

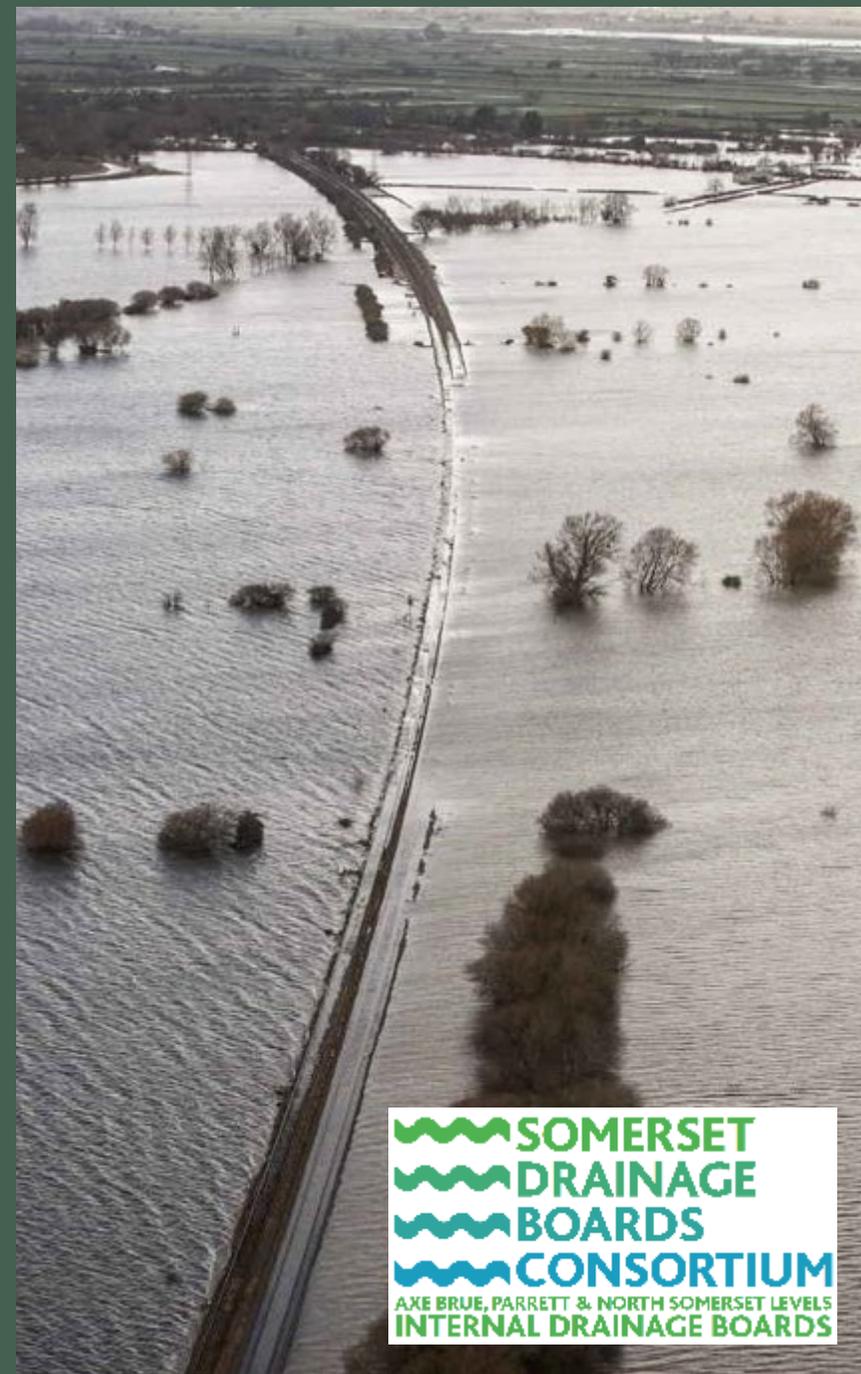
# Ignoring Main River Maintenance At Our Peril

*Short-Term Win or Long-Term Loss?*

**APPG for  
Sustainable Flood & Drought Management**

Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> December 2025

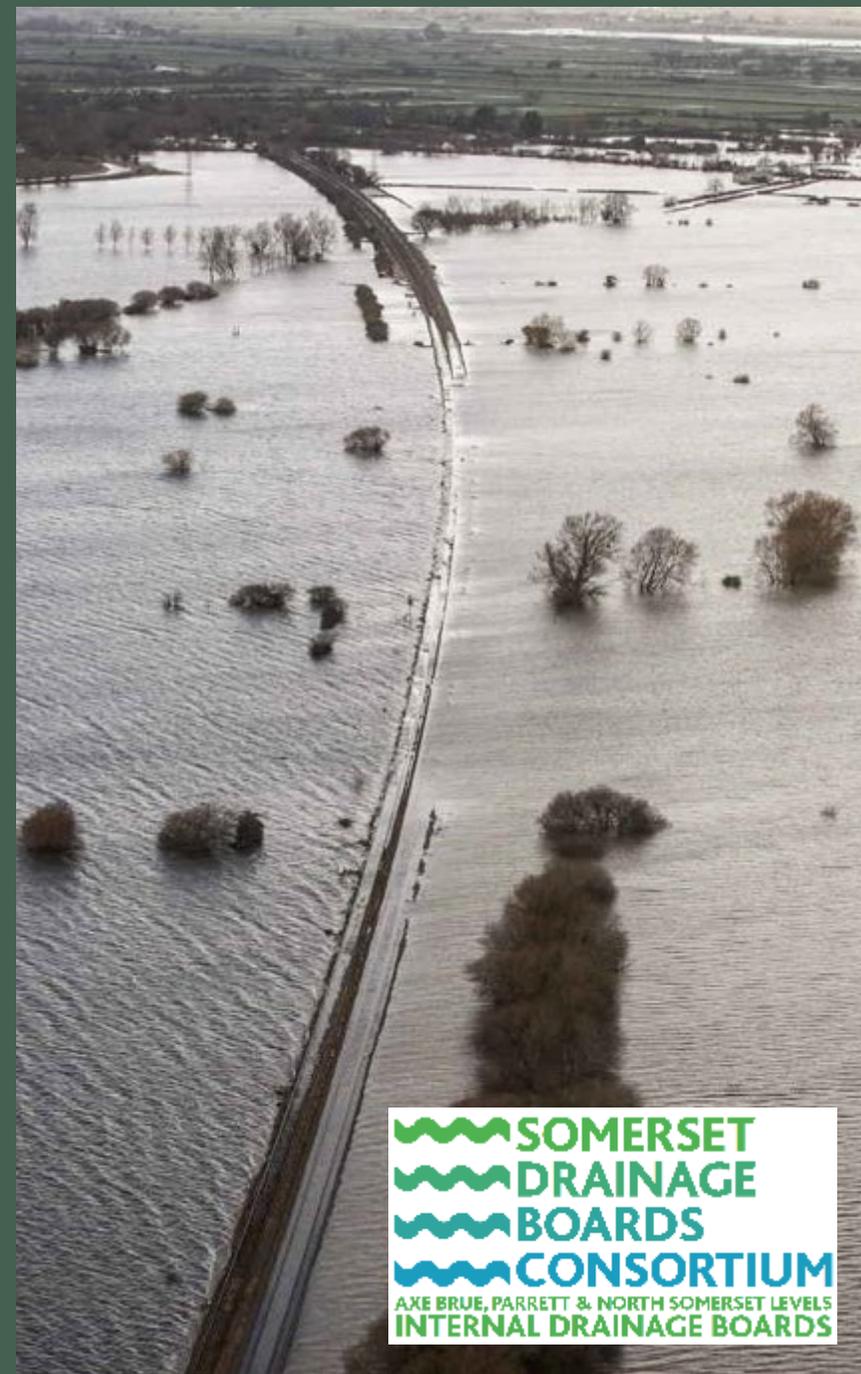
Iain Sturdy  
Chief Engineer and Clerk/CEO  
Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium



# Why is Maintenance, River and Asset Condition, Safe Conveyance and Storage of floodwater important?

Water which exceeds the conveyance capacity of Main Rivers spills over the banks into the adjacent lowland system where it causes flooding.

Here it stays until river levels subside and it can drain or be pumped back into the Main Rivers.

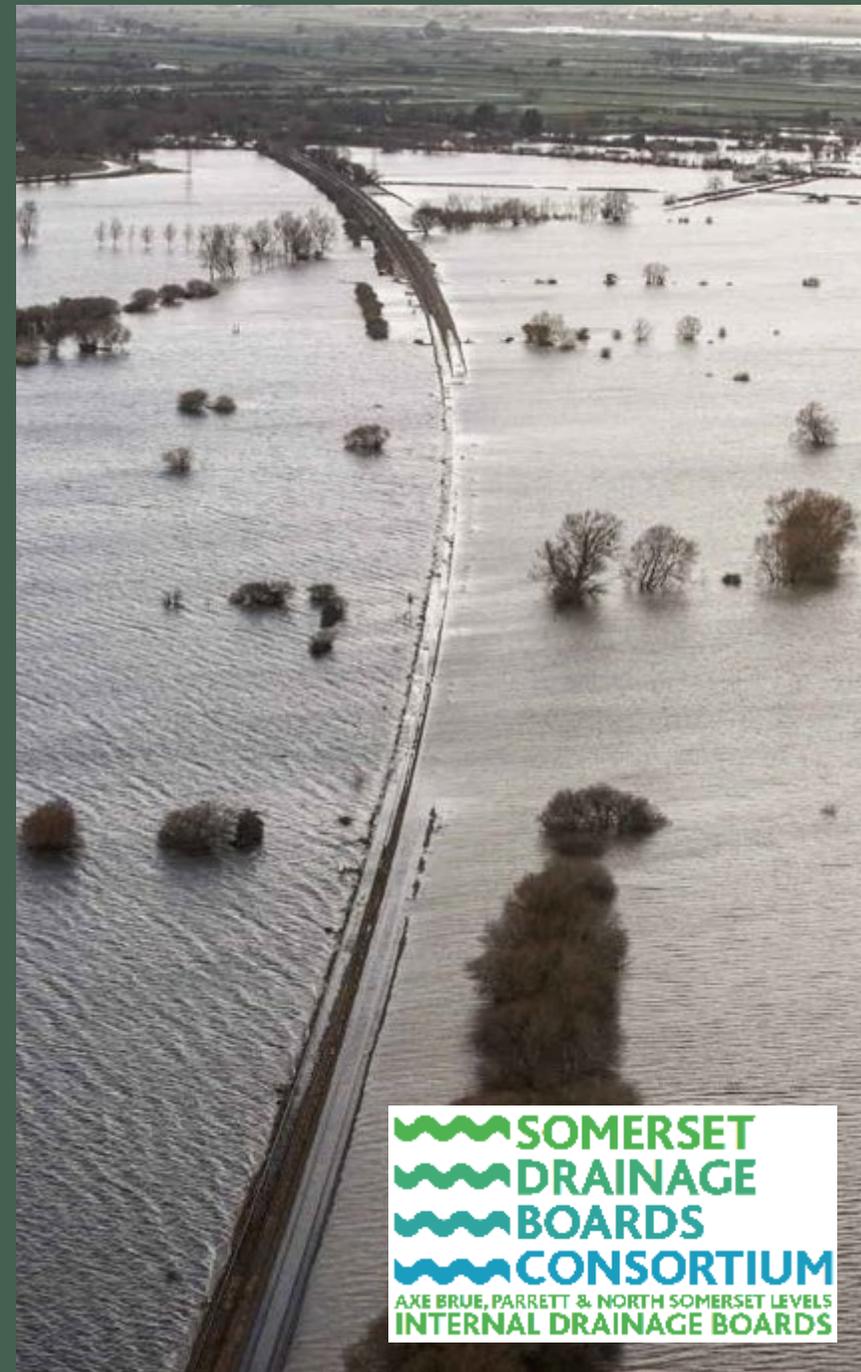


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## Why does this matter?

