FLOODPLAIN GRAZING MARSH

LOCAL HABITAT ACTION PLAN FOR CAMBRIDGESHIRE

Last Updated: August 2003

1 CURRENT STATUS

1.1 National Status

Grazing marsh is defined as periodically inundated pasture, or meadow with ditches, which maintain water levels. These ditches can be especially rich in plants and invertebrates. The marshes act as important areas for breeding waders such as lapwing, and also for wintering birds like whooper swans. Almost all areas are grazed or cut for hay and silage. Generally there are few areas of tall fen species like common reed, although reedbeds will often be found in ditches around the grazing marshes (reedbeds and fens are considered in separate Plans). It is thought that there are 300,000 ha of floodplain grazing marsh in the UK, with an estimate of 200,000 ha in England in 1994. However, only a small proportion of this (about 5,000 ha in England) is thought to be semi-natural.

1.2 Local Status

The largest areas of floodplain grazing marsh in Cambridgeshire are in the Ouse Washes (around 1,900 ha – both Cambridgeshire and Norfolk) and Nene Washes (around 1,000 ha). Both these sites are designated as SSSI, SPA and Ramsar sites. As an indicator of the status for grazing marsh in Cambridgeshire, the area of rough grassland (not only grazing marsh) over 4 years of age declined in the period 1981 to 1991 by 8%. The dairy herd in Cambridgeshire fell by over a third in the 1980s (MAFF figures). This may act as an indicator of the area of grassland and its management in the county.

Other areas of floodplain grazing marsh in Cambridgeshire can be found within the Cam Washes SSSI, the Ouse and Nene Washes and on the south bank of the Welland. Castor Flood Meadows SSSI and Portholme SSSI/cSAC are also important sites within the county.

2 CURRENT FACTORS AFFECTING FLOODPLAIN GRAZING MARSH IN CAMBRIDGESHIRE

- Nationally, significant losses have occurred this century, with, for example, around 37% loss in Broadland between the 1930s and the 1980s.

- Ecologically insensitive flood defence works and a lack of integrated flood management have had a negative impact on this seasonally flooded habitat.

- Agricultural intensification and improvement of the soil has led to a decline in the number of plant species found on the grazing marshes.

- Eutrophication of the ditches has led to changes in the species assemblages.

- Whilst not relevant to the Ouse and Nene Washes, and Portholme Meadow, groundwater abstraction lowers the water table and can have an adverse effect on the systems that bring surface water to sites, having an impact on the ecology and sustainability of sites.

- The reduction in the head of cattle in the county has reduced the value of this habitat to farmers. Lack of grazing has also created problems with the management of protected sites.

- The Ouse Washes is often very wet in the summer due to increased spring and summer flooding and a reduced ability to clear the water from the site due to increased siltation in the Hundred Foot River. This prevents hay cutting or reduces grazing which results in vegetation changes and reduces the quality of this site for ground-nesting breeding birds.

3 CURRENT ACTION

- The largest areas of floodplain grazing marsh in Cambridgeshire are in the Ouse and Nene Washes. These sites are designated as both SPAs and Ramsar sites, and proportions of both are managed exclusively for nature conservation. The Cam Washes, Castor Flood Meadow and Portholme are designated SSSIs. Portholme and part of the Ouse Washes are also designated cSAC.

- Kingfisher Bridge, bordering the Cam Washes is undergoing conversion from arable farmland to include an area of grazing marsh.

- The Environment Agency, Water Companies, Internal Drainage Boards and Local Authorities have a statutory duty to further conservation where consistent with purposes of enactments relating to their functions.

- Some floodplain rehabilitation / conversion to wet grassland projects are ongoing in the county under the Countryside Stewardship scheme.

4 OBJECTIVES AND LONG TERM TARGETS

4.1 Objectives

- Maintain the existing habitat area and quality in Cambridgeshire.

- Create more flood meadows, with appropriate water regimes, so that they become a predominant feature of river valleys.

