

TRAP and the Newtown Farm, Newent Polytunnel Scheme. July 2004.

Summary

Tewkesbury Road Action on Polytunnels (TRAP) was one of Britain's first local residents' groups to campaign against polytunnels. The Forest of Dean District Council (FoD), the local planning authority's decision to insist on proper planning procedures for large-scale polytunnel schemes established an early and important legal precedent.

TRAP raised objections on the following issues:

1. Noise
2. Visual intrusion and loss of landscape quality
3. Loss of wildlife and bio-diversity
4. Effect on watercourses and drainage schemes
5. Loss of tourism income
6. Health and safety
7. Loss of privacy
8. Agricultural sustainability
9. Increase in traffic
10. Little local employment prospects or local economic regeneration
11. Definitions of 'temporary' and 'rotation' with respect to polytunnels
12. Existing legal planning precedents for large-scale polytunnel schemes

In addition to these twelve issues, others have been added over time to a growing list of objections. These are:

1. Glare from plastic covers
2. Ingestion of plastic by ruminant animals
3. Reduction of property values
4. Food politics and the supermarket domination of food production
5. Pesticide residues and soil sterilization
6. The long-term impact on soil quality and structure within tunnels
7. The use of peat as a growing medium within the tunnels

Further legal challenges, planning policies and statutory instruments will make future large-scale polytunnel food production systems more problematical. These are some of the current issues:

1. Herefordshire County Council's decision in May 2004 to deny planning permission for fruit pickers' accommodation at Brierley.
2. Waverley Borough Council's decision in July 2004 to serve an enforcement order for the removal of mobile homes, windbreaks and polytunnels erected without planning permission at Tuesley Farm near Godalming.
3. EU CAP reforms which prioritize soil and environmental health.
4. DEFRA's Soil Action Plan for 2004-2006
5. National requirement from July 2004 for LPAs to carry out strategic environmental assessments (SEAs) for major developments.
6. County Council Bio-diversity Action Plans (BAPs)

During 2004, high-profile national media coverage increased public awareness of the polytunnel/ environmental/food production debate.

Historical context

In autumn, 2002, 4 hectares of raspberries at Newtown Farm, Newent were 'polytunneled' by the Ledbury agribusinessman, Mr Angus Davison. Historically, the farm has grown cereals, potatoes and sugar-beet on the majority of its fields, and residents expected this small area to be the total extent of the tunnels. In October, 2002, strong gales wrapped nearby houses in plastic, bringing down telephone and electricity cables. Forest of Dean officers were alerted. After an unsuccessful legal challenge, Mr. Davison finally submitted a planning application to the Forest of Dean District Council for a proposed 64 hectare (160 acre) polytunnel scheme. FoD officers are to be congratulated on their progressive and robust legal interpretation which stipulated planning permission for the tunnels in the first place.

Residents around Newtown Farm formed TRAP to co-ordinate their local campaign. Its lobbying and campaigning activities moved the planning application from a programmed delegated decision to a full development control committee decision. TRAP was supported by Newent Town Council and Newent Civic Society. FoD received 44 individual letters of objection, and a petition from 80 residents adjacent to the development.

In April 2003, and 6 months after plans were first submitted, the scheme was given a conditional go-ahead:

- a) Permission was granted for a trial 3 year period to April 2006 to assess the impact of the scheme.
- b) Permission to erect tunnels was denied in certain fields deemed sensitive wildlife areas. (N.B. These fields were neither SSSIs nor AONBs).
- c) Tunnels were not to be erected within 50 m of residential boundaries.
- d) Other conditions were imposed concerning drainage, floodplains and hedgerows.

In June 2003, Mr. Davison applied to FoD to vary condition c) above, in line with neighbouring Herefordshire's *Voluntary Code of Practice*, i.e. 'polytunnels no nearer than 30m from property elevations'. Again, TRAP campaigned vigorously. In November, 2003 the application was voted out unanimously by a full development control committee. In addition, the development committee gave Mr. Davison a maximum of two years to remove other polytunnels erected without planning permission from within 50m of property boundaries.

Current Position

The consequences of those issues raised by TRAP in its objections are now manifest:

- There are major increases in noise levels and duration over a wide area of the site and from a range of sources: spraying machines, drilling augers, pickers, etc.
- The visual scars of almost 200 acres of plastic in a previously traditional rural landscape are difficult or impossible for local residents to accommodate.
- The loss of wildlife from the area appears serious.

- In the unusually dry winter of 2003/4, water run-off has been a major concern.
- The scheme attracts unfavourable comment from residents and visitors.
- There is evidence of poor and dangerous driving by the foreign labour force.
- Road traffic has increased considerably with attendant increase in accidents and near misses.
- Anecdotal evidence points to an increase in symptoms of respiratory problems among residents, possibly due to increased pesticide applications.
- On March 20, 2004, strong winds again blew most of the polythene covers and fleece protection off the frames and into the lanes.

Voluntary codes of practice as in Herefordshire are inappropriate tools for responsible planning and democratic decision-making and give no legitimacy to residents' concerns.

Formal planning procedures:

- Allow growers and objectors to engage with the planning process, and to argue their cases in a democratic environment.
- Allow objectors to be instrumental in modifying or overturning planning applications.
- Give objectors confidence that their objections can be presented without intimidation.
- Allow local planning authorities to study planning applications in detail.
- Ensure that local planning authorities judge planning applications in the light of legal precedent and case law.
- Give legitimacy to sensitive and responsible growers

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