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Free-range egg farms choking life out of the Wye

Demand for more ethical eggs has led to a farming boom in the Wye Valley — and toxic run-off that is filling the river with algae

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Environment



Patrick Darling said the River Wye is being damaged by run-off from farms that produce brands including Happy Eggs

Rising in the uplands of mid-Wales and flowing across unspoilt landscape, the Wye is one of the country's best-loved rivers. Its waters are being sullied, however, by the rise of the free-range egg.

The Wye Valley is a centre for the poultry industry. Modern, multitiered units with as many as 64,000 hens on one farm are dotted near the banks of the river and its tributaries in Powys and Herefordshire. These farms produce tens of millions of free-range eggs a year — including Britain's most popular brand, the Happy Egg Company — and thousands of tons of manure. Pollutants that wash off farmland are blamed for contaminating the Wye with phosphates, fuelling blooms of thick algae that can suffocate a river.

Simon Evans, chief executive of the Wye and Usk Foundation, said: "It's a beautiful river but its ecology is being destroyed. Planners are apparently unwilling to use the existing laws to protect the river from the nation's desire to eat more eggs."

Britons eat 13 billion eggs a year, nearly 200 per person. Demand soared during lockdown, with sales at Waitrose up 50% in late April. Nearly 70% of eggs sold in shops are free-range, as supermarkets move away from selling eggs from caged hens. Rural experts warn of a devastating impact on the 134-mile Wye.

Patrick Darling, 62, a salmon angler who owns a 700-acre estate near Ross-on-Wye, said he was shocked this month at the state of the river after a dry spell. Its once abundant water-crowfoot, a member of the buttercup family, had been replaced by thick green algae including blanket weed, which blocks the light and can grow more than two yards in a day.

He said: "The river was as low as I've seen it in 20 years and it was like a pea-green soup. It's like a river dying. These problems started about 10 years ago and one of the main things that has changed is the intensification of free-range chicken farming."

Campaigners have counted about 500 applications for broiler units, which produce chicken to eat, and free-range egg units in the border counties of Powys, Herefordshire and Shropshire since 2000, enough to house 46 million birds. The broilers vastly outnumber the egg-laying hens but are mostly confined in hangar-style sheds, while the hens wander freely, dropping manure. Photographs taken on farmers' land by the Wye and Usk Foundation show manure effluent pouring into streams in the Wye catchment area. The hens lay an average of about 320 eggs over 17 months before being slaughtered.

Dr Christine Hugh-Jones, who lives in Presteigne, Powys, and is a member of the Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales (CPRW), said: "Planning has been a pushover and there is this vast amount of manure that washes into the rivers.

"This is not a chicken in a backyard. The density on the ranges can be 2,000 per hectare and it's causing an environmental disaster."

The Wye is famous for the Atlantic salmon that spawn in its tributaries and the Wye Salmon Association is among the organisations calling for urgent action.

From July 2015 to June 2018 there were 116 applications for poultry units in Powys, including 83 for free-range eggs. The CPRW says just two were refused.

Marc Willimont, an assistant director at Herefordshire county council, said Natural England was refusing to sign off new building in the upper half of Herefordshire to curb river pollution. "No such restriction seems to exist across the border in Wales," he added.

Powys county council said: "The council is fully aware of its statutory duty to conserve and enhance biodiversity." Ann Weedy, mid-Wales operations manager for Natural Resources Wales, said improved sewage works were helping to reduce phosphate levels and it was working with farmers to minimise run-off.

The British Free Range Egg Producers Association said only 10% of manure was deposited outside the chicken sheds of free-range units and it was used as a fertiliser. The National Farmers' Union said the Wye's water quality was affected by a range of factors, including record low flows this year, and it was disappointed at an "agenda" targeting free-range hens.

Noble Foods, the owner of Happy Egg, said it was working with other businesses and the Wye and Usk Foundation to understand and mitigate the environmental impact of its operations.

Ian Pick, an adviser on free-range chicken farm applications in Powys, said a farm with 32,000 free-range chickens would produce more than 800 tons of manure a year. He said: "It is the biggest issue I now have for a new poultry development in Wales. What are we going to do with the manure?"