

Fee hike will be resisted say inland waters boat owners

Boat owners using the rivers Great Ouse and Cam are furious at changes to the licensing system, which could mean an increase in licence fees of up to 23 per cent and fragmentation of a waterway. The Environment Agency had already announced that licence fee increases for the next three years would be limited to just two per cent plus CPI or 6.4 per cent for 2012. Owners are angry that the Environment Agency made no announcement or consulted on the new fee hikes due to start on 1st April this year. At present, an Environment Agency Anglian region licence permits access to all navigable parts of the system, including the river Cam up to the centre of Cambridge.

However, at a meeting of the Cam Conservators on 12th January 2012 it was announced that from 1st April 2012, in order to navigate on Cam Conservancy waters, Environment Agency licence-holders would have to purchase, from the EA, an "EA/Conservancy" licence costing 110 per cent of a standard EA licence. Alternatively, EA licence-holders deciding to navigate the Cam later in the year could purchase an additional annual visitor licence at 15 per cent of their EA licence fee (or pay a penalty charge of 25 per cent of the fee if found without the licence).

A Cam-only licence will no longer be available and all river Cam based boaters will be obliged to purchase the "Conservancy/EA" licence at 110 per cent of the EA fee, which will now be issued and administered by the Cam Conservancy and not as in the past by the EA. The present Cam-only licence costs 95 per cent of the EA licence so the increase to 110 per cent represents an increase of over 17 per cent in addition to an already announced 'inflation-linked' rise of 6.4 per cent. The total increase is 23.2 per cent.

GOBA is now aware that in September 2011 the Environment Agency gave the Cam Conservators the required six-months' notice to end the existing Interchange Agreement under which a small proportion of the EA licence fee was passed to the Conservators. However, as yet, there has been no announcement from the Environment Agency and no consultation whatsoever with user representatives. In effect, these massive increases in charges and significant alteration to existing licensing procedures, due to start in just two-months' time, have been announced by a third-party. It appears that up to half of the additional revenue raised will remain with the Environment Agency and there will inevitably be increased administration costs.

GOBA claims the effect of these measures will lead to fragmentation of an existing contiguous public right of navigation; reduce by around six per cent the length of cruising waterway previously available without extra charge to EA licence-holders; add a massive 23.2 per cent to Cam-user fees; increase hire boat fees, and seriously damage boatyard trade. Bob Wells, Chairman of GOBA said: "We are concerned that at a difficult time, when everyone is being forced to tighten their belts, boaters could now be faced with unprecedented licence fee increases. It is a great pity that navigation of the river Cam may no longer be an option for many. The effects on the hire-boat and tourist industry and river based businesses could be disastrous. The proposals have not been thought through properly and the Environment Agency has conducted no consultation with its customers. GOBA will strongly oppose these unfair and ill-conceived proposals which will fragment a waterway and drive boaters away."

