



Follow us on Twitter  
@edp24

FARMING

# Fen nature battle taken up by EU environment commissioner

**Stephen Pullinger**

stephen.pullinger@archant.co.uk

The EU's environment commissioner is to launch an investigation into whether British authorities have adequately protected one of the Broads' most precious natural sites.

Seven years after landowner Tim Harris began his monumental battle to save Catfield Fen from drying out, the Environment Agency (EA) earlier this month finally decided to refuse the renewal of two water abstraction licences affecting the site and that of neighbouring Sutton Fen.

However, his victory has been tempered by the assessment of leading scientists who say the fen – home to such rare species as bittern and swallowtail butterfly – may already have reached a tipping point concerning environmental damage caused by the loss of groundwater.

Mr Harris, 67, who owns a large part of the fen on his Catfield Hall estate, is frustrated by the time it took the two government bodies concerned, the EA and Natural England (NE), to investigate and reach a decision – despite the fact the site is protected by the highest level of EU conservation legislation.

Now, after Mr Harris's specialist



■ Tim Harris and his wife Geli at Catfield Fen. Picture: JAMES BASS

team of lawyers raised a possible breach of EU law by the UK, environmental commissioner Dr Karl Falkenberg is to launch an investigation.

A letter from the commission has informed Mr Harris that he will be notified through his lawyers of any infringement proceedings taken against the UK government.

Explaining his reason for continuing the fight which has already cost him a seven-figure sum in legal expenses and professional fees, Mr Harris said: "Our experience at Catfield Fen has shown that the public cannot rely on the EA and other statutory

bodies by themselves to protect one of Europe's finest wetland sites which is dependent on alkaline groundwater to support its unique habitat."

He has specifically highlighted to the EU the "persistent granting" of temporary licence extensions by the EA and his assertion, supported by the analysis of a leading expert, that the EA's hydrological model used to review water abstraction licences was not adequate to implement the Habitats Directive properly.

He describes the EA's decision process as "deeply flawed" and failing to consider the legislation's precautionary principle

that should dictate the stopping of water abstraction if there is any suspicion of environmental damage.

Mr Harris, who has been supported in his campaign by the RSPB which manages a neighbouring part of Catfield Fen, said his MP Norman Lamb had enjoyed no more success in communicating with the government bodies – he had twice unsuccessfully asked for the Catfield Fen issue to be called in for decision by the Secretary of State.

An EA spokesman said the matter is with Defra, which would be responding to the environment commissioner in due course.

**CONTRACT SHEARING**  
A young, fast and tidy team  
Covering Norfolk & Suffolk  
Small and Large Flocks  
Book Now on 07774 015523

**LG SURFACING**  
Established for over 50 years

Resurfacing with Hot Bitumen and Peashingle or Granite, and Tarmac  
12 Month Guarantee

t: 01953 458019  
m: 07884 040100  
e: grayroad@btinternet.com

**NICHOLSONS**  
Stalham Engineering Co. Ltd  
The Green, Stalham, Norwich NR12 9QG  
www.stalhameng.co.uk