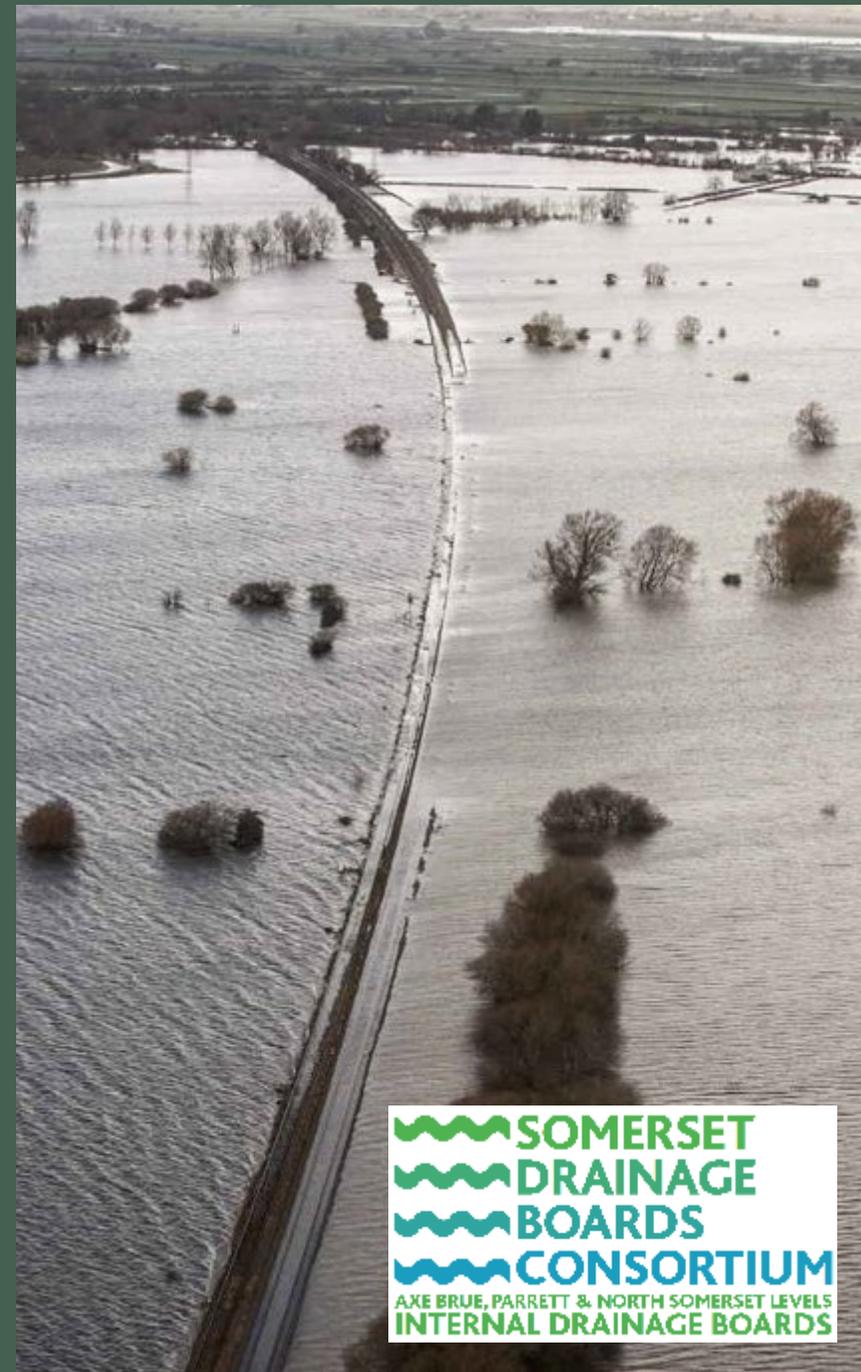
All aspects of Society have occupied these areas over generations and have become reliant on the maintenance of Main Rivers and Assets and the flood risk standards that result.

- Communities
- Property
- Transport and Communication
- Industry
- Food Production
- Environmental Designations
- Prospect of Growth



## Why does maintenance matter ?

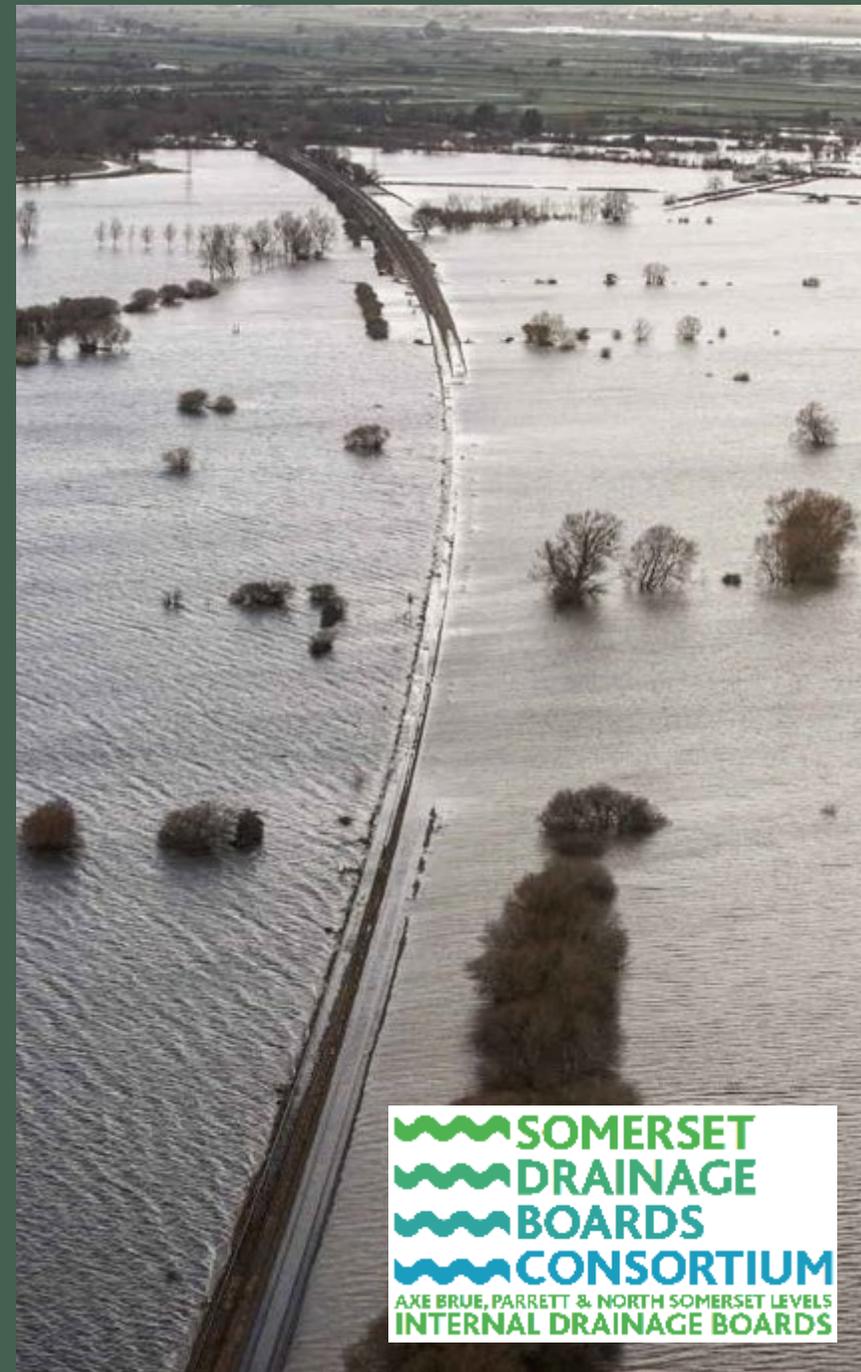
Maintenance reduces the likelihood that channel capacity will be exceeded, or assets will fail, so the likelihood, extent, depth, and duration and damage caused by flooding is reduced.



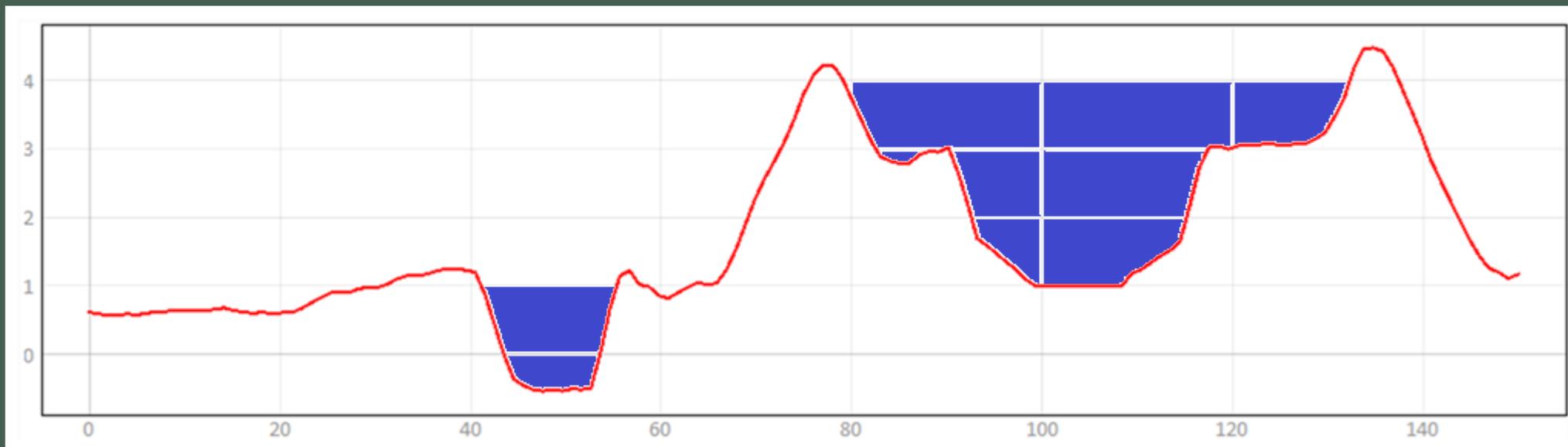
## REALITY CHECK 1

Whilst we know flooding can't be totally avoided, the likelihood and consequences have historically been managed to acceptable standards through a blend of capital improvements and maintenance.

