

Plan to end Thirlmere water release agreement with Keswick Flood Action Group raises concerns

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Thirlmere dam

A United Utilities proposal to unilaterally withdraw from a water release agreement with Keswick Flood Action Group (KFAG) for Thirlmere has raised concerns.

The release of water from Thirlmere acts as a safety valve by providing storm space in the reservoir particularly during the winter months, and attempts to avoid overspills when the rest of the catchment is in flood, preventing peak flows to rivers.

Representatives from the Environment Agency, which has launched a consultation on a new licensing and abstraction agreement, and UU met on Thursday (January 29) with members of KFAG to discuss the controversial proposal. In the meantime St John's Castlerigg & Wythburn Parish Council has also waded into the debate and strongly objected. Members of the public wanting to submit comments have until February 6 to do so.

"I am sure many locals will be horrified to learn that UU proposes stopping the KFAG releases without a well thought out alternative plan," said Lynne Jones, chair of KFAG. "Keswick has never flooded from the River Greta if there is adequate storm space in Thirlmere."

She said that the EA has circulated invitations for comments on UU's licence renewal application but claims this blocks any comments on "Changes to flood risk from UU stopping their flood management releases."

She added that KFAG is strongly opposed to the withdrawal of the water release agreement, which would come to an end on April 1, before any new scheme is fully discussed and trialled.

"The reservoir is a 100 per cent managed environment," said Mrs Jones. "We refuse to accept UU's view that uncontrolled overspill is an 'act of God'. Everything is a choice. Actions as well as inactions are impactful. They either choose to keep so much water in the reservoir that they allow it to excessively overtop, being fully aware of the consequences, or they choose to manage Thirlmere for an optimal balance for water supply, habitat requirements and flood risk."

The new abstraction and transfer licensing application refers to UU's intention to work with the Environment Agency to develop a future forecast-driven operating regime for the reservoir. KFAG, while initially supportive of the concept of forecast driven releases (FDR), has expressed its concerns to UU multiple times over a solely FDR scheme.

St John's Castlerigg & Wythburn Parish Council has formally objected to the renewal of the licences in their current form.

The parish council considers that, taken together, the application documents and the proposed decision-making framework fail to provide adequate assurance that abstraction from Thirlmere reservoir can be sustained in a manner that is environmentally sound, socially responsible, and consistent with statutory flood-risk management principles.

The issue was also discussed at the January meeting of Keswick Town Council and it was agreed that they write to the EA and UU to express extreme concern about the removal of a long-standing flood resilience measure without having replacement measures in place. A copy of the letter was also to be sent to Penrith and Solway MP Markus Campbell Savours and Cumberland Council as the lead local flood authority.

It was also requested that the council responds to the EA's consultation on the renewal of UU's licence to abstract water from Thirlmere and that was delegated to Cllr Claire Peat of the Keswick Community Emergency Response Partnership.

A United Utilities spokesperson, said: "Our abstraction licence at Thirlmere is due to be reviewed this year and we are currently working with the Environment Agency and KFAG to look at a new regime for maintaining releases that will allow us to protect local communities and the environment, whilst balancing water resources."