

*The following is a summary of the proceedings of the 75th Annual Conference of the Association of Drainage Authorities held on Wednesday 21 October 2012 at One Great George St, Westminster. The report includes Association business, Committee Reports, a presentation and a summary of the Question Time Panel.*

## **Opening by Henry Cator OBE, Chairman of ADA**

Henry welcomed everyone to the Conference, paying tribute to the astonishing landmark of ADA's 75th Anniversary. Shortly afterwards, Henry paid the Association's respects to the victims of the tragedy that had occurred on the American East Coast the day before. Whilst the devastation was great, Henry recognised that many more lives would have been lost but for the prompt early warnings from state and federal authorities.

Discussing previous storm events, Henry showed how lack of flood and coastal management can lead to loss and destruction of life, infrastructure, residential properties, businesses and agriculture. The unpredictability of weather extremes was the strong message from Henry and how climate change will be the main opponent of flood and coastal risk managers, "This year we have experienced extremes of our own. The wettest summer on record followed the driest 18 months since records began. No single event obviously can point to climate change but it does appear that the extremes we are facing are coming at us rather more often. I believe drainage boards have a very key role to play and how we adapt to climate change is something we are going to have to work out."

Henry hoped partnership working would help authorities adapting to climate change. He thought IDBs' efforts during the drought earlier in the year, and the Defra workshop on Climate Change Adaptation held in June, showed that IDBs' preparedness for climate change is already underway. However, Henry was disappointed that the Government was continuing to reduce watercourse and asset maintenance budgets.

Before handing the platform to Richard Benyon, Henry declared that in the next 75 years ADA must be as successful as the last 75, expressing his gratitude to all the work of ADA's members and other water management related agencies and organisations.

## **Richard Benyon MP, Minister of State for Natural Environment, Water and Rural Affairs**

Opening his address, Richard thanked ADA for inviting him to talk at its 75th Anniversary Conference. He expressed his astonishment at how ADA has collated so much knowledge and experience about local water level management and was able to share this at a national level. Richard touched upon his first hand

experience of how IDBs run when he visited Drainage Boards in Somerset in April this year. He was delighted to witness so many different parties working together and said: "I think it is interesting that everybody in that team, that group of very different interests represented there, said that many years before there had been a very difficult atmosphere between these various farming interests and the conservation interests. It was actually the IDB bringing them together, showing real leadership and working with people, that had created a very good and proper working atmosphere."

Richard echoed Henry's message about how unpredictable the weather has been this year and congratulated IDBs for managing water levels effectively to reduce flooding and, on the other extreme, drought conditions. "There's no question that partnership working and the pooling of resources enables us to collectively achieve more and that doesn't just apply to flood risk management. I, therefore, really welcome your continued input in helping us develop the UK's first National Adaptation Programme."

Asking Boards for feedback on their membership and representation, Richard hopes that Defra can help remove any unnecessary regulatory burden that makes it harder for IDBs to operate. He will ensure that the Government are making changes to the Land Drainage Act 1991 which will streamline the IDBs' structural reform process and update the way notices can be published to help further reduce costs.

Richard moved his address on to the topic of biodiversity, touching on the importance of IDBs in developing Biodiversity Action Plans (BAPs) to enhance wildlife and ecosystems, and ultimately deliver the ambition set out in the Government's England Biodiversity Strategy.

He concluded: "So, I'll end by paying tribute to the enthusiasm, the skill and the expertise of all those people, many of them volunteers, who contribute to the work of IDBs across the country. Your local knowledge and your experience are invaluable and hold the key to your success. I'm very keen that we should learn from your experience in developing our policies and taking them forward. Most importantly I want to work to ensure that IDBs continue to deliver to their full potential for the next 75 years and beyond."

## **ADA Committees**

Policy & Finance Chairman Ian Thornton and Technical & Environment Chairman Graham Littleton presented the main areas of work for their respective Committee this year. They both thanked their Committees members for their hard work, input and knowledge. Comments were raised in relation to the procurement of management services and the need for clear guidance, the replacement of British Waterways with the Canal & River Trust, the future for aquatic herbicides, and the audit of Caldicot & Wentlooge Levels IDB.

### **David Baxter, Environment Agency “Water for life and liveliness”**

David Baxter (Head of Catchment Management for the Environment Agency) opened his address by stating that his job title shows that the philosophy of the Environment Agency is changing and that the Agency is expanding beyond the Water Framework Directive (WFD) in order to reflect the underlying aims of delivering balanced water for life and livelihoods – not just for ecology. He said: “If we get overly focused on the Water Framework’s jargon, on its technical aspects, we lose sight of what we are all trying to do, which is to work together to get the right balance, to get society to use and manage land and water together for the best for everybody.”

