

Tough decisions over coastline, says Benn

By David Green

STARK choices will have to be made over the defence of East Anglia's coastline and some areas might have to be surrendered to the sea, according to Environment Secretary Hilary Benn.

During a BBC radio interview Mr Benn said that while the Government had increased spending on flood defences it could prove uneconomical to protect some stretches of coast from rising sea levels.

The minister was quizzed over draft proposals put forward by Natural England, the Government's countryside and wildlife agency, for the future of the coastline. One of the options discussed was the future abandonment to the sea of about 25 square miles of land on the

Norfolk coast. "We know that sea levels are rising – you have just been talking about climate change – and if we don't deal with that the scientists tell us that sea levels are going to rise potentially a lot farther and nature is more powerful than all of us," he said.

"We're putting more money into flood and coastal defence. We had the terrible floods in the summer and I announced a couple of weeks into the job that over the next three years we're going to increase spending from £600million to £800million and we have doubled spending in the last 10 years, but we are going to need to do more.

"And there are some very difficult decisions that are going to have to be taken. The Environment Agency has got the responsibility as it's looking at the coast – looking at each bit of land, each stretch of coastline – saying 'Well, here are areas that we really, really need to



STARK CHOICES: Hilary Benn

protect and here are some other areas where, over time, it may be difficult to protect for ever from rising sea level'.

"It is very difficult for people living there; for farmers, for communities. In the end it is partly about how much money we are prepared to spend as a country, but

it is also about what nature, in the end, makes happen."

Mr Benn said flood defence policy would, in the end, reflect sea-level rise and no-one could yet accurately predict what the increase will be. "But it does make sense to start to think about what the consequences of that are and what we do to protect," he added.

Lady Young, chief executive of the Environment Agency, said she understood how worried people living on the coast must be, especially in the Broads area.

"We have committed to trying to hold the line for the next 50 years but after this there are difficult decisions to make. We have to look at all the options and, of course, extreme weather could cause over-topping of defences and flooding before then," she said.