

Letter to Portsmouth Water and Environment Agency 15/10/20

Further to our meeting in Westbourne on Wednesday 30 September it is clear that the current rate that water is being abstracted out of the aquifer feeding the Ems (Walderton licence, SO/041/0027/004 & Funtington licence 10/41/521301), combined possibly with the effects of climate change, is having a devastating impact on the health and biodiversity of the river ([see 2007 report from Nigel Holmes](#)).

Historically the Ems supported five water mills, the highest of which was at Lordington; watercress beds at Racton Dell, Aldsworth and in Westbourne; and extensive water meadows from Broadwash down to and Mill Meadow Farm. (Link below to Lidar scans showing clear indication of water meadow earth works.)

[Lidar Scans](#)

The Ordnance Survey map of 1898 (link below) indicates that the river was historically a permanent water feature from Walderton.

[1898 Ordnance Survey Map](#)

Sadly the river today is a pale shadow of this and the recent interruption in augmentation for just five days (Wed 23 – Mon 28 Sept) has highlighted the cliff edge that the current rate of abstraction is taking it to.

The current rate and location of augmentation implemented in 2016, though helping to restore the rich habitat in Racton Dell, is failing to maintain the target flow rate of 31l/sec at the Hampshire Bridge gauging station and does nothing to support the potentially rich habitat in the Aldsworth pond and tributary,

It is clear that the volume of abstracted water permitted by the current abstraction licences was far too high when they were established in the 1960s and is long overdue for reduction. The flashy nature of this aquifer also makes it particularly vulnerable to a changing climate where we seem to be getting less consistent rainfall with prolonged, 2-3 month drought periods. Something needs to be done quickly to start to address this.

The Friends of the Ems (FOTE), has been established as part of Greening Westbourne to raise the concerns of people who live along the river, who are deeply concerned about the current situation and want you to consider the following proposal.

Temporary short-term solution 2021–2025

A voluntary adjustment to the abstraction licences to reduce or stop abstraction when groundwater levels fall below an agreed level at the Compton gauging station in order to try and maintain a minimum Q95 flow rate of 45l/sec at the Hampshire Bridge gauging station.

Could an abstraction incentive mechanism (AIM) be considered to compensate Portsmouth Water for this? We all agree that the need for augmentation is a last resort and an admission of an unsustainable abstraction policy and it would be far better if the flow could be maintained by natural ground water springs.

Permanent long-term solution 2025–2029

A permanent change to the abstraction licence to try and achieve the EA projected natural Q95 flow rate of 56l/sec at the Hampshire Bridge gauging station.

It has been shown elsewhere that with the cessation of abstraction, necessary infrastructure modification and changes to water collection points that overall supplies can be maintained whilst allowing over-abstracted chalk watercourses to recover. This has already been given the green light by OFWAT as part of the overall review of water resources in the south east region.

The Walderton abstraction licence represents just 8.3% of Portsmouth Water's available licensed source capacity, so it would not seem to be too unreasonable a target to significantly reduce or entirely cease abstraction from this source in order to achieve very significant environmental gains.

We would like to arrange a follow-up meeting, as soon as you have had a chance to consider this proposal, to hear your response and hopefully to plan for the restoration of the river which I know we all want to see.

Yours sincerely

Friends of the Ems