Society in its broadest sense has developed and grown in these areas and is now dependant on these practices and standards. **No viable alternative has been offered in its place.**



## River Geometry Cross Section



X and Y scales are not proportionate

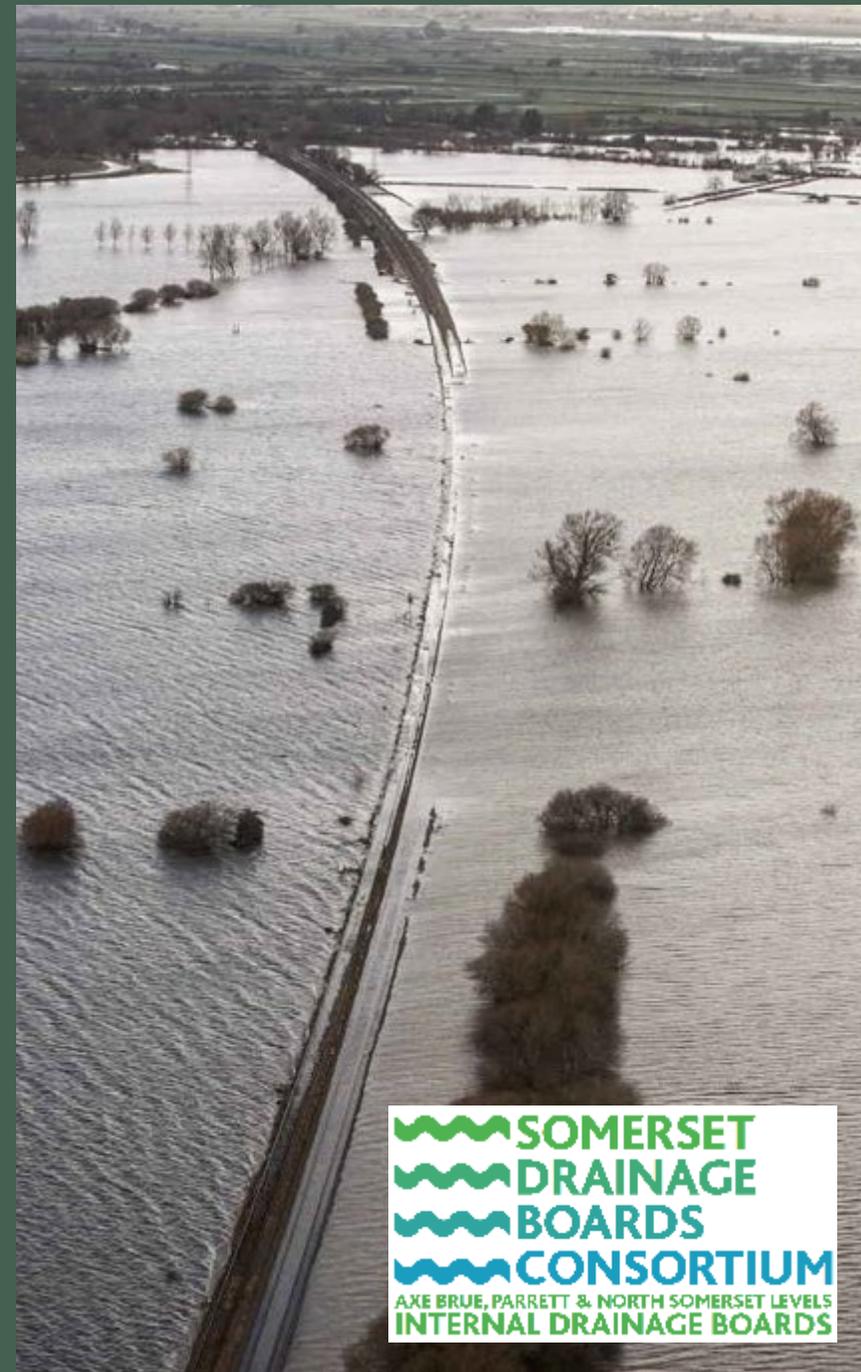
**Dependance of lowland systems on high level carriers**

## REALITY CHECK 2

We are suffering a creeping withdrawal and decline.

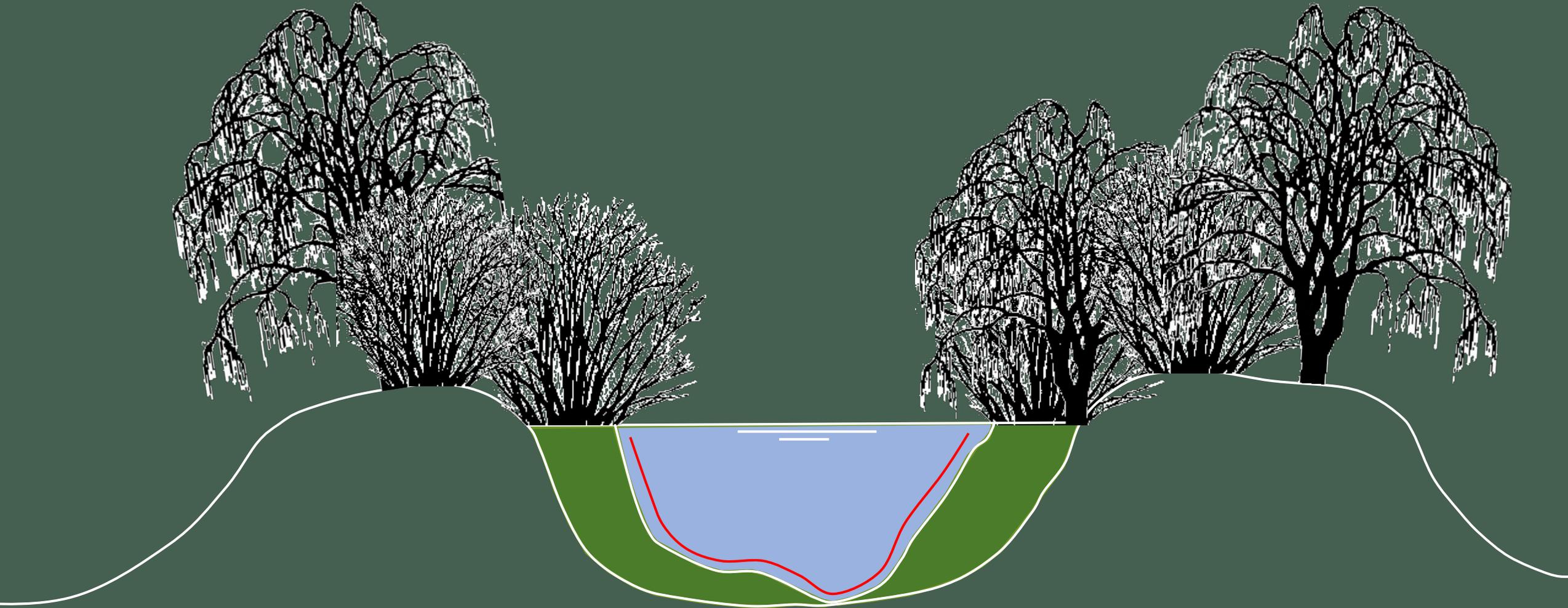
The maintenance that the system has come to depend upon is now being quietly withdrawn.

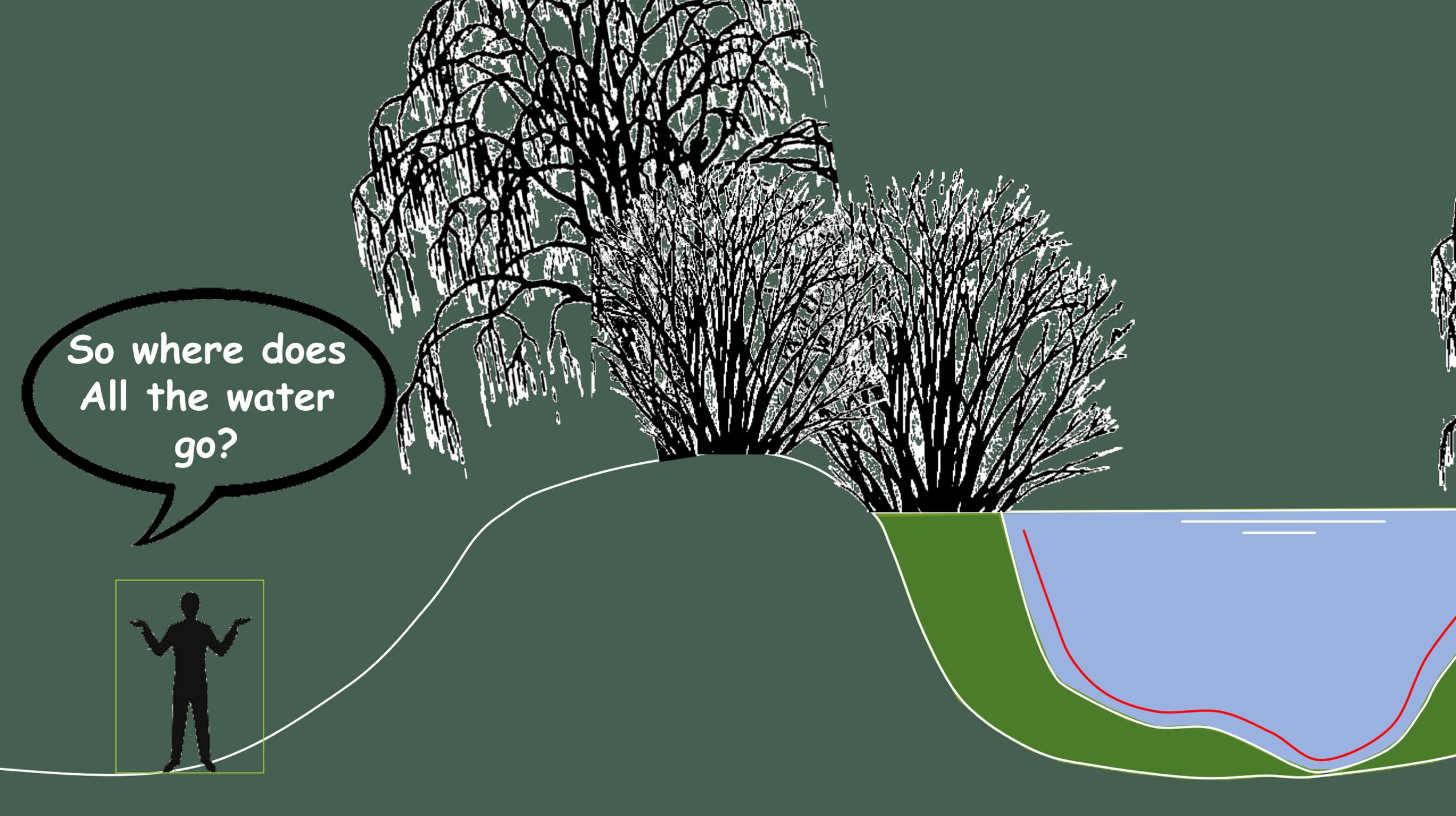
Without sufficient visibility or understanding of the consequences.



