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SO YOU THINK THEY'VE ASSESSED THE FLOOD RISK!

A few months ago, the world's press camped out on Abingdon Bridge for two days, waiting for the Thames to overflow its banks and flood houses in the town. That time, the press didn't get their story and people living on the Thames flood plain escaped disaster by a whisker. Next time they may not be so lucky! On the Ock flood plain, and in other parts of the country, disaster struck and people found their homes under feet of water. Such floods are predicted to become more frequent and severe as global warming increases so it is imperative that flood risk assessment is as efficient and unbiased a process as we can make it. So, is it?

Investigations into RWE npower's proposal to turn Thrupp Lake at Radley into an impermeable ash tip for Didcot Power Station identified a number of serious inadequacies in the flood risk assessment process. These inadequacies will be replicated anywhere in the country where big companies seek to increase profits by developing on flood plains.

1. The first problem is that flood risk assessments are not independent! They are carried out not, as you might think, by the Environment Agency (EA) but by contractors, appointed by the developer, who may well also be contracted to carry out the development itself. The EA's role in this is purely one of oversight and approval.

2. Secondly, there is no requirement for the developer to include the effect of 'temporary structures' in the flood plain in their risk assessment, however massive and long lasting they may be. For instance, next to the Thames, just upstream of Abingdon, is a massive, 40 acre, clay-lined waste tip filled with Power Station ash - the result of RWE npower filling Lakes H and I at Radley. This structure projects above and below the flood plain and obstructs the flow of both surface and ground water, just the sort of development everyone agrees increases flood risk! However, as far as flood risk assessment is concerned, this massive clay structure is not there, it doesn't exist, and no attempt was made to incorporate its effect into flood risk predictions either before it was created, or after the 2003 or 2007 floods! The EA will class this as a 'temporary structure' until it is eventually 'reprofiled' years hence, if ever! Meanwhile it forms a massive obstruction in the flood plain that has been totally ignored in the estimation of the flood risk of filling Thrupp Lake!.

3. Thirdly, developers can manipulate flood forecasting models for their own ends. Flood modelling is a very inexact science, models are constructed and tested using data from actual flood events. Poor data collection will produce a poor model that does not give accurate forecasts. In the area between Radley and Abingdon there seems to have been little attention to collecting good data and, not surprisingly, for both the 1947 and 2003 floods, npower's flood model seriously underestimated the actual flood levels reached.

Flood models usually depend on lots of adjustable parameters (such as the gradient and profile of the river bed). Here again, poor data collection gives the developer plenty of chance to tweak the model to obtain the results from it that they need. The EA often has little grounds to object to the possibly biased assessment - the onus is put on them to prove that there is unacceptable risk, which, given high accepted levels of uncertainty in the modelling,

would generally be very difficult. So, when dealing with powerful corporations they don't waste their time objecting and risking the trouble it could cause them!

Save Radley Lakes Chairman, Dr Basil Crowley, said, 'The whole procedure for assessing flood risk is flawed, unscientific and not independent. Big corporations, like npower, are able to reap the benefits of this flawed process, whilst ordinary people whose homes are flooded and lives disrupted bear the cost! Decisions about flood plain development, including the filling of Thrupp Lake, are based on over-simplified flood models and a flawed system of flood risk assessment which lacks proper independence and which can be 'interpreted' by developers to suit their own ends. People should therefore not be too surprised to find, from time to time, floodwaters lapping unannounced at their doorways'.

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