

Old ways must change to stop flooding

Monday December 11 2023, 2.00am, The Times



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Weather

The floods on the Angus South Esk devastated people's homes in Brechin and did so much damage to crops and farm livelihoods upstream. Conventional engineering approaches founded on concrete walls are not working there or in many other parts of Scotland.

Màiri McAllan, the cabinet secretary for net zero, aided by her officials and experienced experts at the Sniffer consultancy, is to be congratulated on her leadership of the review of the Flood Resilience Strategy. The fears and worries of communities suffering flooding on a regular basis are now being heard. The old way of “engineers rule” will no longer do. A new paradigm is being called for: collaboration with communities and catchment management.

The word “resilience” is critical. It is no longer about protection, but about building the resilience of communities to deal with these flood emergencies at a time when climate change is increasing the risks, and biodiversity is being lost. But why are some councils not listening? They are out of their depth when dealing with engineering companies whose

schemes are not independently scrutinised. And they see 80 per cent of the costs coming from central government as cash cows; a seriously outmoded approach to local accountability.

What's to be done? Farmers can help protect their land and their crops and reduce flooding downstream if they are given specific assistance under the Agriculture and Rural Communities Bill currently before the Scottish parliament. In eastern Scotland, where farms are dependent on vegetable produce, judicious [breaching of flood barriers](#) and the digging of water-retention ponds would have the double benefit of flood reduction and water storage for drought periods. It's what we call providing ecosystem services and farmers should be paid for their positive stewardship.

This bill can also provide the opportunity for a radical revision of the forestry grant scheme by stimulating tree planting of native species in the upper catchments to capture water, slow its flow into streams and rivers, lock up carbon and improve biodiversity. For some reason, the approach to land-use change through Regional Land Use Strategies has been buried. But it is an ideal way of reviewing how changes in land use in river catchments can ameliorate flood risk, improve biodiversity and amenity and provide better livelihoods. Government, please reactivate this through the agriculture bill.

Independent scrutiny of all flood schemes is essential otherwise private companies are marking their own homework for whose benefit? The release of documents to the public to allow proper scrutiny and to cast aside the secrecy of the so-called engineering experts is also needed. In the meantime, flood protection schemes in towns where flooding is a distant memory, such as Musselburgh, should be stopped in their tracks and the new approaches being developed in the Flood Resilience Strategy applied to them. Changes in policy and practice will improve Scotland's ability to achieve multiple gains from use of public money. The perfect storm of flooding can be turned round.

Professor Roger Crofts was the founding director of Scottish Natural Heritage, since renamed NatureScot