


Battered Britain: More wet weather... and there's still no sign of leadership

 independent.co.uk/environment/nature/battered-britain-more-wet-weather-and-still-no-sign-of-leadership-9101711.html

Chris Stevenson , Zachary Boren

2/2/2014

The Government braced itself for a further onslaught of storms and flooding last night, as the Environment Secretary, Owen Paterson, promised that "everything possible" was being done to help potential flood victims and prepare for the further storms and tides forecast to hit the UK today.

Mr Paterson, speaking yesterday afternoon after the latest meeting of Cobra, the Government's emergency committee, promised that the Government was "offering full assistance" to emergency services and local councils. "Five severe flood warnings are in place and I urge anyone living in an area at risk to remain vigilant and listen to the advice issued by the Environment Agency and emergency services," he said.

The promise came as Met Office experts warned there was to be no let-up in the flooding misery being faced by many across the country with more wet weather on the way, following another day of high winds and rain yesterday. Today was expected to see a brief respite for some of the country, with sunny spells to the east of England, with strong winds easing overnight for many. But fresh warnings of rain tomorrow will see up to 30mm of rain in areas across the South-west and into Wales, coupled with winds of up to 60mph, and up to 70mph in some coastal areas. Another system is set to hit on Tuesday and into Wednesday, bringing 15-25mm in some areas of South-west England, Wales and Northern Ireland, with up to 40mm in some spots – plus more gale-force winds that could see up to 80mph on some coasts.

Calum MacColl, from the Met Office, said that the forecast was "still dominated by this sort of weather", with another low pressure front potentially coming on Friday and "even into next week with no signs of longer spells of respite".

The warnings came as the Environment Agency struggled to cope with the existing conditions with five severe flood warnings in operation last night, indicating a danger to life, three along the Severn Estuary in Gloucestershire and two along the coast in North Cornwall. Numerous locations across the country faced road closures, with trains in Hampshire affected by a landslide.

This is in addition to around 150 flood warnings, which call for immediate action, and approximately 290 flood alerts, asking residents to be prepared. About 150 properties in the Midlands, South-west and South-east were reported to have flooded, the EA said.

Following the Cobra meeting, Mr Paterson said that "everything possible is being done over the weekend to help those affected by flooding and to prepare for the further bad weather and high tides forecast overnight and into next week. The Government is offering full assistance to the local authorities and emergency services, he added.



A woman and her children are transported after a flash flood

However, Maria Eagle, the shadow Environment Secretary, said that this "government by PR" was not helping those in areas such as Somerset that had seen constant problems since December, despite David Cameron stating that he felt "enormous sympathy for the people who live on the Somerset Levels" in writing for the Western Daily Press, yesterday.

"Somerset residents have been facing a horrendous time since before Christmas, yet all they have had from ministers is government by PR. Numerous meetings of Cobra have been announced to the media and Owen Paterson turned up for a couple of hours for the cameras, but still the Government has failed to get a grip," she said.

"The PM promised dredging just hours after his Environment Secretary and the Environment Agency said it wasn't necessary while troops were pledged seemingly without any consultation with the council. Those facing flooded homes lost business, had lengthy journeys to work and school deserve better," she said.



The Environment Secretary Owen Paterson answers questions

Ian Liddell-Grainger, Conservative MP for Bridgwater, who spent yesterday at the Somerset Levels, speaking to what he called "scared" residents, took aim squarely at the Environment Agency, saying that officials at the top of the organisation were "idiotic" and that they needed to sanction £5m for river dredging, a process that he said would help with the flooding.

He added that the agency needed to "concentrate on people", referencing the £31m sanction for a bird sanctuary in the area. "They can't just be an environment agency, they have to be a flood-protection agency as well, which means they dredge the rivers, build the defences, right across the country," he said.

Contamination was also key, with residents facing dirty water – with septic tanks in the area. This was confirmed by test results on waters in Moorlands, Somerset, obtained by microbiologists from the University of Reading. They found the waters contained 60,000-70,000 bacteria per 100 millilitres. According to the WHO, agricultural water should have no more than 1,000 bacteria per 100 millilitres.



Rising waters: Inundated fields in the South-west

Microbiologist Nathaniel Storey, who carried out the research, said the results were not unexpected given the extent of the flooding. Mr Storey told Sky News that it would take "about two to three months" for the bacterial levels to drop significantly. Public Health England has advised residents to stay away from flood water and wash their hands and surfaces for food preparation.

Mr Liddell-Grainger said that it "was not acceptable that in the 21st century people are feeling scared because of water in Britain" – ahead of a visit to the area on Tuesday by the Prince of Wales to see victims of the flooding in Somerset, which has seen some areas cut off for a month.

The EA said that it was "working around the clock" to reduce the risk of flooding and had protected more than 70,000 homes, with flood barriers also being put up around parts of the River Severn – and it was also ready to close the Hull Barrier at the Humber Estuary as flooding is also a risk there. Kate Marks, the EA's flood-risk manager, said: "In the coming days, the Environment Agency is likely to issue further flood alerts and flood warnings, so people should check their flood risk."