David picked out a key definition within the WFD: ‘Good Status’ meaning ‘a slight deviation from the natural conditions characterised by no or very low human pressure.’ The Environment Agency was surprised to find that in 2009 only 27% of waters in England and Wales met this high standard. David’s message was that a target of 100% Good Status is unrealistic and unfeasible. Showing several slides predicting the targets reached using different scenarios for 36 watercourses in England and Wales, David highlighted that even under the best achievement scenarios ‘Good Status’ would not be achieved in all water bodies and the costs would be between £300 million and £1 billion.

“So ‘Good Status’ everywhere is not the goal, getting long term benefits everywhere is a goal and doing things proportionately is a goal.” expressed David. “A big shift in the Environment Agency’s approach [to WFD] is to the concept of a catchment-based approach seeing how hydrology works and how it all interconnects. But it’s also about being more local and looking at evidence at catchment level so that we can get an understanding of the values, the competing needs and bring in local evidence and data on decision making.”

The key focus of Mr Baxter’s address was about localism and partnership. Establishing local views and

experience, whilst working together was, he felt, the key to achieving wider benefits for the environment and community. Promoting the European ‘Restore’ website ([www.restoreivers.eu](http://www.restoreivers.eu)), David explained how this was a good example of knowledge sharing where people can publish case studies of cost-effective and best-practice techniques used to tackle various problems in the water environment.

David concluded: “Water is the life and livelihood for society and through working in local partnerships I see IDBs as absolute fundamental to that partnership.”

### **Mary Creagh MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs**

Mary began by praising the work of ADA and reinforced the importance, in this time of regular weather extremes, of the work that IDBs carry out. Reflecting on the disaster of Superstorm/Hurricane Sandy, Mary spoke of the impact weather extremes have on a nation, stating that the Government’s own Climate Change Risk Assessment identified floods as the greatest threat climate change poses to the UK.

“For the record, I do believe the scientists who tell us climate change is mostly due to human activity, unlike some Government Ministers.”

She described how she felt that, in Government, Labour had been led by the evidence. The catastrophic floods in 2007, the largest peacetime emergency since WWII, led to the commissioning of the Pitt Review and its conclusions that individual agencies in flood risk management needed to be properly coordinated and investment in flood defences should rise by more than inflation each year. Mary underlined that Labour had accepted Sir Michael Pitt’s recommendations and passed the Flood and Water Management Act to put these changes into law and increased capital funding in flood defences from £264 million in 2007 to £354 million in 2010.

Mary was pleased to see that these efforts had led to the Environment Agency’s strategic overview of flood risk management, and created a duty to co-operate. This was bringing together all the local players, including IDBs under the co-ordination of Lead Local Flood Authorities. Acknowledging concerns from ADA members, Mary encouraged Conference delegates to express their views on how the new arrangements are working locally.

Referring to Richard Benyon, who told Parliament on 18 April 2012 that “the Government’s prime responsibility here is building flood defences, whether for coastal erosion or for surface water or fluvial flooding.” Mary was critical of the £95 million a year

that had been cut from Defra's budget under the Comprehensive Spending Review.

Mary was concerned that the Statement of Principles, which had been negotiated with the insurance industry during Labour's time in power, was set to run out on 1 July 2013. Insurers had warned that unless new proposals are published by the end of November it would be too late to ensure any new alternative was in place by July 2013. She said: "The Government promised a replacement scheme in July. We are all still waiting."

Mary was concerned by the implication of a 22% cut to the Environment Agency's budget when it manages 45% of flood risk management assets on main rivers and the coast. She felt that any cuts could have significant implications for flood management, pump houses and maintaining river courses.

Discussing the draft Water Bill, Mary was disappointed that it contained only two references to Internal Drainage Boards. Mary said "We need to be ambitious for our country and our environment."

Mary concluded: "Protecting homes and communities is morally right and economically prudent; in the long-term it saves us money and spares families and businesses the pain of having their homes and businesses destroyed. We need closer working at all levels of government to ensure that we are ready, whatever the weather."

### **Question Time**

The panel comprised Lewis Baker (Flood Risk Management, Defra), Tim Farr (Chairman, Trent Regional Flood and Coastal Committee), Peter Fox (Head of Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management, Environment Agency) and Jean Venables (ADA Chief Executive). The majority of questions were based around maintenance of assets, investment within drainage districts, communication between organisations and watercourse pollution.

### **Maintenance of assets**

David Thomas started Question Time with an example of how a recent bid for Anglian capital works was heavily under-funded by 60%. He touched upon the urgency that the amount did not cover the minimum needed for crucial maintenance in the area. Pete Fox returned the point that the EA and IDBs need to work closely together to identify these critical areas in order to allocate the tight budget to provide the best option.