# Channel Conveyance and Maintenance

Neglected Main River Channel





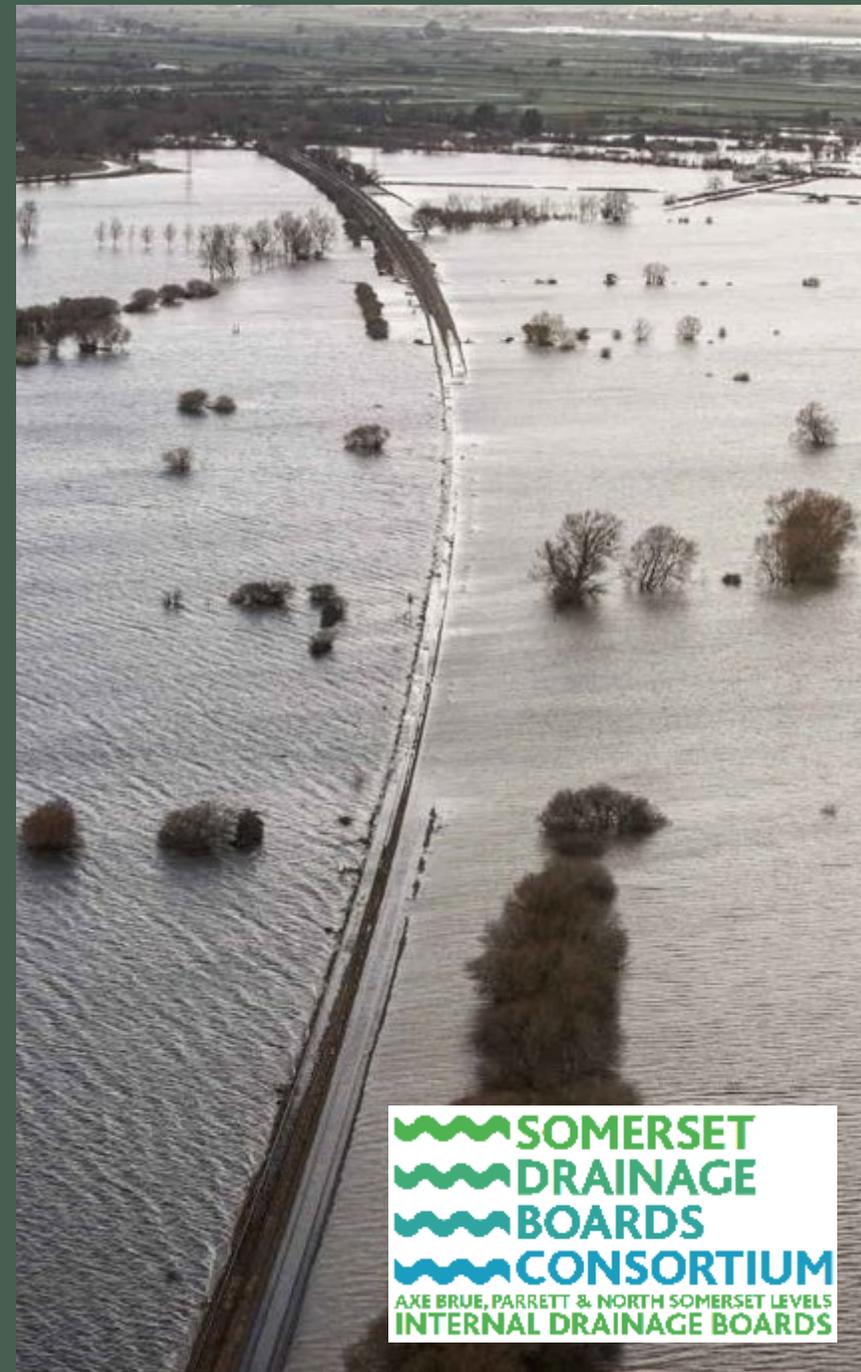
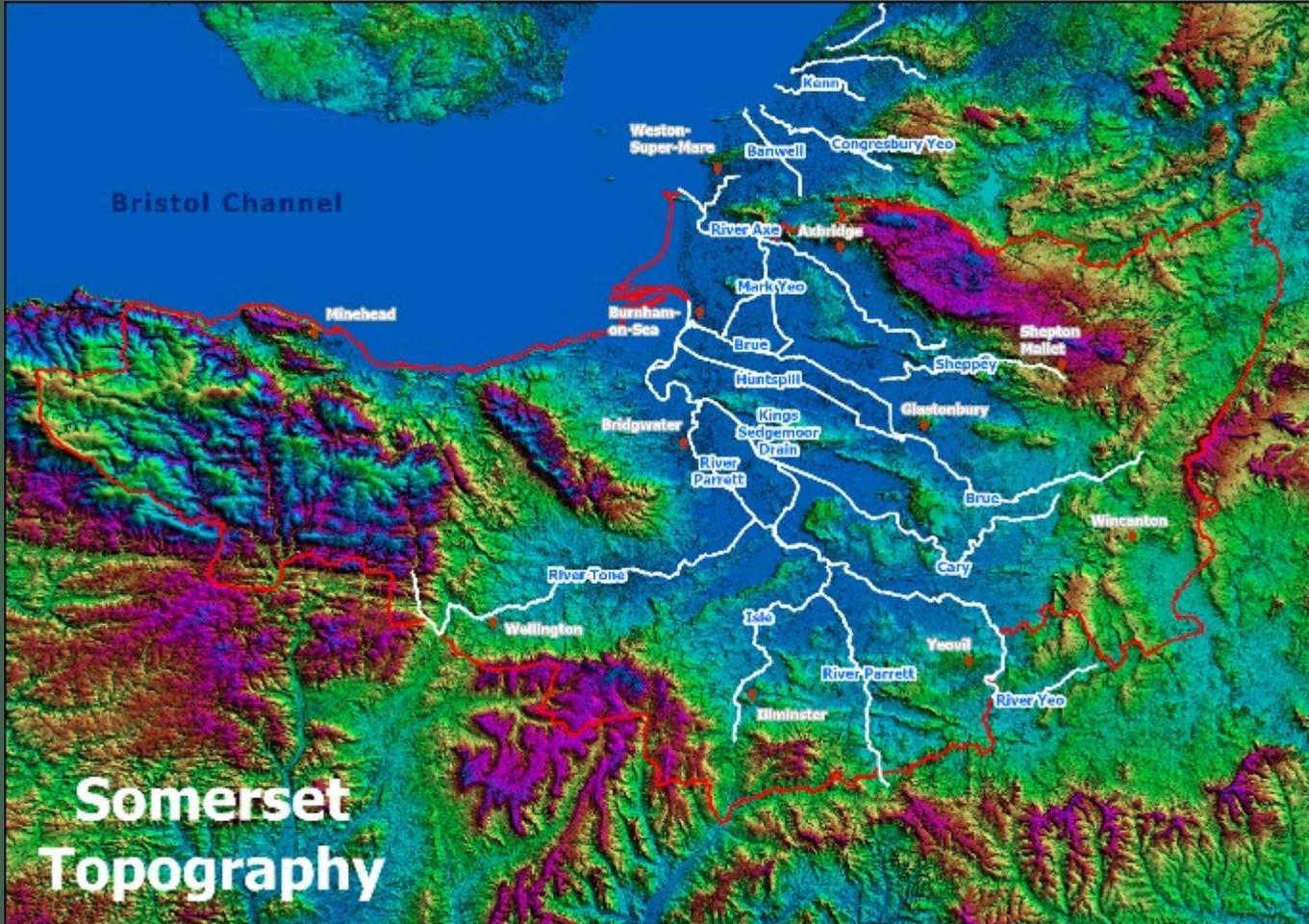
So where does  
All the water  
go?



We have firsthand  
experience in  
Somerset!

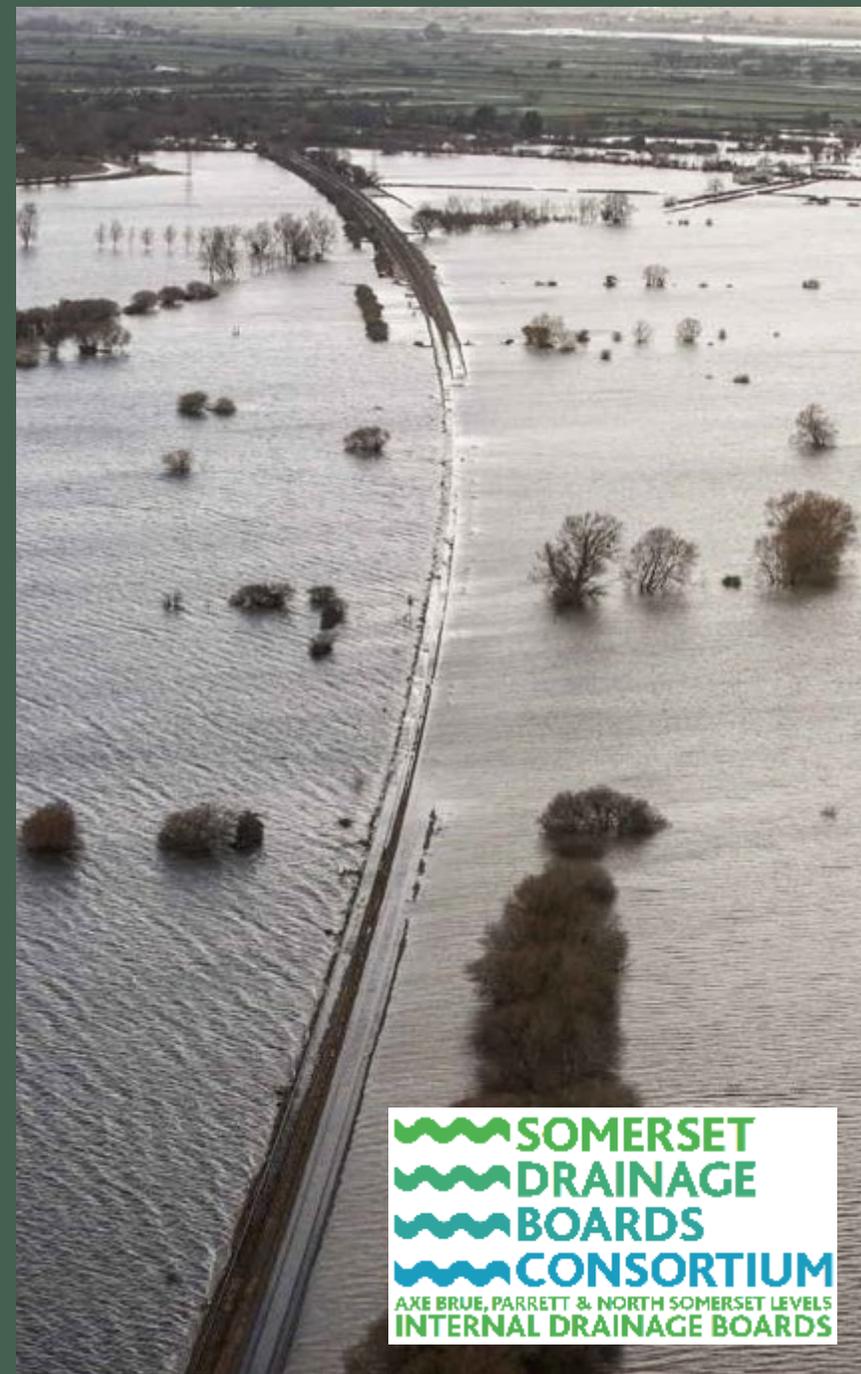
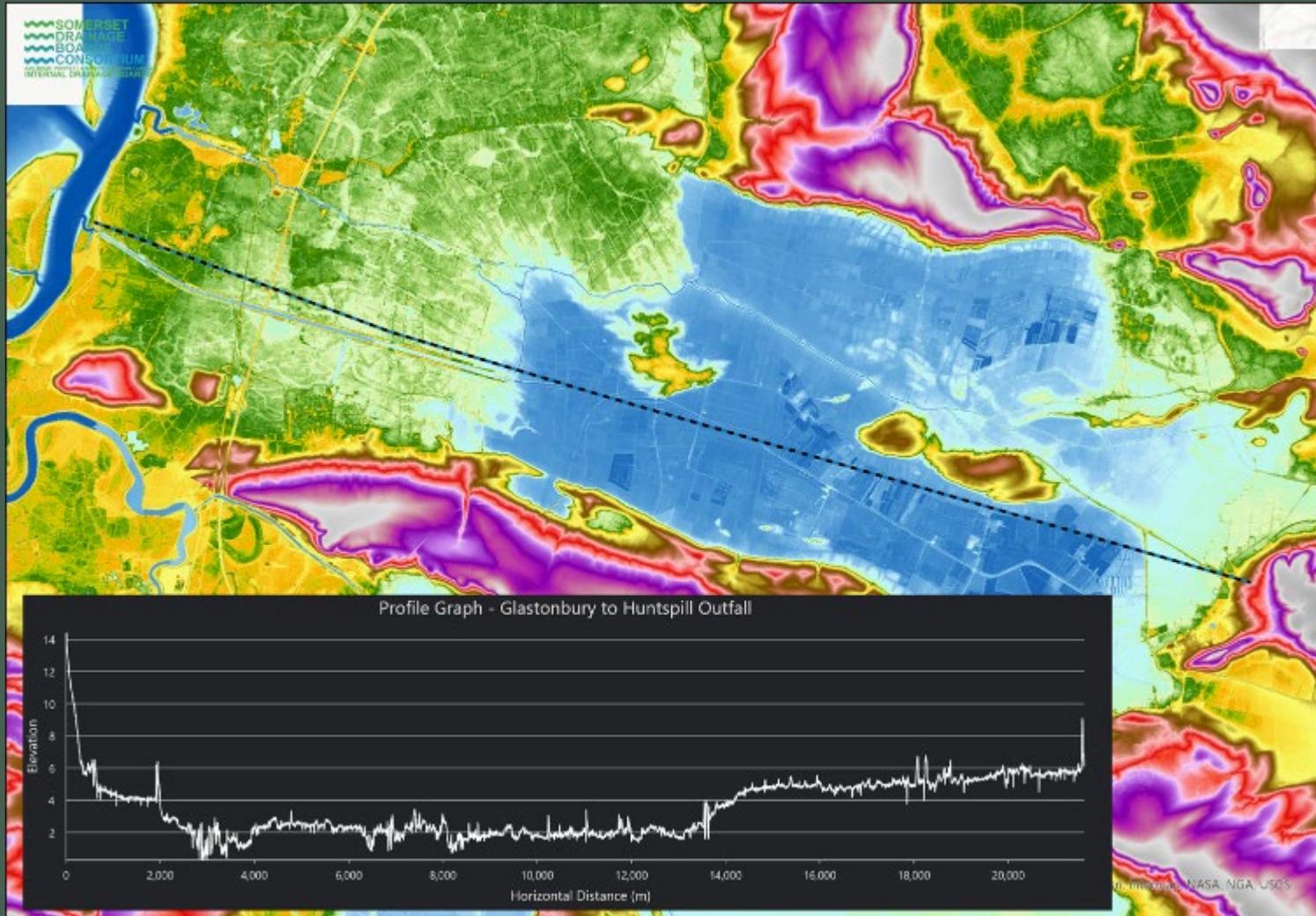


