

**We started this year's ADA Flood & Water Conference in London by remembering all of those who sadly lost their lives during the catastrophic floods in Spain this October. It had only been a few weeks prior that I had met with representatives from a number of Spain's irrigation communities who were visiting the UK with their national federation (Fenacore), which is the equivalent of ADA. Several on that trip, including their President, Juan Valero de Palma, are from the Valencia region that was so badly affected. Our thoughts remain with them as they work to recover and rebuild.**

We concluded the Conference with a wide-ranging discussion session putting questions from the audience to a panel of speakers and representatives from Defra, the Environment Agency, and ADA. The final question was from an engineering student, whose question epitomised the challenge: "How would we manage if we had suffered the same rainfall as Valencia?" i.e. a year's rainfall in one day! I think we all know the answer in our hearts is that only the most robust of our current river, drainage, and flood management assets and systems could withstand anything near this intensity of rainfall. Yet it is such extremes that will sadly become all the more common in the future and we need to prepare using the best available science.

At the same time, many of the questions, comments, and discussions at the Conference were around the need to fix the basics of our flood and water management systems. I took that line of questioning to mean that we must get ALL our main rivers assets into a good condition. Not only those within our high consequence rivers and watercourses, but also those with medium and low consequence systems too, with consistent targets.

That will not be achieved by the Environment Agency on its own. Partnership

working is and will be vital, and so I was pleased that all of our speakers highlighted the need to work together towards this goal.

The Minister's announcements that £50 million has now been released for investment in the renewal and improvement of IDB assets and systems, and that there will be a review of the funding formula for FCERM capital schemes is most welcome and timely. I am grateful that Defra colleagues and the Minister have heard the case that ADA has been making in these areas, especially around the timing of funding to ensure it has the best chance of being spent to achieve the best value for money.

Nonetheless, we do await the outcome of the next Spending Review, set to conclude in late Spring 2025, which will set Government spending plans for a minimum of three years. We need to see if there is serious ambition to reverse the decline in asset condition that we have seen over the last 15 years. ADA is ready and willing to work with Defra and our flood risk partners to turn this around. Likewise, Government will need to lead and demonstrate determination for change via the Flood Resilience Taskforce and Treasury Spending Review.

At the end of the Conference, I announced that ADA is starting the process of appointing a new Deputy Chair to our Board of Directors. The intention is for that person to succeed me as Chair of ADA in 2026 at the AGM. We are looking for as wide a range of applicants as possible, and with that in mind, membership of current ADA committees or IDB boards is not a prerequisite.

In the wings of the Conference, I was also delighted to have signed the Memorandum of Understanding between ADA and the Association of SUDS Authorities (ASA), alongside ASA's acting Chair, Glen Westmore. ADA is definitely moving to an exciting new



phase and it is a great time to get involved and help lead the organisation forward. Details on how and when to apply are in this edition of the Gazette and will be published widely, so if you or anyone you know might be interested, please do get in touch for more information on the role.

**ROBERT CAUDWELL**  
Chairman



Left to right: Robert Caudwell (ADA), William Harrington (Defra), Jim Hall (ICE), and Rachel Hallos (NFU) answer members' questions at the ADA Flood & Water Conference 2024 (Ryan Dixon)

# Minister Hardy gives go ahead for IDB fund

INNES THOMSON



(Ryan Dixon)

**Defra Minister for Water & Flooding, Emma Hardy, used her speech to the ADA Flood & Water Conference in London on 13 November to confirm the Government's intention to support the second tranche of the IDB Storm Recovery & Asset Improvement Fund. With a value of £50 million spread over this and the next financial year, the funding will be carefully used by internal drainage boards who have already identified a wide range of asset modernisation projects, supporting the resilience of England's lowland farmers and rural communities from flood risk and climate change impacts.**

Minister Hardy confirmed that the Environment Agency will administer the fund with support from ADA and Defra. £31 million will be allocated to approximately 80 to 90 projects by 31 March 2025. The remaining £19 million will be allocated following a new application window to be opened by the Environment Agency, later this year, for project delivery in 2025-26.

Funding allocation agreements for just over 140 projects have already been issued as part of the Tranche 1 allocation, covering over £25 million with £20 million (currently £16.8 million paid, but may be £20 million by the time the article is published) already paid out and the remainder expected to be paid on project completions between now and March 2025.