Graham Littleton re-emphasised the lack of communication between parties when informing landowners, IDBs and stakeholders which assets

are not being maintained, and that they could be currently implemented without those named knowing. Clarifying dates for handover of assets is key in order to implement management plans for maintenance with those involved. Lewis Baker stated that the EA do try to give communities an advanced warning and that transparency in this is critical.

Building on this topic, Cllr Keith Moore reflected on his experience within Goole & Airmyn Drainage Board, giving an example in 2011 where Yorkshire Water failed to handle a pumping station and a sewage plant failure. The result was a £1 million cleanup of raw sewage. Residents had to pick up the costs of insurance charges. He followed this example with a plea: can we apply pressure to make sure this will not happen again in Yorkshire or anywhere else and that plant and equipment is fit for use.

Pete Fox responded with identifying partnerships issues. Despite partnerships, there will always be a conflict when working together, as organisations have different remits and principles. Peter touched upon the Price Review 14 (PR14) and how the industry is in a state of analysis, but indicated that PR14 is a good mechanism for discussing flooding and flooding issues with water companies.

### **Investment**

Following on naturally from the topic of maintenance, the need for investment was the next hot topic. Charles Pudge (River Lugg IDB) reflected on his experience on how there is a lack of investment within his area, leading to IDBs taking back control of 37km of watercourses. He concluded that if you have a problem, deal with it yourself.

Steve Wheatley (Chairman of Anglian Central Region Flood and Coastal Committee) followed by asking what can we all be doing collectively to help Defra to influence the Treasury to rethink the reductions that they made in departmental budgets, particularly for Defra. He also noted that the amount of funding that goes into flood risk management nationally is quite small compared with other departments.

Pete Fox replied saying that the ADA publication on infrastructure is an important tool. "It's about using language that the Treasury understands on both the value of the assets and the costs of any problems with those assets. We should be looking at the costs averted in the good works that we do together, so I would applaud and ask you to continue to capitalise on those and use every opportunity you have and we have to demonstrate the value and worth of our work together."



John Duckitt (Danvum Drainage), after realising he was even older than ADA, raised the issue of lack of clarity into what percentage of his IDB's £318,000 drainage charge precept is being put towards watercourse maintenance. He concluded that living on the River Don, he had seen little or no pollution control, bank maintenance or even bank inspection. He also raised the point that a neighbouring river (Aire) had a recent event where the bank almost collapsed completely, which would have flooded the lower lying regions of Keithley and Skipton. Although the EA had prevented this with sandbags, this was a very near miss event and shows that regular maintenance is crucial.

Jean referred the question to Phil Winrow from the EA who emphasised the importance of clarity and that the EA is trying to work strongly towards this to IDBs. He referred John to the EA website where there are examples of this occurring.

### **Pollution**

John Carrick (Norfolk Rivers IDB), referring back to David Baxter's presentation, highlighted a point David made about the reasons why water courses were not achieving 'good status' was primarily down to physical modification and phosphate pollution, and that nitrates and nitrites were down to 2%. He therefore asked that being such a small pollution contributor, does this not render the nitrate vulnerable zone largely irrelevant and place huge restrictions on livestock farmers particularly in the west of the country.

David Baxter reminded the audience that nitrates have two particular impacts: affect on drinking water and eutrophication on coastal freshwaters. Areas reliant on groundwaters particularly need strict controls on nitrates where there is a long response time. Nitrates are an enriching nutrient and will affect drinking water and freshwater areas, so nitrate vulnerable zones are necessary.

### **Lord De Ramsey, ADA President**

In concluding the day's events Lord De Ramsey thanked all the speakers and guests for attending the Conference and raised what he felt were the key issues for the water management authorities in 2012, communication and under investment. He stated: "Four new reservoirs would solve the problem of water shortage in the UK, but the Treasury and Ofwat have steadfastly blocked the Water Companies' expenditure, preferring to destroy chalk water habitats, advising us to plant drought-resistant gardens and to grow cactuses!"

"We need to make sure the public knows what IDBs do and why we are important. We will only be given

the freedom to do our job unhindered if we are the best and that includes every aspect of our duties including governance."

### **Keynote speaker: Peter Glas**

Peter Glas, President of the Unie van Waterschappen (Netherlands Association of Water Boards), began his address by congratulating ADA on reaching its 75th Anniversary, joking that his Association was only 10 years our senior. Reflecting on ADA's visit to Netherlands earlier this year for EUWMA's annual meeting, Peter thanked Henry, the High Sheriff of Norfolk, and Jean for his invitation to speak at the Conference.

