

## **Managing agricultural diffuse pollution Time for a change**

**Water UK statement on publication by the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs of consultations on the revised Code of Good Agricultural Practice, the Nitrates Directive and Diffuse Pollution from Agriculture**

### **Age-old problem**

Water UK is pleased that Defra has this week taken a significant step towards solving the age-old problem of agricultural diffuse water pollution at source where it is most cost-effective. The agriculture sector has an essential role to play in ensuring that we have a sustainable water environment in the United Kingdom.

Agriculture provides an essential service to society by managing the land and providing the food we need. Some farmers and some EU member have been more successful than others in delivering the service in a sustainable way which, we must all accept, is one reason why the new consultations are needed.

### **New direction**

For decades the direction of policy has been towards intensive farming, heavily subsidised by the tax payer. Among the results has been over-use of chemicals and water pollution from agriculture. Now in the face of climate change and other pressures a new direction is needed. It makes no sense to go on paying farmers to pollute. Nor to expect water companies and their customers to go on paying for pollution caused elsewhere. In short, it makes no sense to go on pretending that the problem does not exist.

In 2002 the Defra Nitrate Vulnerable Zone Action Plan aimed to reduce nitrate levels by between 2% and 7%. It was not enough and has put the government under threat of infraction proceedings. Will the revised action plan deliver better and acceptable levels of nitrate reduction?

### **Time for action**

The water and agriculture industries have a good track record of working successfully together in the UK and Europe to improve the quality of the water environment. But there are few grounds for collective pride.

The fact that it has been necessary for water companies to build pesticide removal plants, nitrate removal plants, cryptosporidium removal plants and UV disinfection plants at a high cost to their customers strongly suggests that it is time for more action from farmers, government and regulators. A blend of carrots and sticks (economic and legal instruments) is essential to ensure that diffuse pollution from agriculture is dramatically reduced.

### **Invest to improve**

Water UK hopes that the new consultations will lead the agriculture sector in a new direction in its business practice and operations. It should allow the agriculture sector to:

#### Business practice

- Invest in better facilities and infrastructure
- Accept that it should pay to clean up the pollution it has caused even where others carry out the improvements
- Face up to the ongoing cross subsidy by other sectors of its adverse impact on the environment

#### Operations

- Control pollution at source
- Reduce pollution of groundwater and surface water used for drinking water supply
- Reduce loss of biodiversity and damage to the ecosystem caused by pollution
- Protect the quality of bathing waters and shellfish waters

### **Incentives for change**

We support the steps Defra is taking, but more needs to be done to incentivise farmers and the agriculture sector to implement the polluter pays and cost recovery principles as required by the Water Framework Directive. Where these instruments are lacking they should be provided. It is time to end the cross subsidy involved in the clean-up of agricultural pollution by the water sector.

What would be the incentive for change? Voluntary initiatives have worked to an extent in some cases but are clearly not enough. The claim by some regulators that they lack the powers to control agricultural pollution is not convincing. These consultations are the opportunity to ask for appropriate instruments to ensure the job is done properly this time.

Relying on 'end-of-pipe' solutions from water companies is effectively short-term 'pollution-swapping', as we are learning from the emerging impacts of climate change.

Do farmers provide vital land management services? Yes? Then this should be properly addressed. But they should no longer be paid to pollute.

### **Ends**

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