

Press release 18-02-2020

With further storms forecast this February and flooding in the spotlight, I thought you might be interested in this press release from Keswick Flood Action Group, who have identified that peoples' homes and lives are at risk by the persistent mismanagement by United Utilities' and the Environment Agency's handling of Thirlmere Reservoir in Cumbria.

If you would like to speak to me, I am available on 017687 74075.

Best wishes, Lynne Jones, MBE Chair, Keswick Flood Action Group

Previous press coverage on similar issues in The Times.

Homes and businesses at risk by mismanagement of Thirlmere Reservoir

Keswick Flood Action Group (K FAG) are criticising United Utilities, the Environment Agency and Natural England, who they say are putting Cumbrian lives and businesses in danger whilst they play the blame game over an outdated water-release strategy at Thirlmere Reservoir.

The current strategy, which is over a decade old, means that, at present, insufficient volumes of water are released at certain trigger levels, thus the reservoir can be at, or close to, capacity before a storm event. The latest K FAG report, commissioned after Storm Ciara, suggests that, had United Utilities used two already in situ valves to pre-emptively lower water levels, Thirlmere Reservoir would have provided enough storm space to withstand a major rainfall incident, and further prevent the risk downstream from flooding the town of Keswick and surrounding areas.

Yet instead of flood protection taking precedence over all other considerations, K FAG can reveal that United Utilities are prohibited from releasing increased volumes of water until they receive permission by their regulators, the Environment Agency and Natural England, who propose conducting trials over the next two years to determine what the impact a proposed new flow regime may have on the area's river habitats.

Chair of Keswick Flood Action Group, Lynne Jones MBE, said: "All we are asking for here is a common sense approach and a commitment to the duty of care these organisations have to the local community, not just passing the buck and denying responsibility. Our action group has demonstrated the benefits to flood risk reduction by better management at Thirlmere, yet we're still waiting. This is a story of homes, health and heart attacks, not flora, fauna and fish. The situation is absurd."

K FAG also says that the Environment Agency, in its role as a 'Flood Risk Management Authority', should have the powers to apply sensible river management protocols and use reservoirs to make a significant difference to flood risk mitigation. This will, in the future, prove vital in the light of climate change forecasts and the repeated flooding of towns and villages nationwide.

Infrastructure upgrades to Thirlmere reservoir have also been slow and K FAG Chair, Lynne Jones concluded: "It is nothing short of a disgrace, after all the assurances we've had from United Utilities over the past nine years, of the valve work supposedly being prioritised, it has not yet come to pass. We have been patient far too long and the recent weather helps to concentrate minds. Someone has to be accountable for the way the years have gone by and our situation has not improved."

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Notes to the editor:

1. For press enquiries, please contact Lynne Jones on 017687 74075 or by email on: info@hazelmerekeswick.co.uk.
2. The River Greta which flows through Keswick has two main tributaries, the Glenderamakin and St John's Beck. The discharge from Thirlmere into St John's Beck represents 28% of the River Greta's catchment area, it also receives some of the highest orographic rainfall in the catchment. As far as K FAG are aware, Keswick has never flooded from the river when Thirlmere is not overspilling.
3. If Thirlmere Reservoir is not managed adequately to prevent flooding in a series of storms with high rainfall, this may lead to increased risk of the reservoir being full and overflowing before a storm hits, or overspilling during a storm; increased risk of both tributaries peaking at the same time; flows which rip out bridges, pull down walls, river banks and trees leaving vast quantities of stones/boulders over fields, and drown livestock; increase the risk of landslides upstream of Keswick which could block the river (the whole upstream area has been rendered extremely fragile since the floods of 2015/16); strand fish across fields as the floods subside.

4. Recovery time is extensive and the area's tourist economy suffers from the bad press and many in Keswick are living with fear every time it rains as their homes and businesses are at risk, yet again. It is recognised the community's flood risk is directly related to available storm space in Thirlmere reservoir.
5. If all valves on the reservoir were upgraded and fit for purpose, the reservoir can be managed to provide greater storm space before a storm forecast avoiding damaging uncontrolled flows. Overspill can be delayed so it does not coincide with the peak flows of other watercourses and the flows can be varied. Allowing increased flows in advance of a storm forecast when the river systems can cope, then adjusting as rainfall amounts become clearer. This will give a more natural, varied river environment rather than a minimal, static release rate. This benefits wildlife. Simply by being there, Thirlmere reservoir has altered the river's state, St John's Beck is now not "natural" but man-made.
6. The flows would be planned and pre-agreed, the farmers can protect their stock and the damage to land and environment can be greatly reduced. Damaging flows which exacerbate the fragile state (since Storm Desmond) of the river section between Keswick and Threlkeld can be avoided. The risk of flooding is reduced for the Keswick community. Delaying peak flows can also benefit Cockermouth and communities downstream.
7. A pre-arranged water release management regime to create storm space in the reservoir would also be beneficial to the water company as it would avoid their exposure to legal action for any out-of-bank flows and it would be able to raise and spend money on the necessary infrastructure to achieve that aim rather than simply have a duty, through Ofwat regulations, to merely provide a water supply as is currently the case.
8. There is already evidence to show (from March 2019) that flows which are comparable to the range of flows that K FAG are proposing, caused minimal damage to St John's Vale and further downstream.
9. K FAG have researched and produced a wealth of worked examples, graphs, documents and reports to back up their proposals including Dr Ed Henderson & Al Cook's "Water Balance Model" paper evidencing the type of managed regime that should be adopted to protect Keswick from all but the most extreme flood conditions.

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