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Joint Met. Office/Environment Agency project to improve rain and flood forecasting

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It has been another wet Easter and many people will remember the heavy rainfall which flooded large parts of central and eastern England over the 1998 holiday. A new project being developed by The Met. Office and the Environment Agency will strive to improve the forecasting of these heavy rain events, and the warnings issued to the emergency services and the public. The project will bring together a number of individual elements giving faster and easier access to the rainfall data on which these forecasts and warnings are based.

Weather forecasters will be able interrogate the extensive network of rain-gauges across the country in real time. This real time data will be combined with information from the UK's rainfall radar network to provide better estimates of accumulated rainfall.

New visualisation and decision aids will also be developed as part of the project. The total rainfall accumulating over whole river catchments will be available to The Met. Office forecasters and Environment Agency flood warning staff, along with daily updates of information on soil moisture conditions. This information will lead to earlier detection of saturated river catchments.

Stewart Wass, Head of Government Department Business at The Met. Office said: "This project demonstrates both organisations commitment to following through the recommendations of the Bye report. Although forecasting of intense rainfall events is difficult we are building on our infrastructure in order to make improvements that will bring better rainfall and flood forecasting. It is a practical example of the Government's policy of modernisation with two organisations working closely together to improve services for the public."

Jim Haywood, Head of the Environment Agency's National Flood Warning Centre, said: "This investment is all about getting better information to the public. Nature is unpredictable, and there will always be occasions when it simply will not be possible to issue practical advance warnings of flooding. This project will ensure, however, that weather and flood forecasters will be working from the best available data on rainfall as it happens. This will give a more accurate picture of just how wet it is, leading to better early prediction of possible flooding."

The project will largely be funded by £1.1 million from the Government's Capital Modernisation Fund, and is one of three successful bids by MoD Agencies. The scheme encourages innovative capital investment that will improve the quality and delivery of services.

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