# Somerset case study



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# SOMERSET



# IDB watercourse maintenance



**North Somerset Levels IDB: 194 km**

**Axe Brue IDB: 632 km**

**Parrett IDB: 586 km**



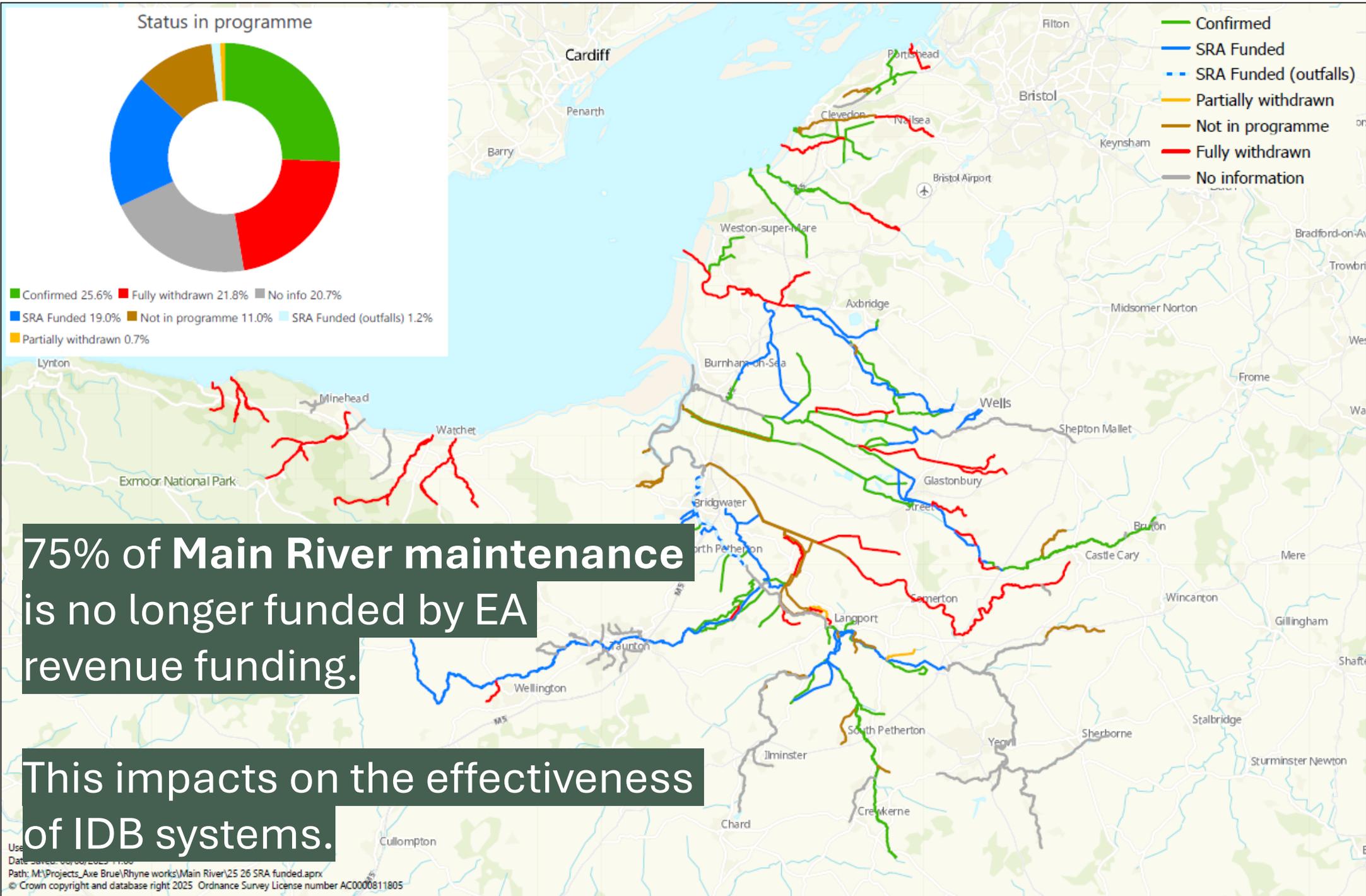
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### Status in programme



Confirmed 25.6% Fully withdrawn 21.8% No info 20.7%  
SRA Funded 19.0% Not in programme 11.0% SRA Funded (outfalls) 1.2%  
Partially withdrawn 0.7%

- Confirmed
- SRA Funded
- SRA Funded (outfalls)
- Partially withdrawn
- Not in programme
- Fully withdrawn
- No information



**75% of Main River maintenance is no longer funded by EA revenue funding.**

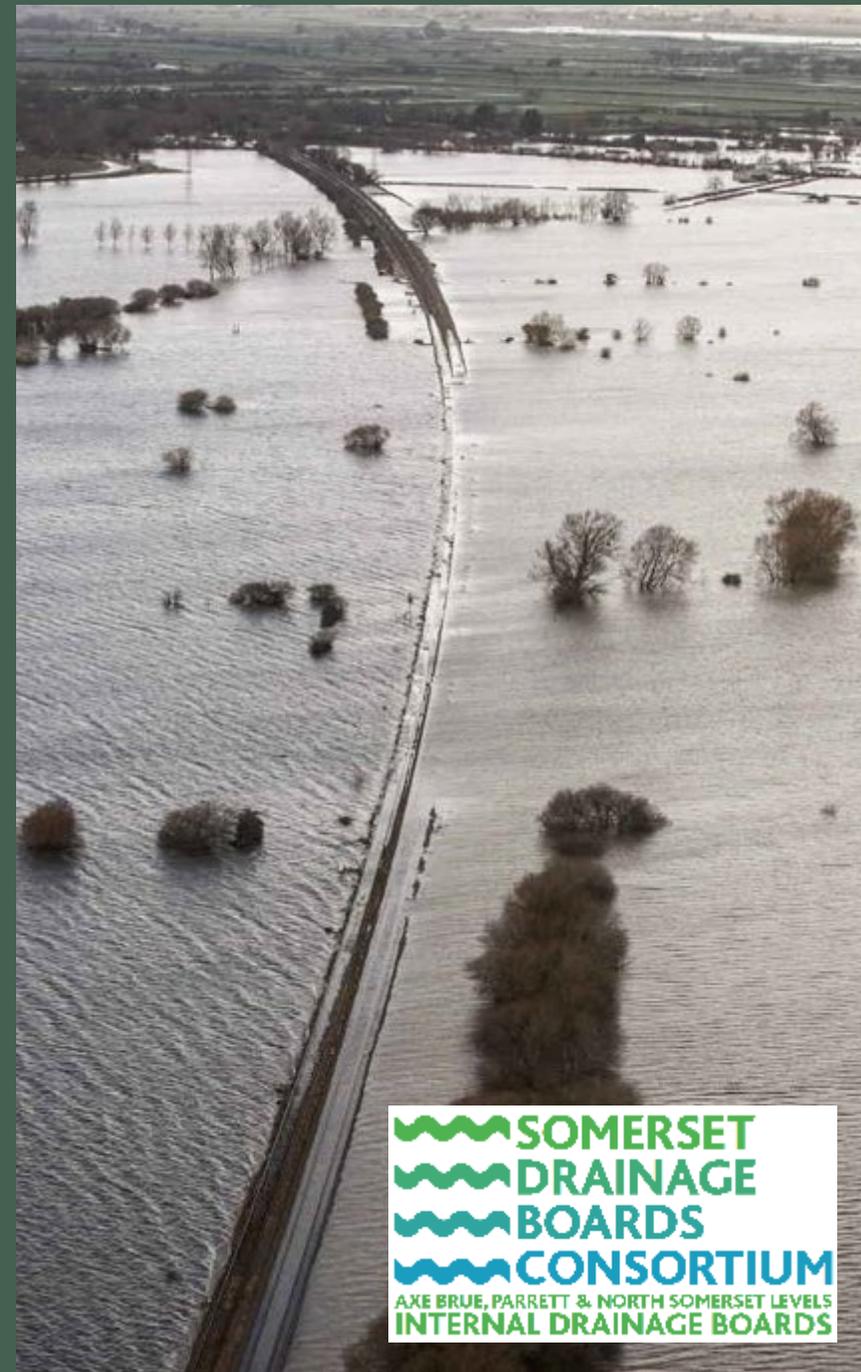
**This impacts on the effectiveness of IDB systems.**

