

Publication by the Environment Agency of Draft River Basin Management Plans

Purpose

Publication of draft River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) is a milestone in the implementation of the Water Framework Directive (WFD). This statement summarises the views of the water industry on progress to date and the complementary roles of different economic sectors.

Summary

- 1) Water companies are committed to playing a full part in implementation of the WFD by building on their success in meeting the requirements of earlier environment directives.
- 2) In contrast to the earlier directives, the WFD highlights for the first time the impact on waterbodies of different uses of the land, particularly in agriculture and aspects of urban life.
- 3) Sustainable implementation of the WFD depends on policy taking a new direction and building a process of collaboration between all relevant sectors. A lot has been achieved, but gaps remain which if not filled could threaten the sustainability of the project.

1 Implementation

Water companies are committed to playing a full part in implementation of the WFD by building on their success in meeting the requirements of earlier environment directives.

It is self-evident that strong economies and healthy populations demand a clean water environment. Since 1990 the UK water industry has been responsible for one of the largest programmes of investment in environmental improvement ever seen in Europe. This was carried out and continues within a framework set by European legislation transposed into UK law. The results speak for themselves:

Bathing Waters Directive

The quality of bathing waters has improved from less than 30 per cent meeting mandatory and guideline standards to over 70 percent this year.

Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive

This year 76 per cent of rivers in England and 95 per cent in Wales reached good or very good status against chemical and biological standards. The equivalent figures for 1990 were 55 per cent and 86 per cent.

Freshwater Fish Directive

Fish are one of the best indicators of a clean water environment. More rivers now have healthy fish populations, a development welcomed by anglers and otters whose reappearance in catchments after many years of absence has been widely welcomed.

As their contribution to the first cycle of the WFD (2009 to 2015) the water companies are planning to invest heavily in carrying out the National Environment Programme (NEP) projects in their business plans for the 2009 Water Price review (PR09).

The general characteristics of this work are that it will:

- contribute to meeting WFD objectives through continuing activity required by related environmental directives and UK regulations;
- employ 'end-of-pipe', engineering-based, techniques with some catchment-based solutions to protect drinking water sources; and
- include investigations and monitoring designed to improve the evidence needed to ensure that work in the second cycle is as effective as possible.

When finalised the level of water industry investment is expected to make it the most significant contributor to these first RBMPs.

2) Impact of land use

In contrast to the earlier directives, the WFD highlights for the first time the impact on watercourses of different uses of the land, particularly in agriculture and aspects of urban life.

During the development of draft RBMPs led by the Environment Agency as the competent authority it was often pointed out that the Water Framework Directive might well have been called the "Water *and Land* Framework Directive".

Earlier directives aimed at protecting and enhancing the quality of water in the environment (including the three mentioned above) focus mainly on applying chemical standards to wastewater discharged to the environment. In other words they were designed to limit pollution from known, regulated point sources such as heavy industrial plants and sewage treatment works.

The WFD by contrast looks more widely.

In classifying water bodies according to water quality status and, where needed, devising remedial actions (Programmes of Measures), this newer directive assumes the continuing contribution of improvements to point source discharges; but now also takes account of diffuse pollution – the impact of run-off from multiple, unregulated land sources, such as farms, highways and industrial sites.

Recognising the importance of these diffuse pollution sources for the first time has several implications:

- we need to understand more about the impact of diffuse pollution relative to point source pollution
- plans are needed to enable sectors other than heavy industry, water and sewerage to play their part
- sectors asked to be involved for the first time will need relevant incentives and funding
- public service sectors, such as local authorities and highway agencies, will need formal targets and allocation of funds
- farmers are being helped by government Catchment Sensitive Farming schemes and grants but this is a small initiative in relation to the scale of the problem.

As an example, in the plans published today there are several cases where contributions to controlling pollution caused by road and highway run-off from local authorities and highway agencies are absent.

The greater scope of the WFD and change of direction it requires could hold up implementation and risk the UK's credibility with the European Commission and EU member states. This can be avoided by recognising and acting on the implications listed above.

The most important action will be to develop a process of collaboration that ensures transparency, clarity and funding for actions for all sectors and that measures to be undertaken by all water companies as partner organisations are cost-effective and integrated within the water industry pricing framework.

3) Collaboration between relevant sectors

Sustainable implementation of the WFD depends on policy taking a new direction and building a process of collaboration between all relevant sectors. A lot has been achieved, but gaps remain which if not filled could threaten the sustainability of the project.

Water UK accepts that it was always going to be hard moving from individual sectors acting alone to cut pollution they have caused or are affected by, to sharing responsibility

and identifying best solutions by combining contributions from different sectors. Also the political and economic barriers to change that were to be expected may have become higher due to the economic downturn.

Nonetheless we are convinced that collaboration, as opposed to continued reliance on single sectors, is the way to deliver the greatest environmental benefit, with lowest aggregate cost and least wasted resource. Taking the draft RBMPs published today, Water UK recommends that the Environment Agency work with stakeholders to:

- deepen and broaden understanding of the problems facing the water environment and the benefits of WFD implementation
- promote integrated catchment solutions in which all sectors contribute in proportion to their capacity to solve the problems
- put in place effective coordination for co-deliverers of catchment plans
- ensure funding is available for all sectors or mechanisms put in place to provide funding.

These actions are the essence of the WFD and should lead to a sustainable water environment. But the consequences of not acting in terms of higher risk are serious:

- for the environment and climate change policy -,in that unnecessary end-of-pipe projects would mean unnecessary increases in greenhouse gas emissions
- for the economy - in waste of resources
- for water customers - in higher than necessary water bills

Ends

For more information please contact:

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<http://www.water.org.uk/home/policy/water-framework-directive>

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