

THE SOMERSET LEVELS, UK. RESOLUTION OF CONFLICT IN WETLAND MANAGEMENT

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The Somerset levels and moors are an internationally important wetland in the Southwest of England. Behind a coastal barrier zone of dunes, two zones, one of marine silt and behind this lowland peat has accumulated over the holocene. Much of the peatland was historically flooded, but has been subject to successive drainage and water control measures. Until the 1970s, land ownership was fragmented, and the area dominated by low level grazing of wet grassland of high ecological value.

A major conflict arose in the 1970s with proposals to improve the drainage, in response to government policy, formulated at a national level without regard for local ecological needs. In the 1980s the Nature Conservancy Council reacted to a proposal to improve the drainage of West Sedgemoore, by designating it a protected site. This led to "head-on" conflict between the farming community and the conservationists, that was only decided when a government minister confirmed the NNC designation giving protection status to the area. This decision was far from local democracy. Subsequently, the conflict has been "put on hold" by the economic state of farming, as the farming community was unable to pay the high price for intensive drainage works. Consequently, the introduction of the Environmentally Sensitive Areas payments at the end of 1980s enabled farmers to improve their economic status by accepting a form of "conservation payment".

The ESA scheme has widespread adoption in the Somerset Levels, with as much as 50% of the potential area in one level of agreement. Three tiers of agreement are available to the farmers on a voluntary basis:

- Tier 1 protects the grassland
- Tier 2 requires the maintenance of high water levels in summer
- Tier 3 requires active intervention to raise water levels to the surface during the early spring, thus attempting to improve the ecological value of the designated areas.

The introduction of the ESA, the active promotion of water management by the Environment Agency, and the overall move towards a conservation approach to water management has appeared to resolve the conflicts. However, it is far from clear that the farming community is committed to conservation aims. As long as it is economically acceptable, then conservation payments are accepted, but if the economics situation were to shift (if for example the world price of food increases dramatically) then pressures on these wetlands will return.