## Lessons In History?

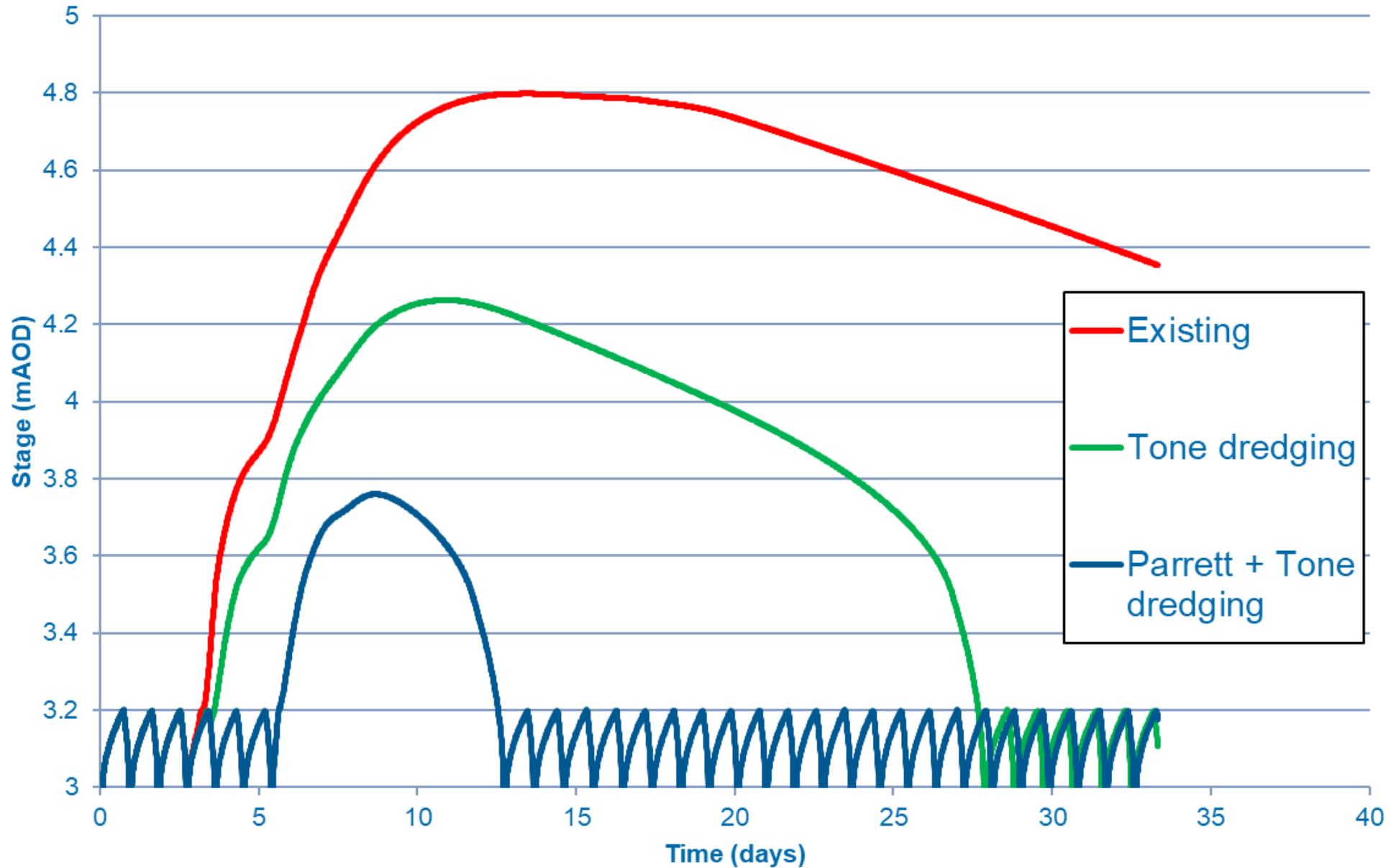
In 2012 Main River Maintenance had reduced over several years, much as is the case today.

A catastrophic and largely avoidable Summer Flood in 2012 occurred and was followed by an even more extreme flood in winter 2013/14.

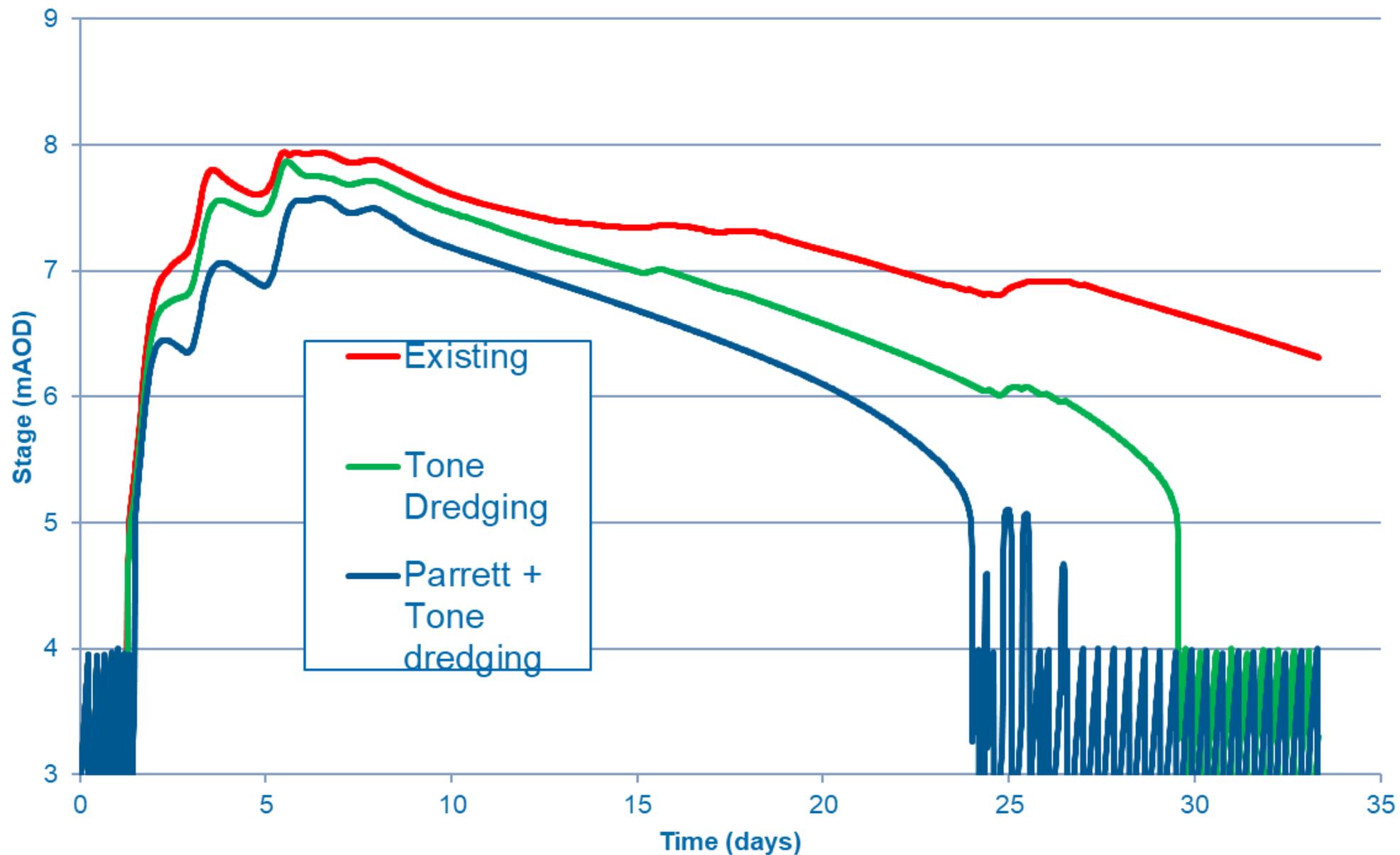
It was shown and agreed by all that had regular Main River maintenance been undertaken these events would have had much less impact.

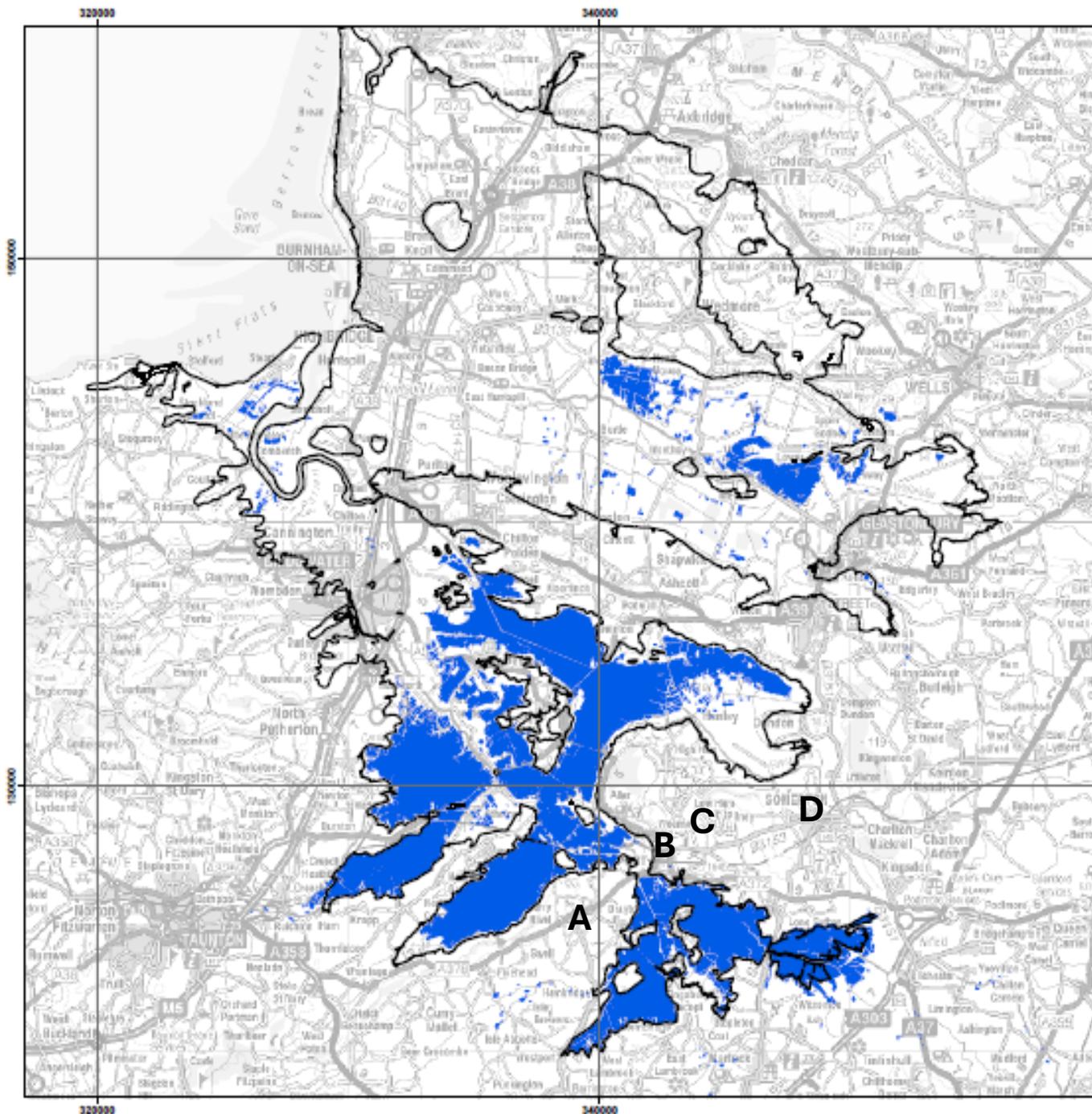


# Flood levels in North Moor Main Drain - Nov 20th 2012 onwards



# Flood levels in Curry Moor Main Drain - Nov 20th 2012 onwards

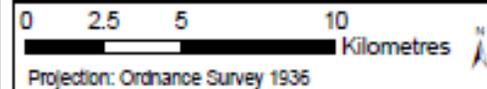




## Flooding Somerset Levels 19th February 2014

### Legend

- Estimated Water Extent
- Somerset Levels & Moors Boundary provided by FCRM - Wessex



