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Minsmere Levels Stakeholders Group. Newsletter No 7. November 2012.

A year of achievement – but also continuing suspense....

Welcome to our 2012 newsletter. Last year we reported on the success of the Environment Agency's (EA's) bid for funding to significantly reinforce the North Wall. This year we can tell you of the EA's further success in securing additional resources to refurbish our sluices and repair sections of the banks of the New Cut. All very good news at a time of continuing national funding constraints.

We also appreciate the much more open dialogue we now enjoy with the EA, evidenced by the meetings we have had with their staff and consultants, at which we have been joined by colleagues from the Internal Drainage Board and the RSPB. The EA are also playing an active part in the new Suffolk Coastal Forum and we report below on its first annual conference.

However the proposed development of the Sizewell C nuclear power station still holds us in suspense and the consultation we had expected to start in March 2012 is now only scheduled to start later this month. As the consultation period is likely to be just eight weeks, and include the Christmas period, preparation of our response will present MLSG with quite a challenge.

The defence of the Levels

Since our 2011 newsletter there has been major progress on action to protect the Minsmere Levels from the sea. As we reported last year, the EA secured the funding to protect the remainder of the Levels from flooding of the vulnerable North Marsh. This work was completed early in 2012 and the new look North Wall, a graded and reinforced clay bank which replaced an earlier clay wall built in 1900, is shown below with a manually controlled sluice to control discharge of flood water from the north. As well as significantly enhancing the level of protection, it provides a much improved amenity, in particular a much better footpath between the RSPB Reserve and the sea shore.



Sluice gate on new North Wall to protect RSPB reserve.

Protection of shore line.

The proposal within the present Shoreline Management Review is that the coastline of the North Marsh should no longer be actively protected. MLSG has reluctantly accepted this as the “least bad” option.

Currently significant coastal erosion is only present just south of the Dunwich cliff to Coney Hill. The 2011 work programme completed by the Environment Agency should reduce the chances of future storm surges flooding the major part of the levels, south of the north wall.



RSPB site looking north from Sluice to Dunwich Cliff

However the Minsmere sluice is recognized as a local hard point on the coast and the line of the sea defences has been virtually unchanged from Coney hill down to Sizewell since at least 1810, when the Minsmere New Cut was started. It is currently planned that the Minsmere Sluice be maintained for the next 50 years; this decision will be reviewed at the next Shoreline Management Review.

Minsmere Sluice.

In 2006 the Environment Agency decided that, following an incident with one of their workers, the sluice was a dangerous structure and they stopped any maintenance on the gates. In March 2010 the Environment Agency conducted a detailed examination of the sluice, including trying to block the out-flow to investigate the state of the sluice gates. This involved installing a series of pumps and temporary pipe lines laid over the beach - see pictures below.



Temporary pumps to drain Minsmere Sluice



Temporary discharge pipes. March 2010

The inspection showed major leakage past the sluice gates and gate chamber, though the internal drainage tubes are apparently basically sound. There is considerable work required to create a safe and effective sluice for the medium term.



Minsmere Sluice looking northwest.



Leiston Drain entry to Minsmere Sluice

This spring MLSG were informed that the Environment Agency had obtained funds to perform a series of works on the New Cut and the Minsmere Sluice. The work is scheduled to start in October, during the quiet period for the RSPB, and will involve major work on the main sluice, together with replacement work on three of the side sluices discharging into the New Cut. The existing tidal gates will be replaced, the entry culverts from the Leiston drain and New Cut will be lined, repairs conducted on the existing brick and concrete structure and safe access provided for future inspection and maintenance.



Three of the river sluices along the New Cut which will be replaced in the current work plan.

A “totem pole “weed screen will be fitted to trap larger pieces of drift wood. In the past tree branches have jammed the tidal sluice gates open.

After World War 2 significant repair work was performed on the sides of the New Cut, where high water flowed out of the cut into the marshes. Asbestos sheet piling was hammered into significant lengths of the bank, and covered with clay. Over the years deer crossing the New Cut have caused bank damage and exposed the asbestos in places, which has then crumbled. The EA propose to cover the exposed asbestos sheet with plastic and then cap it with clay and re-profile the banks. The pictures below show some of the bank damage. If the low sections of the bank are not maintained, the water will simply flood the marsh areas, rather than quickly flowing out to sea.



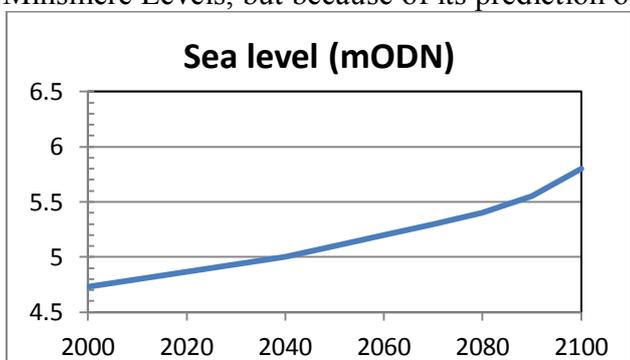
Significant damage to New Cut by deer. Exposed asbestos sheeting along bank of New Cut

The left hand picture illustrates that water in the New Cut is significantly higher than the grazing ground to the left, and if unrepaired the bank will be completely washed away. In the right hand photo the horizontal white line is a metal cap section placed on top of the asbestos, it has been broken away in the centre section allowing the asbestos to be exposed and damaged.