Speaking in hydraulic terms, Peter described the state of water management in the Netherlands as "extremely turbulent". After the turn of the century a debate began as to whether the traditional approach of fighting the threats of water in the Dutch Delta, and "engineering our way to safety", was still the best strategy for the next 100 years. This was triggered by regional flooding events and narrowly avoiding major floods from the River Rhine and Meuse.

"When you have to evacuate 300,000 people – which happened in 1995 – this is indeed cause for thorough evaluation and public debate." Peter emphasised.

Peter noted some key changes in the Dutch policy ethos toward managing water:

- Making room for water and room for the river,
- Retain, store, drain (rather than drain, drain, drain),
- Building with nature,
- Constructing defences to safety levels rather than flood levels, and
- From fighting water, to living with water.

Referring to the Third Dutch Delta Committee, Peter described that, by 2008, the Netherlands was in need of strategic investment. They appointed an independent Delta Commissioner who, by law, is charged with keeping the Delta habitable for the next 100 years. The Commissioner presents an annual Delta Programme on the same date as the Dutch Cabinet presents the state budget to Parliament.

Peter explained that the current Delta Commissioner, Wim Kuijken, is working in close cooperation with the National Water Agency, the regional Water Boards, and Provincial and Municipal authorities to adopt five so-called Delta Decisions in 2015 on:

- Flood safety levels,
- Fresh water supply,

The water levels of Lake IJssel – our major fresh water reservoir,

The protection of the Rhine-Meuse estuary near the city and port of Rotterdam, and

Adaptations to physical and spatial planning.

A Delta Investment Fund of €17 billion has been reserved for the necessary investments and maintenance of national water infrastructure until 2028. This will cover strategic expenditure on main rivers, coastal flood defence and fresh water supply. The coverage for this money is something for which the Water Boards will be partly responsible. Peter expected them to be responsible for spending in the region of €2.5 billion. On top of this, the Water Boards are responsible for investing in and maintaining regional water infrastructure and national flood defences, an investment which in itself runs into hundreds of millions of Euros every year.

“Although I think that this long term view on goals, delta decisions, and delta budgets are very important and very positive, we should be very much aware that to maintain the policy impulse, to secure and re-secure the political backing with each election, and to show the motivation of water managers to keep on working in this direction, we need to keep producing practical, physical and visible results. Water awareness should, as we all know, not be taken for granted, neither with the general public, nor with politicians.” Peter commented.

Peter explained that the Netherlands have had no fewer than five national elections in the last ten years. With each election there had been a growing desire to simplify the political and administrative landscape (The Netherlands have just scrapped elected police commissioners). The institutional position of Dutch Water Boards was just one area debated. In other words, Peter said there were calls to “get rid of the water boards”. Peter was disappointed that whilst a recent meeting between the key political parties in the Netherlands had secured Water Boards until 2025, their future after this date was far from assured.

Peter encouraged the audience with the Unie van Waterschappen’s work to provide “maximum transparency” regarding the work of Dutch Water Boards, something that could be of interest to Defra looking at the beneficiaries and performance indicators for Internal Drainage Boards. Peter explained that he was set to present an annual report regarding the performance of Water Boards in the Dutch Houses of Parliament’s Press Centre in November. This would not only give an assessment of the collective performance of Dutch Water Boards but also allow

Boards to assess and benchmark their performance against other Boards. Peter emphasised the purpose is “not to name and shame, but to learn and gain”. He went on: “In my view, it is crucial in maintaining our professional level of excellence but also, in the end, to maintaining support with the taxpayer and politics.”

Reflecting on a holiday to the UK with his wife in 2007, he witnessed a stream in the back garden of the holiday house where they were staying turn into a broad river within a day. The next day they had planned to attend the World Para Dressage Championships in Hartpury, but had to turn back with the closure of bridges and roads over the Severn. Peter’s visit had firmly imprinted into his mind the realisation of how quickly water can turn into flood conditions and destroy infrastructure, and images following Hurricane Sandy had reinforced these thoughts: “These disasters, vividly illustrate the vulnerability of our infrastructure and, indeed of our society.”

Peter concluded: “I am an optimist, and I strongly believe in the strength and purpose of regional water management organisations in my country, and elsewhere. Abroad we encounter a lot of interest in the Dutch way of securing crucial water services: irrigation, drainage and flood safety. I am, therefore, confident that, perhaps against all odds, the Unie van Waterschappen will be able to convince our own politicians in my home country about our continued existence and that, in the year of 2027, we will still be around to invite ADA to be present at the celebrations of our first centenary jubilee.”