

Grass cutting to reduce flood risk

What you might see

You may see our Environment Agency teams, or contractors on our behalf, out and about cutting grass on the thousands of kilometres of Main River and reservoir banks that serve as flood defences. These banks are man-made and help reduce the risk of flooding to people and property.

Embankments need regular maintenance. The Environment Agency bids for public funding every year to carry out this maintenance and we use our permissive powers to deliver the works. Other ordinary watercourses are still important to local flood risk, but are likely owned by the landowner who will be responsible for maintenance and conveyance.



An example of the machinery we use to cut grass

What we are doing and why

Grass cutting will be carried out either with driven machinery, by hand or by remote controlled mowers, where slopes are steep or unsuitable for larger machines. It is essential that flood defence embankments are kept in good condition, so they are mown regularly throughout the grass growing season.

Research has shown that the regular close mowing (5-10cm) of grass improves the strength of the root network and erosion resistance. Grass helps protect the earth embankment underneath from external erosion caused by rainfall, wind, currents, wave action, human and animal movement, and traffic. Regular cutting also prevents broad leaved plants and woody vegetation from getting established. This vegetation could damage the embankment by root penetration, overturning, encouraging burrowing animals, discouraging adequate grass growth and concentrating flows, which then cause scour.

Shorter vegetation helps our asset inspectors monitor our defences, which we do regularly, to identify any signs of damage.





How we are supporting wildlife and the environment

We are working to create a better place in everything we do. We have a team of biodiversity experts who advise and help us adapt our maintenance work to support biodiversity where possible. We will only cut grass where it is necessary to reduce flood risk; areas next to embankments that are not needed for other purposes are left to grow, allowing for most plants to flower, providing cover and food sources for pollinators and other animals, including water voles.

Some of our grass cutting and maintenance does need to be carried out during nesting bird season. Nesting birds are legally protected, and so we apply stringent environmental checks before any work is carried out. This includes working with our internal biodiversity experts and carrying out walkovers before cutting begins, ensuring nests are not damaged.



On embankments where we only mow the top of the slopes, by mowing during the time when plant growth is vigorous, it encourages nesting birds to make their nests lower down the embankment slopes in the longer vegetation, away from machinery. If the grass is long, the machine operator will walk over the site before mowing, to try and identify any nesting birds or other habitat or hazards. Our staff are diligent and will stop work if they see something of interest, to get further advice.

If a nesting bird is found, our machine operators will leave a 10 metre perimeter on either side of the nesting area, so as not to disturb the nest.

For more information or to contact us

Call: 03708 506 506

Email: EMDenquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk

Incident hotline: 0800 80 70 60

Please use this number, which is open 24 hours a day, to report incidents such as flooding, blockages, unusual flow of water, damaged flood defences or pollution.

To find out more about our maintenance activities, please visit consult.environment-agency.gov.uk/east-midlands/flood-risk-management or scan the QR code.