Estimated flood extent on 19/02/2014

Area approx. 10,400 ha

The flood extent was estimated from TerraSAR-X satellite data acquired at 19/02/2014 18:01 UTC.

These data were used to map the water extent within the flooded analysis area.



Map generated by Environment Agency,  
National Operations, Geomatics.

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Ordnance Survey 100024198.

Derivative Works product

# Winter 2013/14

## 10,000 ha flooded

## 50% of Parrett Internal Drainage District flooded.



**£147 million  
damages in 2014**

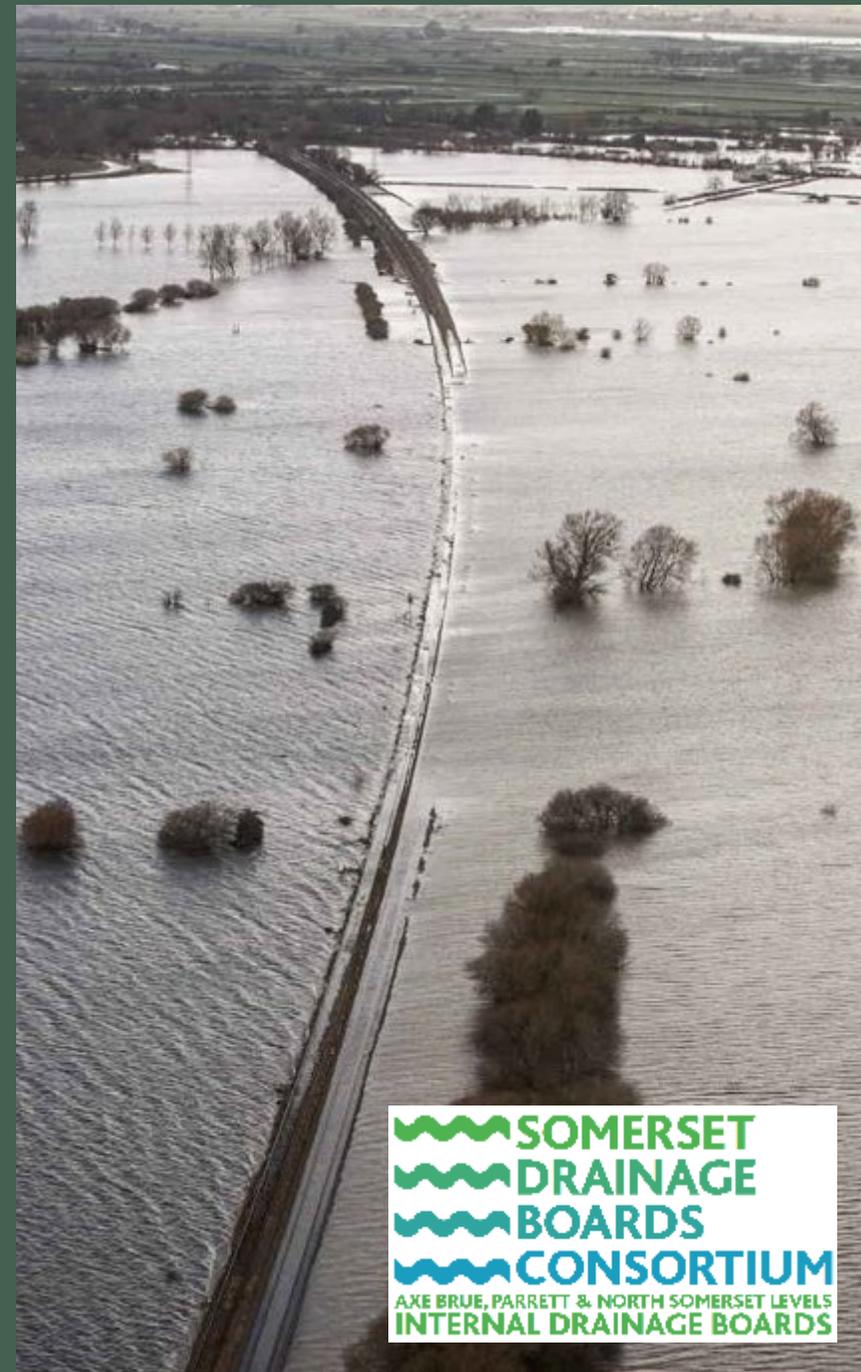


## Our Solution

Local community exposed the neglect to our River Systems and Assets.

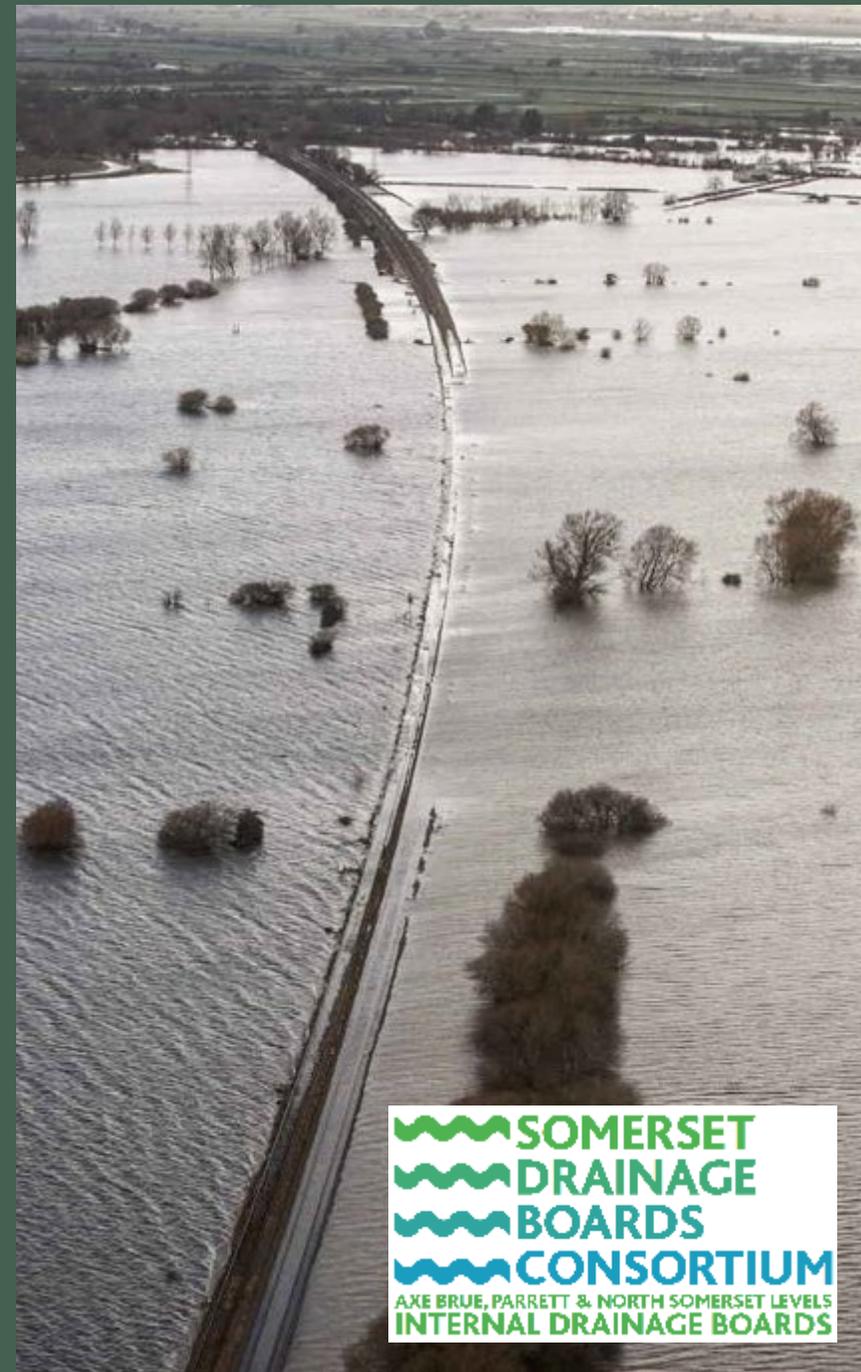
The Government of the day listened and injected cash to rectify the situation.

Enabled local choices with local funding going forwards, in the form of the Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA).



Many improvements were made and maintenance was restored to key Main Rivers.

However, in recent years, despite good levels of capital investment in new infrastructure, such as the Bridgwater Tidal Barrier, once again the importance maintenance has been neglected.