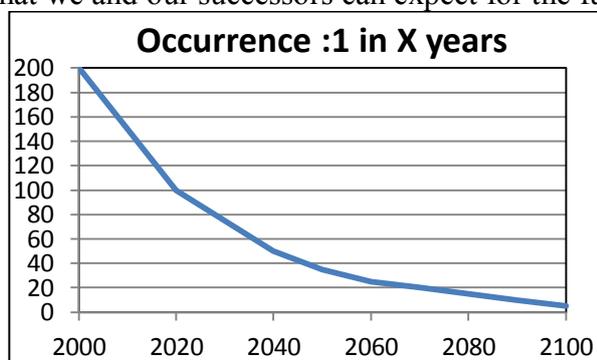
This plan of work covered by the Environment Agency, if completed as scheduled, will significantly improve the medium term life of the Minsmere Levels, and we would like to thank the EA for their support in this time of financial cutbacks, and in the increase in extreme weather conditions throughout the UK.

Suffolk Coast Forum

As a member of Suffolk Coast Against Retreat (SCAR), MLSG was invited to attend the Forum's inaugural conference at Thorpeness on 4 October. There was a mix of extremely interesting presentations, some from a national perspective, such as the role of the Crown Estate in the care and management of beaches and the offshore, and others describing the contribution of local initiatives, such as those on the Deben and the Shotley Peninsula. The final presentation by Dr Charles Beardall, the EA's Area Manager for East Anglia was probably of the greatest interest to MLSG, not just because of its account of the recent EA work on the Minsmere Levels, but because of its prediction of what we and our successors can expect for the future.



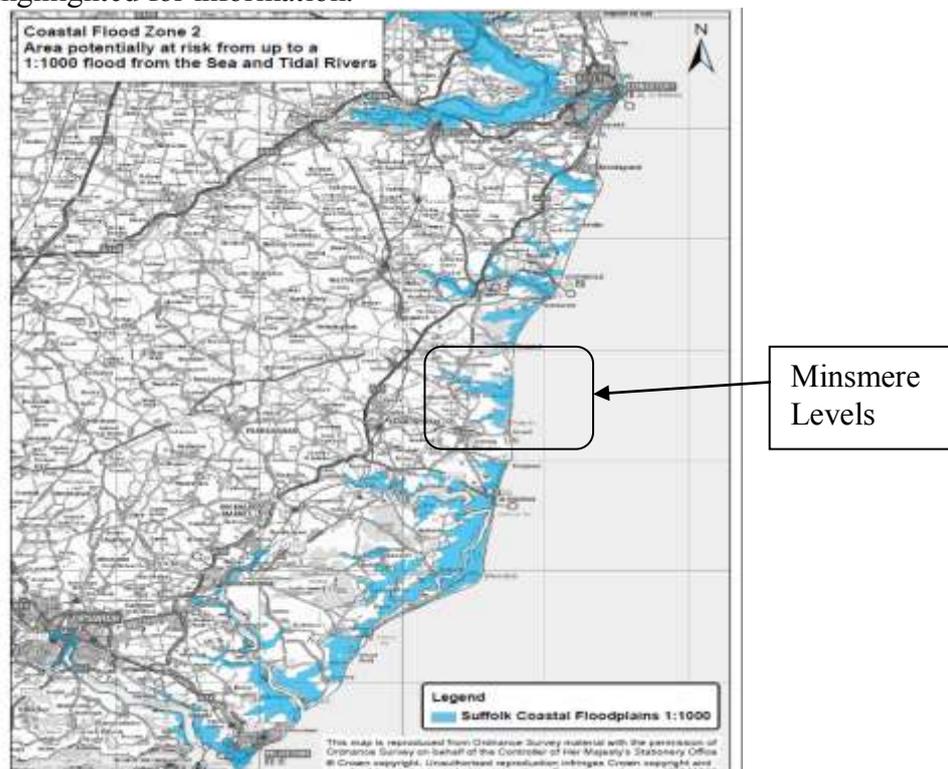
Change in predicted sea level above datum



Likelihood of that height storm surge.

The two graphs are based on data presented by Dr Beardall at the Suffolk Coast forum on 4th October 2012.

Predicted flood risk areas on the Suffolk coastline from the same presentation are shown below. The Minsmere Levels area is highlighted for information.



Suffolk coastal Floodplains Map. 1 in 1000.

These two graphs present us with some uncomfortable challenges, particularly when we are faced with the development of Sizewell C, a structure that could be in place for the next 150 years.

Summaries of all the presentations, with many more maps and illustrations can be found in the conference Report of www.greensuffolk.org website. They are much to be recommended.

The Sizewell C Development

The first of the two phases of consultation on EDF's proposed development was scheduled to start in September, it may possibly now to start in November; however our local councils have already raised considerable concerns that a bare eight week period is to be allowed for this consultation, especially over the Christmas period. As of now, we have no idea as to the form that this consultation will take. Nor do we know how much of the information and evidence that EDF's extensive investigations and researches on the possible environmental impact will be revealed to us.

The development of the new power station and its additional access road is likely to have massive implications for the Levels. In the short term, during the construction phase, there will be significant increase in population, with temporary accommodation and an inevitable impact on the outflow from the sewage works via the Leiston drain into the Sluice for discharge. We understand that the intention is to bring as much as possible of the required materials in by sea to a temporary pier, a structure which could have a significant impact on the coastline to the North and South. A similar temporary pier built for Sizewell B construction caused significant change in the coastline during its existence.

Over the longer term - by which we mean perhaps 150 years from now - any reinforcement of the site could have very serious implications for the drainage of inland water as well as the coastline itself, which would have to be contending with rising sea levels even if there was no development on the site.

However, all this is taking place at a time of continuing uncertainty, indeed confusion, as to what the Government's energy policy actually is. Until this policy becomes a good deal clearer, it is highly unlikely that there will be any funding for Sizewell C, whatever the outcome of the impending consultation.

We will endeavour to keep you fully informed on the progress of the coming consultations and any responses submitted by MLSG.

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