Commenting on the good news, Innes Thomson ADA's CEO said "IDBs have justly received the support which they needed to recover and improve their assets for community, environmental and economic wellbeing, and ADA

*is grateful for not only Minister Hardy's empathy and understanding of issues, but also the wider political, officer and partnership support over the last 11 months in getting to this point".*

Announcements on 13 November were wider ranging than just the funding for IDBs. Minister Hardy took the opportunity to spell out Defra's intentions for flood risk and water management covering a number of positive developments. Clearly moved by the devastating and lethal effects of the flooding in Spain, the Minister went on to announce that Government is providing £60 million through the Farming Recovery Fund with payments being made to qualifying farms imminently. £2.4 billion will also be invested over this year (2024-25) and next (2025-26) to improve flood resilience by building, maintaining, and repairing flood defences.

## Reform for Flood Defence Grant in Aid funding

ADA is very pleased that Minister Hardy announced that Defra will also be reviewing the approach for the funding formula used for funding flood defence, accepting that the current system, whilst having served its purpose, is now outdated, and she will be inviting views and suggestions for change. Michael Sly in his address to the ADA Conference very succinctly summed up one of the issues by challenging that we are "Operating with outdated funding systems and an inexplicable holding onto traditional economic theories about capital and revenue spending"

As well as the Minister announcing flood funding for the remainder of this year and next, the press statement went on to say that

the next Spending Review will inform budgets for 2026/27 and beyond, with an intention to bring in changes to the funding formula from April 2026. It remains to be seen if calls for a re-balancing of funding allocations between capital and revenue will be heeded to meet Secretary of State for Environment, Steve Reed's call for more attention to be paid to the routine management and maintenance of our flood risk assets and rivers. When not routine however, asset maintenance can, in certain circumstances, involve both capital and revenue funding.

Partnership working will continue to be a key aspect of delivering Defra's goals and Minister Hardy recognised the vital role that IDBs play in being a part of the water management and flood risk family.

The reality of the budget announcements for Defra, which appear to hold the line, do not make mention of stubborn inflationary erosion which in real terms may see a reduction in what can be done with the money available. There is even more reason for the flood risk management sector to seriously examine its efficiency, drive for much more delivery on the ground with less process and reporting on how to do that, and perhaps it is time too for a fundamental overhaul of how we finance flood risk. A recent fact-finding visit to the Dutch Water Bank (NWB) in The Hague by members of the Fens 2100+ team, including ADA, was both illuminating and encouraging.

Basically we need banking and financial expertise to take a closer look and get much more involved in what we do – and we need changes in thinking at HM Treasury.

# ADA Flood & Water Conference 2024

INNES THOMSON



**A** capacity audience of 240 delegates from flood risk and water management authorities were welcomed by ADA and our sponsors Wilkin Chapman LLC and Balfour Beatty to our Conference on Wednesday 13 November. The fabulous event, once again held in the heart of Westminster, served to facilitate discussion on the key policy issues for flood and water level management in the UK. We were also delighted to host even more displays this year from 26 Associate members over lunch and networking in the Great Hall.

There was a warm welcome for our keynote speaker, Emma Hardy MP, who returned again this year in her new role as the Government's Minister for Water & Flooding at Defra. The highlights of Minister Hardy's positive and well received speech can be found in detail on page 5.

Having become the Institution of Civil Engineers' 160<sup>th</sup> President only a week before, **Professor Jim Hall**, asked three important questions of the Conference audience. They were questions that not only apply to our immediate interests in flood and water management, but to the country and the globe.

1. What do we want from our infrastructure systems?
2. What are the challenges that are preventing us from getting what we want?
3. How can we create the infrastructure systems that we need for a sustainable future?

Jim was positive that engineering expertise linked to science, and a deep understanding of the environment in which we are working,

will produce the sustainable solutions to those challenges. He believed that engineers have the tools to navigate this uncertain future where they can work in partnership with others. He highlighted how we are now able to accurately model and predict flows and water levels, understand sediment transport and water quality throughout catchments in a wide range of climate conditions. Utilising this information, he said, is key to how we monitor and control modern asset management systems.

Professor Hall finished by saying that expertise needs to be mobilised alongside scientists who can understand and predict additional criteria such as soil conditions, agricultural productivity, aquatic ecology and greenhouse gas emissions. He concluded that: "...central to that conversation should be farmers

*who know their land better than anyone alongside all of the other people and communities who love lowland places and care about their future."*

**Rachel Hallos**, Vice President and water portfolio officeholder for the NFU, presented a strong and passionate speech emphasising the importance of collaboration and partnerships to finding solutions to the UK's water challenges. Farmers, she argued, must be central partners in developing solutions, highlighting that 58% of the UK's most productive, grade 1 arable land lies within floodplains.

