

Archaic abstraction system long overdue for reform

The government's revamp of water abstraction offers a golden opportunity for it to reaffirm its commitment to the environment, ensure the economic use of water and adapt to climate change

By Rose O'Neill



A river is so much more than water between two banks; it gives life to the landscape through which it winds. As well as a diversity of wildlife, our rivers and the underground aquifers give us water for food, for businesses, for power and to drink. Our aquatic environment is not only dependent on water – it is the natural capital that underpins the British economy. According to the Environment Agency (EA), if three quarters of rivers and lakes were healthy the economy would receive an £8.5bn boost through improved tourism, recreation, improved flood and drought resilience and increased quality of life.

Yet our rivers and aquifers are under threat: one in six has too little water to support a healthy ecosystem because of abstraction. And as climate change bites, all water users will have to compete for dwindling water resources.

This is why reform of abstraction systems is long overdue. Our archaic system is out of date, unsustainable and not fit for purpose. Only one in five licences offers anything by way of environmental protection. The system favours those that have held licences for the longest time – typically water companies – and often at the expense of farmers and the environment. Paper licences could allow abstraction of water that, in future, is not even there.

DEFRA's proposals for abstraction reform are based on sound principles: an explicit link between natural water variability and abstraction; trading and charges to optimise the value of water and encourage efficiency; an end to crippling compensation payments that have inhibited any adaptation, and crucially the protection of the environment.

DEFRA has spent the past five years developing proposals with abstractors and others, and with widespread support for the need for change, we urge the new secretary of state to get on and put these proposals before parliament without delay. In a new water bill for England and Wales, DEFRA should borrow

ideas from the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 to ensure reforms improve the resilience of our water resources by "maintaining and enhancing a biodiverse natural environment with healthy functioning ecosystems that support social, economic and ecological resilience and the capacity to adapt to change (for example climate change)."

A new water bill must include proposals that will ensure the environment, in every catchment, gets its fair share of water, with smart licences that reduce the amount of water available

for abstraction – and trigger demand management responses – as river levels drop. It must include proposals for every licence to include a 'hands-off flow', so that all abstraction ceases when flow drops below a certain level so that the environment is protected. This level could be based on the EA's Environmental Flow Indicator.

Reforms should introduce an effective system for adaptation that prevents damage to the environment. Under the current system, licences can take more than 20 years to change because the EA has to collect data to prove damage to the environment has actually occurred – such as rivers running dry, species becoming locally extinct or a chronic decline in river health – before changing conditions on abstraction. In a reformed system, we must instead use best available science to set environmental protections first, with the onus then on the abstractor

to demonstrate there has been no impact on the environment before increasing abstraction limits.

Abstraction reform offers huge opportunity for government to reaffirm its commitment to the environment, ensure we make the best possible economic use of water and adapt to climate change. We are keen to help make this happen and support the government to bring forward this essential reform. It must not be left until it is too late. ■

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