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Big Green Gathering festival cancelled after 'political pressure'

Last-minute injunction prompts organisers to accuse police and council of 'premeditated decision to prevent gathering of radicals'



📷 The Big Green Gathering has been cancelled this year. Photograph: Nick Cunard/Rex Features

John Vidal, *environment editor*

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The following correction was added to this online article on 28 July 2009:

Police say that no injunction was served on the Big Green Gathering. Mendip council's application for an injunction was due to be heard in the high court, but because the organisers of the festival had surrendered their licence before this hearing, our article is not correct to say the police served an injunction. The article also mentions the organisers' need for a road closure order from the Highways Agency; in fact, this was a matter for the local highways authority.

Police today set up road blocks around a music festival site to keep thousands of environmental campaigners away from one of Britain's longest-running festivals.

Up to 15,000 people had begun to gather for the [Big Green Gathering](#) in the Mendip hills, Somerset, which was officially due to start on Wednesday. But [organisers were forced to cancel it on legal advice yesterday](#) after the police took out an injunction to prevent the festival going ahead.

Festival directors today accused the police of taking a politically motivated decision to shut down the festival on the grounds that it attracts environmental activists and would have raised money for [a major climate change demonstration, Climate Camp, to be held next month](#).

"It was a premeditated political decision made at least a week ago. There were going to be people from the [Climate Camp](#) here as well as [Plane Stupid](#). It could be seen by police as gathering ground of radicals," said festival chairman Brig Oubridge. [Climate Camp demonstrated in London during the G20 meeting](#) and at Kingsnorth last year, while Plane Stupid have taken direct action at Stansted and Aberdeen airports.

"What the police have done is put more and more pressure on us over all our arrangements. It was a deliberate attempt to make it impossible to go ahead. We got in exactly the same paperwork as in other years. We know the officers were under pressure to close us down. This is a step backwards to the days of Margaret Thatcher," he said.

A spokesman for Avon and Somerset police said: "The event was not cancelled by the police or Mendip district council. The organisers voluntarily surrendered their licence yesterday; therefore it was their decision to cancel, not ours. The fact that they voluntarily surrendered their licence suggests they did not feel they could satisfy the safety concerns. Police and council staff have been involved in negotiations with organisers for many weeks to try to address the concerns."

Oubridge said they had been negotiating with the police and the council until the last minute and that all concerns were being met. "We genuinely believed that things were progressing and we were continuing to spend money on infrastructure, wages and security. If they knew they were going to cancel the event, we can only conclude that this appears to be a deliberate attempt to bankrupt the Big Green Gathering."

The injunction served by the police claimed that the festival organisers had not obtained a road closure order from the Highways Agency in time. There were further concerns about security, traffic management and whether the South West Ambulance Service would provide emergency help on-site at the event.

A spokesman for the Mendip borough council's legal team, today said: "The implications of the issues raised meant that the council and police had significant concerns about the safety of the public attending the event as well as those living, working and visiting the local area."

Some observers believe the closure of the festival is part of a larger plan to crack down on all environmental protest. Many of the people expected at

the festival would have gone on to the Climate Camp, to be held in a few weeks' time. Kent police's blanket use of stop-and-search powers on thousands of activists at the Kingsnorth demonstration last year was recently found to be ["disproportionate and counterproductive", according to an official review.](#)

The Big Green Gathering spun out of the first Glastonbury festivals and has been running in its present form since 1994 without complaints about public safety or crime. It features music, debates and practical green living demonstrations.

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