Rachel called for change in the way we do things, and for the Government to seize the initiative and show leadership. She advocated the need to cover all aspects of water level and flood risk management stating "we cannot continue to talk about the silos of flooding, water



Professor Jim Hall



Rachel Hallos



(Laura Lamb)



(Laura Lamb)



(Laura Lamb)

quality or abstraction" and went on to reinforce the point by saying that "we cannot keep working separately on separate issues".

Rachel pointed to the work of the Rural Flood Resilience Partnership, stronger relationships and jointly developing solutions to strengthen flood resilience for farms, rural businesses and homes.

An integrated water management strategy, Rachel argued, should be developed to give farmers a central role in improving water quality and managing both floods and droughts. Rachel called for clear government leadership in developing this strategy, stressing the need for longer-term investment, better maintenance of water infrastructure and strong engagement with stakeholders.

"The importance of collaboration and leveraging local knowledge to provide tailored, practical solutions cannot be overlooked," she added.

Rachel called for those involved in managing water to be more ambitious than our current short, cyclical funding systems allow, and emphasised concerns about persistent under-funding for the basic maintenance of England and Wales's flood risk assets. She emphasised that local delivery could be more efficient and enable capital schemes to be better tailored to the local area, encouraging local organisations to invest.

She finished on a personal reflection about getting farmers involved, and pointing towards IDBs giving more strategic thought to issues by joining forces, consolidating their skills and resources, and strengthening their financial resilience, to allow them to deliver

more locally.

**Julie Foley OBE**, Director of FCERM Strategy & National Adaptation at the Environment Agency focused her in-depth presentation on the flooding challenge posed by our changing climate. Referring to the devastating flood in Valencia and elsewhere in Spain, Julie reflected that it served as "a real reminder...of the reality of a changing climate being one that we are facing here today".

Julie provided delegates with a number of worrying statistics, demonstrating the trend towards a more volatile climate, with many records being recently broken. Julie pointed out the considerable investment that has been made in England's flood defences and the need to sustain that into the future. She expressed concern that a recent survey of households had revealed that almost half of those at risk of flooding believed it would not happen to them, showing that engagement was still needed to change attitudes.

Julie added to previous speakers' comments by highlighting the importance of partnership in dealing with those challenges, emphasising the work of the EA, NFU, ADA, NE, ACRE and CLA in developing and launching the Rural Flood Resilience Partnership. Integrated approaches and more consideration of resilience, would, she said, be crucial for society to avoid inappropriate development in the floodplain, deliver better flood warnings and incident response for communities, and deliver effective nature-based solutions.

And she finished by mentioning that a refresh of the National FCERM Strategy in

the coming 12 to 18 months, would need to recognise "the balance of expenditure between new flood defenses, ... versus maintaining existing flood defenses"

The final speaker for the day was **Michael Sly MBE**, Chair of North Level District IDB, who gave his perspective on the past, present, and future of internal drainage boards. Whilst saying that we cannot change history, Michael asked us all to reflect on the fact that past human endeavour and hardship "has only galvanised the resolve to find solutions and rebuild, forging a sense of mutual dependency our communities still rely on today."

Michael went on to say that many of the structures and pumps on which we rely are aging and were built for a different time, often without the resilience needed for the future. He was unequivocal that climate change is the elephant in the room and that outdated funding systems and a somewhat artificial division between revenue and capital funding was holding the sector back, sentiments that echo those of many ADA members.

Michael was clear that IDBs must take charge of their own destinies and, facing declining numbers of people wanting or able to get involved, he commented that "It is really welcoming to see the conversations going on within other IDBs about amalgamation and improved governance. It will serve IDBs in good stead for the future".

Michael challenged that there is a risk that the nation disengages with what water level and flood risk managers do, calling upon Government to rejuvenate and inject purpose and leadership back into the sector. He said it was important that Government urgently looked at Defra's purpose, given how our work is a critical foundation stone of the nation's social, economic, and environmental wellbeing. Michael finished by praising the collaboration between local partners in his area and rallying a call for much more of that.

In addition to our five speakers' thought provoking presentations, the audience played an active part in two question & answer sessions that generated lively debate at the Conference, understandably dominated by the subjects of funding and maintenance. A full precis of all the questions raised and answers provided will be available from [www.ada.org.uk/ada-conference](http://www.ada.org.uk/ada-conference).



Julie Foley OBE



Michael Sly MBE