4.2 5 Year Targets to 2005

- All SSSI wet grassland in positive conservation management

- Define specific nature conservation objectives for all grazing marsh sites, and action taken where necessary to ensure that these objectives are met.
- Create 200ha of wet grassland from arable land in targeted areas

4.3 10 Year Targets to 2010

- Create 400ha of wet grassland from arable land in targeted areas, including a significant wet grassland component of at least one major wetland (over 200ha)

5 PROPOSED ACTION WITH TARGETS

Action for the next three years is detailed in the attached programme.

5.1 Policy and Legislation

- Continue to promote an integrated approach to floodplain management and promote floodplain grazing marsh as a priority habitat.

5.2 Site Safeguard and Management

- Ensure sustained and positive management
- Remedy summer flooding problem at the Ouse Washes

5.3 Advisory

- Provide appropriate advice and guidance to landowners and site managers.

5.4 Future Research and Monitoring

- Carryout surveys outside existing nature reserves
- Promote scientific research and wetland creation

5.5 Communications and Publicity

- Promote the importance of floodplain habitats

6 LINKS TO OTHER PLANS

This plan should be considered in conjunction with those for fens, reedbeds and drainage ditches.

When implemented, this plan may also benefit those for fens, reedbeds, drainage ditches, *Segmentina nitida* (shining ram's-horn snail), *Pseudanodonta complanata* (compressed river mussel), and *Vertigo moulinsiana* (Desmoulin's whorl snail).

7 REVIEW OF ACTION PLAN

Arrange monitoring and review of these targets annually and reset targets according to resources and responsibilities for the following 3 years.

8 REFERENCES

RSPB, ITE, EN (1997) *The Wet Grassland Guide: managing floodplain and coastal wet grasslands for wildlife.* RSPB, Sandy.

DoE (1995) *Biodiversity: The UK Steering Group Report*. Volume 2: Action Plans. HMSO,

London

Much information was gathered at a workshop held in winter 1998.

9 LIST OF INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANISATIONS CONSULTED

Anglian Water Services Ltd
Biodiversity Partnership Co-ordinator
Butterfly Conservation
Cambridge City Council
Cambridgeshire County Council
East Cambridgeshire District Council
English Nature
Environment Agency
Farming and Rural Conservation Agency
Fenland District Council
FWAG
Huntingdonshire District Council
Landscape 2000
National Trust
Peterborough City Council
RSPB - East Anglia
South Cambridgeshire District Council
The Wildlife Trust
University of Cambridge, Department of Zoology

CAMBRIDGESHIRE LHAP: FLOODPLAIN GRAZING MARSH
LAST UPDATED: AUGUST 2003

Target	Action	Responsible	3-5 Years	6-10 Years
1) All SSSI flood plain grassland sites to be moving towards or in favourable condition by 2010	Promote the creation of floodplain grassland on land of low conservation value through Countryside Stewardship targeting.	DEFRA	Ongoing	
2) All CWS flood plain graaland sites to be favourable condition by 2010	Restore and maintain, based on conservation objectives and favourable condition tables, the Ouse, Nene & Cam Washes and Portholme Meadow (largest extant areas of floodplain grassland) in a favourable condition	EN	Ongoing	
3) Create 400ha of new flood plain grassland of wildlife value. With appropiate hydrological regimes, from arable land within main river corridors, including at least 200ha as part of a large habitat creation project.	Identify sites for the creation of flood meadows, with appropriate water regimes, so that they become a prominent feature of river valleys	EN, EA WiT, RSPB HDC	2010	
	Integrate all local research into hydrological and water quality regimes affecting flood plain grassland to inform best practise for creation of new floodplain grassland. Particular emphasis should be placed on recent hyroecological prescriptions being prepared by Cranfield University for the NVC communities MG4, 9 & 13.	EN,EA	2003	
	Promote the important role flood plain grassland, particularly washlands, can play in flood defence and the sustainable principles of naturalised river corridors and river flows.	Biodiversity Partnership	Ongoing	
	Ensure that interpretation materials explaining issues surrounding flood plain grassland communities are provided at all suitable sites and that site walks, talks and events are used to promote understanding of floodplain conservation issues. Key sites	EN,NT,WiT	Ongoing	

	are Ouse Washes (WWT & RSPB Reserves), Nene Washes and Portholme Meadow and the other Ouse Valley meadows.			