known as NatureScot