

Water for Life

Water and the natural environment



The Water White Paper – *Water for Life*

[Water for Life](#) describes a vision for future water management in which the water sector is resilient, in which water companies are more efficient and customer focused, and in which water is valued as the precious and limited resource it is. And it explains that we all have a part to play in making this happen.

What will this mean for the natural environment?

The Natural Environment White Paper, [The Natural Choice](#) made clear the importance of valuing nature and the benefits it provides. Healthy rivers, lakes, groundwater, estuaries and wetlands deliver a wide range of benefits, from relatively pure water needing less treatment to be drinkable, to flood protection, recreational opportunities and thriving wildlife.

[Water for Life](#) makes clear that we must halt and reverse the damage we have done to water ecosystems. It takes forward a key

message from the Natural Environment White Paper: that we all have an interest, and therefore a role, in protecting our water bodies.

We have been damaging rivers and other water bodies in two ways. By polluting them; and by taking too much water out of them (over-abstraction).

Tackling water pollution

There has been good progress in tackling pollution over recent years, largely as a result of tackling point sources of pollution such as discharges from sewage treatment works and industrial processes.

Diffuse pollution, from a range of sources such as run-off from roads and farmland, and toxic materials people put down drains, is still a problem. Taken individually, the impact of each source would be relatively low. But taken together, their impact can be dramatic, poisoning water and damaging wildlife.

Given the diversity of the sources of pollution, neither Government regulation nor public money alone can solve the problem. Instead we need a new approach that mobilises local groups and draws on new sources of funding. Therefore [Water for Life](#) takes forward the new “catchment-based approach” to water quality and diffuse pollution launched earlier this year.

The characteristics of any river are determined by what happens within its catchment. So working on pollution across a catchment area makes good environmental sense. It also makes sense socially. Catchment-sized projects are local projects, making use of local networks, tapping into local enthusiasm, addressing local concerns.

Tackling water pollution – Our commitments

[Water for Life](#) explains how we will learn lessons from around 70 catchment scale pilot projects, and provide intensive support to 25 of

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them, before rolling out this approach across the country. To address pollution we will also:

- provide clearer guidance for farmers on the basic measures required to safeguard local water quality,
- continue to tackle pollution from other sources such as private wastewater facilities and abandoned metal mines,
- consult on a national strategy on urban diffuse pollution in 2012, and
- we will consult shortly on national standards and a new approval system for sustainable drainage.

Tackling over-abstraction

Many rivers and water bodies in England are being damaged when too much water is taken from them. The current system for managing abstraction was set up in the 1960s, and was designed to manage competing human

demands for water rather than to protect the environment.

The system's inadequacies will become more apparent as a changing climate and increasing demand place greater pressure on our water resources. Action is needed before our rivers are damaged beyond repair.

We announced in our [Natural Environment White Paper](#) our intention to reform the abstraction regime. We will work closely with abstractors and other stakeholders to deliver it. We plan to consult on proposals in 2013, and aim to introduce legislation to reform the regime early in the next Parliament, implementing the new regime fully by the mid to late 2020s.

In the meantime we will ramp up our efforts to reduce damaging abstraction now, using our existing tools better.

The Environment Agency will report its progress on implementing its [Restoring](#)

[Sustainable Abstraction](#) programme early in 2012. We will develop an action programme for addressing unsustainable abstraction up to 2027 and beyond in the second cycle of [River Basin Management Plans](#).

We will work with Ofwat and the Environment Agency to give water companies better incentives and tools to manage their abstraction sustainably.

Water for Life – the other key reforms

[Water for Life](#) also looks at reforms to the water market, helping vulnerable customers with affordability problems and ensuring our supply and drainage systems are resilient and flexible for the long term.