

**National Water Symposium
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Source 2004

Challenge 1: Water Resources.

To achieve management of water resources that serves society and benefits the environment at reasonable cost.

In the UK we are in danger of taking water for granted. It may sound obvious, but water is the lifeblood of the water industry.

Management of water resources is the most important issue for water and wastewater service companies. Restriction or failure of public water supply brings a heavy price in terms of political standing, finance and public perception. It could be argued that the circumstances surrounding the drought in 1995/6 contributed to the 1997 water summit, the windfall tax on utilities, the harsh 1999 periodic price review, and a lot of bad publicity.

In recent years the industry has achieved a much more positive situation as one of the most reliable utilities. However a reputation for reliability has a downside.

Floods and droughts are an increasing part of life in Britain, but these natural phenomena are rarely seen to impact on water services. For example, we don't experience large-scale interruptions to supply; our tap water is among the best in the world; and it is available to all at low cost. In short, for us, turning on the tap is almost a reflex act. Why not? Surely most of the time we have plenty of rain.

Supply and demand

In fact we do not have plenty of water. The UK has less water per head of population than any other European country. The balance between supply and demand is tight in many parts some in the North and West as well as the drier areas of the South East. And known drivers are likely to make the situation even more difficult:

- Climate change will result in less available water in summer. Population shifts will lead to localised supply problems.
- Lifestyle changes will continue to increase peak demand.
- Increased pollution of raw waters, combined with higher quality standards, will result in less available water or higher treatment requirements.
- Greater focus on environmental protection will spotlight the effects of water abstraction for public supply and lead to relocation of many company sources.

Against this background of increased supply risk, we should recall what a secure supply of water really means. Water and sewerage systems are the most important public health requirements. At the same time, water is essential for functioning other service and industry sectors. Manifestly (though it is still worth saying) without a guaranteed water supply our infrastructure and economy would collapse.

Therefore it is essential that as a society we debate the future of water resources. Should we develop new sources of supply, such as reservoirs and aquifer storage? Should we prioritise reducing demand? Or should we seek alternatives such as aquifer storage and recovery, wastewater reuse, or desalination? Such questions are not simply a matter of engineering. All various solutions have other impacts, societal, environmental and financial. The key question and the challenge for the future is how to achieve sustainable water resource management in a way that serves society and benefits the environment at a reasonable cost.

This is under constant consideration by the water industry. Yet once we look in detail it is obvious that the industry cannot, and should not, make the decisions alone. Future water resources management is inextricable from the future health and prosperity of the UK's people and environment.

Collaborative decision-making

We welcome moves towards public involvement in decision-making laid out in the Water Framework Directive and the government's decision to put water resource and drought planning on a statutory basis. More public engagement will help the industry achieve the aims of sustainability as long as thinking goes beyond single issues and recognises the need for solutions that have multiple benefits.

There are many examples - sites where biodiversity benefits, water quality improvements and flood risk reductions are delivered simultaneously. There are projects that are enhancing farm incomes, rural cohesion, environment protection, and water quality. And there are towns and cities where the quality of urban life is directly linked to the quality of urban waters. The water industry is playing a part in most of these, but keen to do more. Multiple water benefits depend on an integrated approach to catchment management and this requires, above all, partnership.

The future of water resources is being shaped today. We are witnessing a shift from separate water quality and quantity solutions to integrated approaches. This applies for example in planning to deal with floods.

In the past we asked engineers to solve the problem for a single town and they built flood defences; now we are asking catchment management to reduce the impact of flooding and they build green spaces that double as storage in times of flood. Instead of working against nature, we are now starting to work with natural processes.

The same is happening with water resources. Instead of looking solely at abstraction, there are moves to consider it in the wider context of catchment management, which holds out the chance of also enhancing recharge of the aquifer and making better use of the water we have.

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