2018 UK River Prize Finalist

Hills to Levels (Somerset)
Catchment-scale project

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Case Study

The Hills to Levels project, providing advice on soil and land use management in order to reduce sediment runoff, improve infiltration and hydrological processes, reduce flooding and improve drought resilience. This is one of the largest catchments (2871km^2) implementing Natural Flood Management (NFM) in the UK, having experienced severe flooding, with changing climate bringing intense rainfall. Councils, technical advisory groups, community action groups, and landowners work together, sharing knowledge and expertise, and addressing issues to reach the common goal of flood alleviation. The project also worked with partners in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Many streams in the area are failing Water Framework Directive objectives for sediment, phosphate and fish; as well as being heavily modified. Measures have been installed to slow flow, filter sediments and store runoff, including floodplain reconnection, edge of field measures and leaky woody dams. 453 natural flood management structures have been put in place, including 232 woody structures; ponds helping store 25,000m^3 of flood water; planting 11ha of woodland; and restoring the function of 3.5km of headwater streams. Flow pathway data was used to target problem areas, and monitoring including data loggers, time lapse cameras, fixed point photography, invertebrate surveys and infiltration tests are helping to quantify the benefits.

400 farms were visited across five main catchments – River Parrett, River Tone, West Somerset Streams, River Brue and River Axe, with tours carried out across the catchments.

The long term vision is for NFM to become part of land management, for farmers to become ambassadors of NFM, encouraging others to implement techniques, and strive towards the land acting like a sponge, providing healthy river systems.

Project partners
- Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group South West
- Somerset Rivers Authority
- Environment Agency
- Interreg