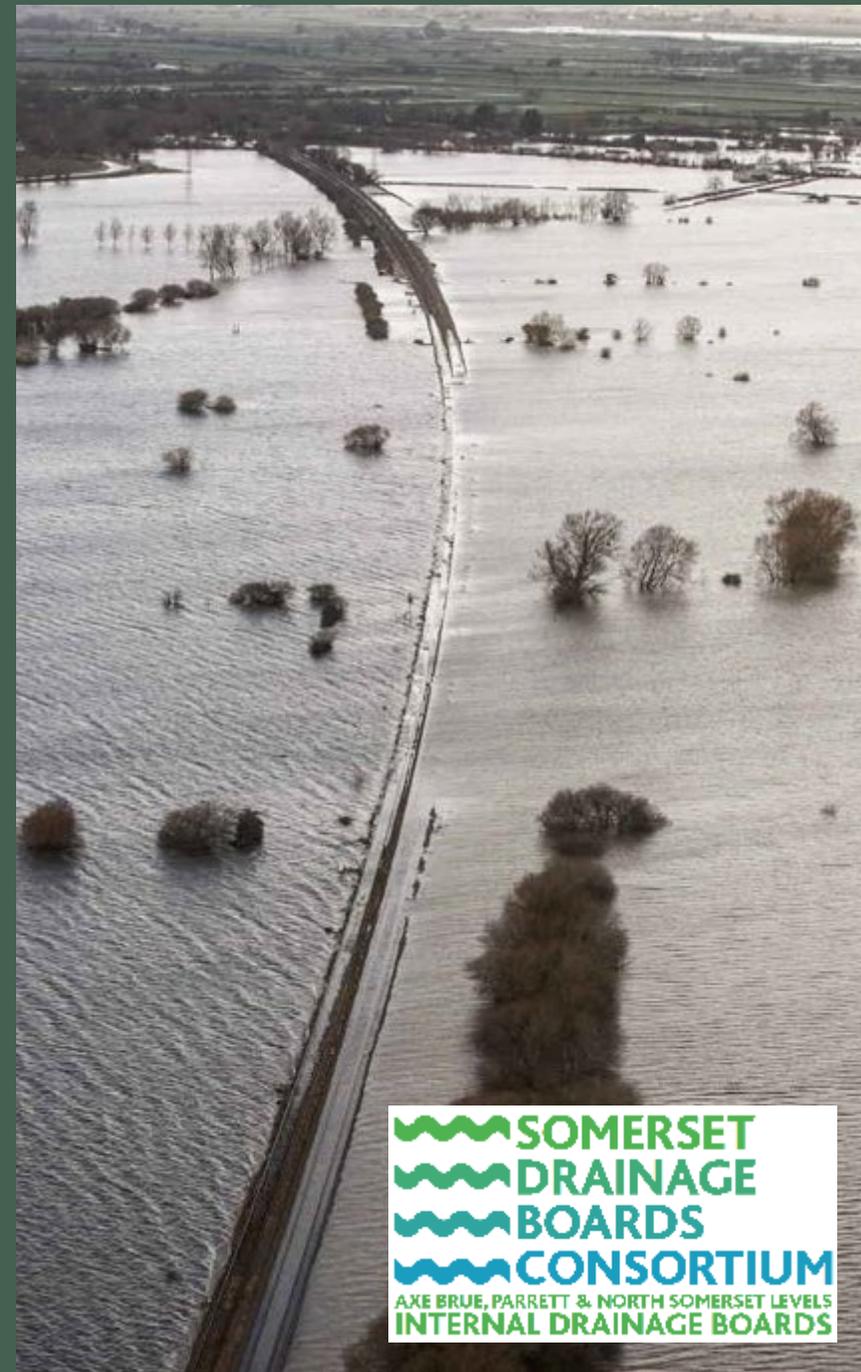
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# Notice of withdrawn maintenance has been sent to Riparian Owners on many watercourses

Leading to:

- Worry and concern at community scale
- Lack of future strategy and coordination
- Lack of capability
- Lack of resource
- Lack of oversight
- Withheld payment of drainage rates

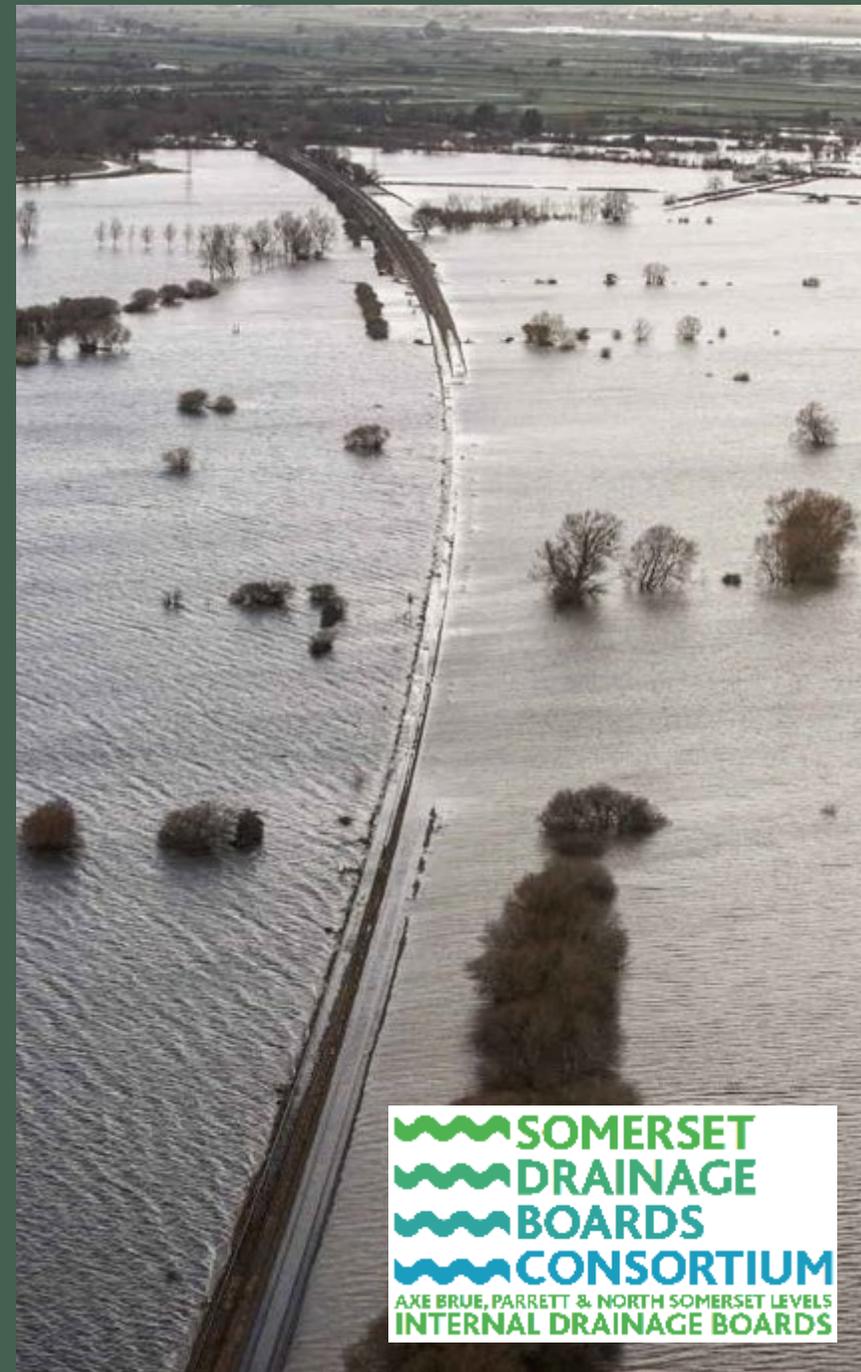
Increased risk and consequence of flooding



## Failure to maintain

Is resulting in:

- short term savings
- increased risks of performance failure
- avoidable costs from incident response and catastrophe management
- increased cost of repair or replacement of failed systems
- adverse impacts on local, regional and national economies.

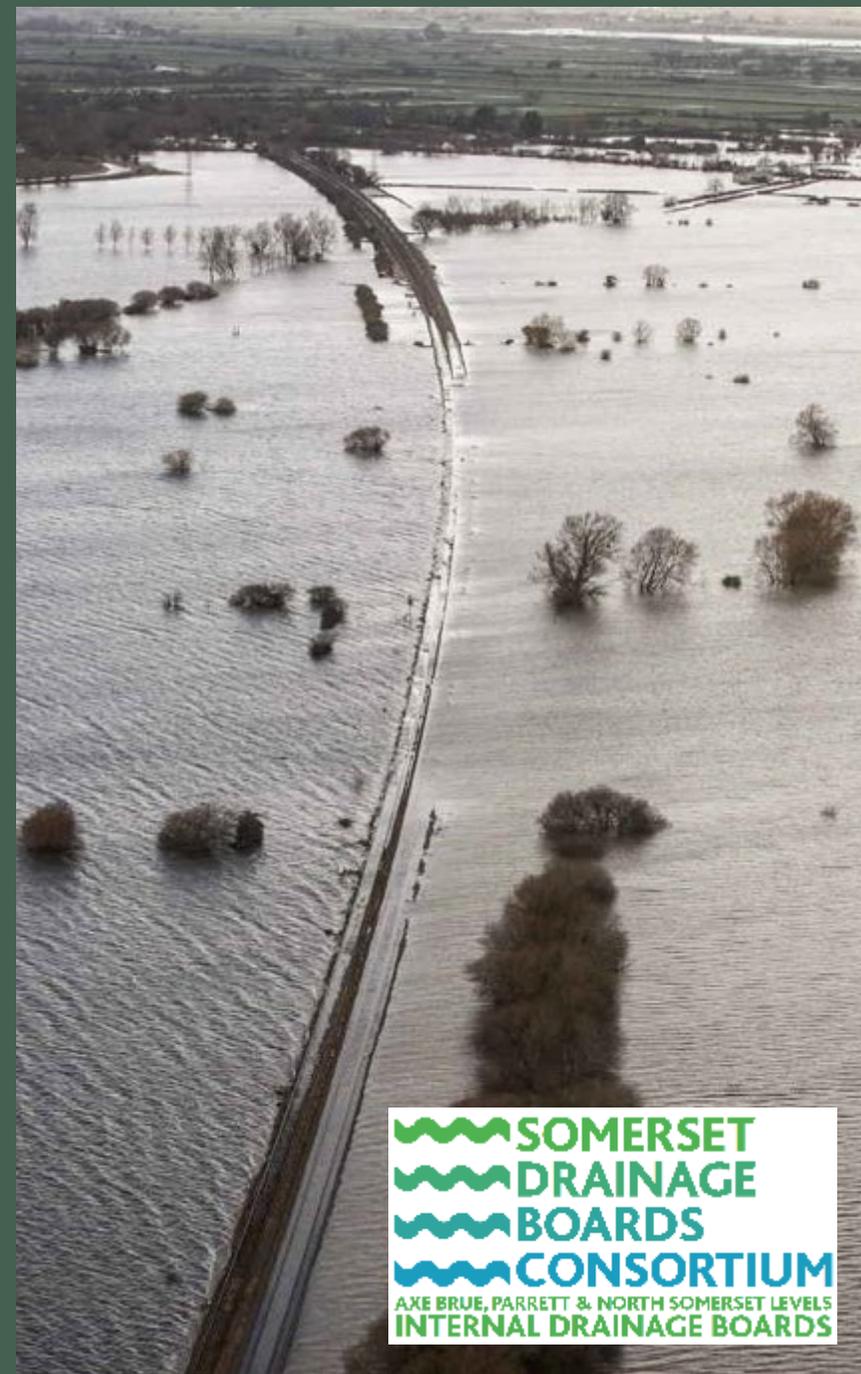


Does the future maintenance of our medium and lower flood risk systems sit in the hands of these worried but well-meaning riparian people?



## The Alternative

- A **long term-maintenance plan** for Main Rivers to sustain Somerset in a changing climate – in drought and flood
- Partnership approach backed up by appropriate local and national funding – EA, IDB, SRA
- Local delivery – de-maining / Public Sector Cooperation Agreements (PSCAs)
- **But**, this will take time to implement
- Need to manage transition over ~3 years
- Need to conserve the maintenance we have until then.
- A **joint working group** to agree sustainable path forwards.



# Thank you for listening

Iain Sturdy  
Chief Engineer and Clerk/CEO  
Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium

