

9 September 2013 Last updated at 10:18 ET

Tees Estuary bird reserve scheme delayed over contaminants

A £3.8m scheme to build a new bird reserve on Teesside has been delayed by contaminants in nearby land.

The Saltern Wetlands, being built on the Tees Estuary at Greatham Creek, will see 22 hectares of saltmarsh and mudflat created.

It was due to be completed this month, but high levels of chlorine were found in an old landfill tip near the site.

A spokesman for the Environment Agency said they had to ensure the area was protected before the work is completed.

Under the scheme, the existing flood embankment will be breached to allow the tide from the estuary to wash in and out of an area between new flood banks further inland.

This will eventually develop into "vital" mudflat and saltmarsh for many species of birds, the agency said.

'Sensitive location'

A high concentration of chlorine was found by scientists in soil heaps at the tip from past salt production on the site.

These "elevated" levels of chlorine would be a risk for the birds who feed at the special protection area, the agency said.

The agency said the entire tip would now have to be encased in a thick layer of clay to prevent further seepage and to protect the new habitat from contamination.

Project manager Chris Milburn said: "The tip lies in a very sensitive location in relation to the new habitat and we have a duty to ensure that the area is protected before we breach the old flood bank to allow to tide to wash in.

"We are disappointed that we will be unable to complete the work this year as planned, but we have no option in the circumstances."

It is hoped the scheme will be completed next summer.

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