

BW cuts threaten canals

Maintenance and little-used waterways in peril

Waterway supporters are squaring up to fight for the future of the canal system – under threat from swingeing Government grant cuts. Another 2.5% cut in British Waterways' grant is threatened, in addition to the 5% and 7.5% cuts already announced this year (September WW).

The cuts have been forced by the Treasury, which is unwilling to compensate the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs for heavy losses and fines incurred by its farm payments branch. Consequently, BW, the Environment Agency, and other DEFRA-sponsored bodies are having to suffer the shortfall. Though the cuts are savage, it is rumoured that the Government considered slashing BW's grant even further.

A 30%-plus increase in licence fees is one of the likely outcomes. Others include cutbacks in maintenance work, BW redundancies, or even canal closures.

The Inland Waterways Association says that it is preparing to join battle. In his speech to open the National Waterways Festival at Beale Park (page 61), John Fletcher declared: "I became IWA chairman when the waterways were enjoying their own 'never had it so good' years. Now they face threats, the like of which we have not seen for decades. I remind David Miliband and Gordon Brown of how articulate the waterway movement has been for the past 60 years – and suggest they should be very afraid."

British Waterways' marketing director, Simon Salem, said "very hard decisions" lay ahead. The £8m–£9m cut this year, he said, could deepen even further in future years. "We are determined not to go back to the old build-up of arrears – neither do we want to reduce our customer service. But it's pretty likely there'll have to be a licence increase, perhaps in 2008." He could not rule out canal closures.



Could assisted passage on canals like the Rochdale be under threat?

WHERE WILL THE AXE FALL?

❖ Less maintenance

BW has already cut its major works programme by £5m. Stoppages this winter are likely to be called off. The programme to eliminate 'statutory arrears' is currently set for completion in 2012, but this date could slip further. **Odds: 100%**

❖ Licence fee rises

The Environment Agency has announced swingeing rises. BW is likely to follow. **Odds: 90%**

❖ Reduced manning

Winter hours on the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal and River Severn have already been cut (see page 47). Other manned waterways and structures, like the Weaver locks and Standedge Tunnel, could follow. **Odds: 80%**

❖ Property sales

BW has quietly been selling 'non-operational' property, such as canal-side cottages, for some time. The financial need is now greater than ever. **Odds: 75%**

❖ Redundancies

BW staff have barely recovered from the last reorganisation – many are now anxious for their jobs. **Odds: 70%**

❖ Restoration cuts

Though BW has already retreated from the optimism of *Unlocked and Unlimited*, abandoning the Cotswold or Droitwich projects would cause uproar. Other restorations are very unlikely to gain financial support. **Odds: 66%**

❖ Mooring price rises

As a 'stealth tax', bankside mooring price rises could be

smuggled in more easily, pleasing private sector marina owners. But this could encourage abuse of 14-day moorings. **Odds: 60%**

❖ Postpone capital works

Short-term building projects, like the new Apsley head office, could be postponed to gain a financial reprieve. **Odds: 50%**

❖ Business sell-offs

BW could gain a one-off windfall by selling partial stakes in its 'venture' businesses – for example, a coastal marina group could purchase a 50% stake in BW Marinas. But BW management is unlikely to want to mortgage future income. **Odds: 40%**

❖ Canal closures

Recently reopened waterways, like the Rochdale and Huddersfield Narrow, and little-used canals, like the Wyrley & Essington, do not pay their way; but abandonment would be a PR disaster, outraging enthusiasts and pressure groups. 'Closure by stealth' is more likely – indefinite stoppages on less well-used parts of the network. **Odds: 30%**

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Lobby your MP, Waterways Minister Barry Gardiner, and DEFRA secretary David Miliband – use www.writetothem.com if you have Internet access. Remember to emphasise that cuts won't just hit boaters – but all who use and enjoy the waterways. Consider writing to your local paper, and join a campaigning user group if you're not already a member.

WaterWatch

Restrictions in place

Whilst still remaining confident that reservoir levels would last for the rest of the boating 'season', to conserve resources, British Waterways imposed overnight restrictions on some canals during July and August. Somewhat unusually, rainfall was particularly low in northern parts of England, where less than 60% of the long term average was

received. This caused some restrictions on the Rochdale and Leeds & Liverpool canals.

"Despite reservoir levels falling since spring, the vast majority of the network remained unaffected," said BW's External Relations Manager Eugene Baston. "This is testament to the maintenance investments we have made over the last few

years, but last year's exceptionally dry summer and winter, and this year's dry summer have taken their toll.

"However, if the drought continues into September, then we are particularly concerned about the Leeds & Liverpool Canal, where reservoir holdings will drop below acceptable levels. Whilst restrictions help to manage water, some have also been put in place to assist a number of environmental problems associated with low water levels, and to protect wildlife."

It was announced in late August that, until further notice, the Grand Union Canal's Marsworth Flight (locks 39–45) would be closed to navigation from 6pm to 9am daily. The restrictions were imposed to conserve water following problems with naturally occurring blue-green algae, which prevented water being pumped from Marsworth, Tringford and Startups End reservoirs.

Up to date details of restrictions can be found by visiting www.waterscape.com, or by contacting BW Customer Services on 01923 201120.