

BASINGSTOKE CANAL JMC– 16 OCTOBER 2014

PROCEDURAL MATTERS

Questions and Petitions-Item 4

Member Question (1) from Philip Riley to ask:

Will the BCA consider adopting a revised bank-side clearance policy which would involve not only a winter cut but also a cut in late spring/early summer and possibly also in the autumn?

Reply:

The BCA ranger staff currently cuts the towpath at least twice per year (May/June and September); occasionally certain areas are cut for a third time, if there is an exceptional growing season. The BCA ranger team are currently not resourced to increase the number of towpath cuts, or employ a contractor to do so. Summer towpath cuts do not extend to hedgerows or to the bankside marginal strip between the towpath and water.

Cutting hedgerows and bankside vegetation is usually done in late autumn or winter to avoid cutting annual and bi-annual species before they set seed, and to avoid disturbing nesting birds. The towpath side winter cutting regime was completely discontinued about 5 years ago, at a time when staff levels were reduced. This has resulted in the presence of a greater number of tree saplings and woody perennial species such as bramble growing in the marginal strip which is seen to be undesirable as it reduces the diversity of the species on the bank. The present Canal Management Team re-instated a winter cut last winter to include hedgerows and the bankside marginal strip - the BCA can currently afford for a contractor to cut approx 11km of Canal per winter on a cyclical basis. It is proposed to replace the BCA's ageing Artesia mower with a more suitable Kubota mini-tractor and flail to enable the BCA Ranger staff to extend the winter cutting regime to a longer length of the Canal.

The matter of additional summer bankside cutting was discussed at the Conservation Management Steering Group on 8 October 2014. We were advised that the marginal strip is a vital hunting ground for dragonflies which are part of the SSSI citation, and that summer cutting may alter the balance of bankside plant species. Although the bank is technically outside of the SSSI regular cutting in summer may have a direct harmful effect on the dragonfly population which are protected characteristic of the Canal SSSI. It was agreed at the Conservation Management Steering Group that additional expert advice should be sought on the height and variety of plant species required to support the dragonfly population, and that the reinstatement of a complete winter cutting programme over more than one season would be monitored before additional summer cuts should be considered. Should it be seen to be acceptable and necessary to increase the frequency and area of summer cutting additional resources will need to be identified.



Mr Keith Chapman
Chairman of the Basingstoke Canal JMC

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