UK Environment Agency warns of job cuts

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Severe flooding across Britain has led to the loss of seven lives and massive damage to property.

As a result of a 10 percent cut to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in last June's spending review, the Environment Agency (EA) has warned that hundreds of flood defence staff face losing their jobs this year.

The number of EA workers will be reduced by 1,700 to around 9,700 by October 2014. Including the 1,100 jobs already lost since 2009, the EA will have seen its workforce cut by nearly a quarter in the five years following the worst floods since World War II in 2007.

EA Chief Executive Paul Leinster said, "Flood risk maintenance will be [further] impacted. All of our work on mapping and modelling and new developments in things like flood warning will also have to be resized. And we're looking at a proportionate reduction in the number of people in flood risk management.

"The public need to know that job losses on this scale will impact specifically directly on flood risk management, on flood defence operations teams managing flood defences and carrying out river maintenance to enable flows to be conveyed away, enhancing the river's ecology and supporting fish stocks," Leinster added.

The spending on flood defence maintenance is projected to fall by £65 million in real terms between 2009-10 and 2015-16, and spending on new projects by £35 million. More than 300 flood defence schemes have been shelved. Reports suggest that the number of properties at significant risk from flooding could increase by up to 800,000 by the 2020s and 1.5 million by the 2050s.

Environment Secretary Owen Paterson dismissed criticism of government flood defence policy as "chuntering" and "blather" and said it was one of many "difficult decisions" because of the "dire economic circumstances" left by the last Labour government.

The last Labour government with its big business agenda is indeed implicated in the current flooding crisis. Between 1997 and 1999, flood defence expenditure fell from £102.6 million to £75.1 million, which led to continuous cuts in the EA's manpower and budget and left it ill-prepared for the 2007 floods.

Following those floods, Labour commissioned a review by Sir Michael Pitt. Despite recommending long-term planning and pointing out the advantages of a well-resourced, publicly funded flood defence system, the vast majority of Pitt's 92 recommendations barely scratched the surface, and stressed that flood victims should not expect the state to look after them.

Instead, local groups contributing to costs themselves rather than central funding should become the rule rather than the exception, with those at risk flood-proofing their homes and preparing emergency kits of torches, wind-up radios, blankets, a first aid kit and a mobile phone.

Pitt had little to say about the responsibility of the private sector for the 2007 floods. It was left to the City Council in Hull, one of the worst affected areas to show that the Yorkshire Water company was largely responsible for the severity of the floods. It discovered that over a number of years—more or less the period since the company was privatised in 1989—"a series of clear recommendations" regarding maintenance and replacement of assets were made, but in many cases the company was "unable to produce any evidence to show if any action had been taken."

The Conservative/Liberal-Democrat government was formed in 2010, but discontinued publication of reports showing progress against the Pitt recommendations. Its final Progress Report on the Pitt Review published in January 2012 revealed that over half the recommendations had not been implemented or were classified as "on-going."

Later in 2012, flooding experts began warning about

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the slowness with which Pitt's recommendations were being implemented and the ability of local authorities to undertake flood management. Following floods in the autumn which caused two deaths, Institute of Civil Engineers Vice President David Balmforth told the *New Civil Engineer* magazine it was time for "clarity" about how well the recommendations had been implemented. Sheffield University urban water professor, Richard Ashley, said there had been little improvement since 2007.

In February 2013, the parliamentary Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) Committee criticised successive governments for lacking "the tenacity and resolution" to fully implement Pitt's recommendations. They were also "greatly concerned by the further postponement of the implementation of the [2010] Flood and Water Management Act's provisions on Sustainable Drainage Systems to April 2014".

Sustainable Drainage Systems (SUDS), which are a well-established flood prevention technique, work by holding back the run-off of rainwater into rivers by planting trees or constructing ponds, for example.

Former Water Minister Richard Benyon brushed aside the criticism declaring, "Having taken forward the vast majority of recommendations in the Pitt review, the country is now better prepared than ever before to deal with major flooding."

The EFRA Committee published another report last month declaring, "Recent flooding events reinforce our concerns about cuts to the Defra budget. It is a small ministry facing massive cuts. Ministers must clarify how further budgets will impact on... the ability of the department to respond to emergencies."

The committee criticised the "lack of transparency" over the government's new "partnership funding," which relies on money from local authorities and the private sector for flood defences. Local authorities are already carrying out massive cuts to existing services and are hardly likely to fund new obligations. Less than four percent of funding came from the private sector last year.

According to a BBC report last week, the government is in "turmoil" over the use of SUDS in new housing developments and that "the policy remains postponed indefinitely" over disputes about technical standards and who pays for their maintenance.

The government and insurance companies have concluded a "Flood Re" agreement to provide cover to properties in flood-prone areas following the end of the old scheme. Although this involves every household in the country paying about £10 a year to provide "universal" flood cover for homes built after 2009, expensive riverside properties and small businesses, one in five of which were hit by flooding in 2012, are still excluded.

The government is also planning to relax the rules on dredging of watercourses, a contentious subject, with the EA warnings in its report "Evidence: Impacts of dredging" that the practice does not "automatically mean a reduction in flood risk."

There are proposals to deregulate control of dredging, allowing farmers and landowners to undertake work on their own land making the risk of flooding downstream worse.

In its response to these proposals the "Blueprint for Water" a coalition of environmental groups, said, "We do not believe that a return to ad-hoc and uncoordinated river 'maintenance' has a role to play in the future. Such a move… risks causing significant environmental damage and exacerbating flooding impacts in downstream communities."

The coalition suggests that farmers should be encouraged "to improve soil and land management to stop soils from washing into rivers in the first place, and should ensure that the flooding of agricultural land is addressed at catchment scale, with a thorough assessment of the causes and development of sustainable solutions."

Scientists are also warning that increased flooding may be linked to climate change in what is known as "extreme event attribution" and that more research is needed. Oxford University Professor Myles Allen suggests that around £10 million a year is all that is needed to investigate the relationship but that it was a "scandal" that the funds have not been forthcoming.

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