



Campaign to Protect  
Rural England

## *Policy Position Statement*

# Water resources

Water is an essential natural resource, vital for life. Yet ever rising demand for water, planned future growth in housing and the uncertainties of climate change raise difficult issues for sustainable water resource management. Conserving this resource, more efficient use of existing supplies and the need to better integrate water considerations into decisions over land use planning are essential to protect the countryside.

### **7What are the issues for the countryside?**

Increasing demand for housing leads to increasing demand for water. Demand is rising most in areas most at risk of water shortage, e.g. in South East England. This is because of the intensity of demand and the limited sources of available supply. Across the country, increasing affluence adds to demand as we use more domestic appliances, such as washing machines, and water our gardens. As a result, household consumption of water per person has increased by 7% between 1992 and 2001, and by 70% over the past 30 years. This insatiable demand for water leads to over-abstraction of water from groundwater reserves (aquifers) and rivers, leading to low flow in many rivers and even drying out. This has a significant impact on wildlife, landscape and amenity, and has a detrimental effect on river water quality.

To meet this rising demand water companies are seeking to enhance resources with water transfer schemes and major reservoir proposals, the latter

likely to lead to significant loss of countryside.

But there are other water-related issues for the countryside. The risk of flooding is highlighted periodically by major flood events, e.g. in Lewes, Sussex in 2000, and Boscastle, Cornwall in 2004. The rapid expansion of development in river flood plains over recent years has placed more people at risk of flooding while reducing the ability of the natural flood plain to absorb rising water levels. The Environment Agency estimates that 5 million people live in flood risk areas in England and Wales. The Government has sought to address this issue through the publication of *Planning Policy Guidance Note 25: Development and Flood Risk*. But this has been inadequate in stemming the tide of new housing and other forms of development on floodplains.

All this is occurring in the context of the uncertainty of climate change, which makes it much more difficult to plan and manage water resources for the future, whether for domestic, agricultural or industrial abstraction, or in terms of flood risk. What

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we do know is that climate change is likely to lead to more erratic rainfall and more storm events. Storms lead to rapid run-off of water – exacerbated by urbanisation – which can overload sewerage systems. Excess untreated sewage can then end up being discharged to rivers, giving rise to fish and wildlife kills and major water quality problems. This happened, for example, in the Thames in the summer of 2004.

Rising sea levels are already affecting coastal areas in eastern England where it is becoming increasingly unsustainable to maintain sea defences for agricultural land. Attempts are now being made to allow some of this land to return to salt marsh. This has significant economic and social consequences for the area affected, but can bring benefits for wildlife and countryside amenity.

### **CPRE's approach**

First among the principles that CPRE applies to these issues is the need to use existing water supplies more efficiently, through water conservation measures (including water metering). A third of all domestic water consumption is used simply to flush the toilet. On average a single flush uses up to 9 litres of water. The use of more efficient water appliances and grey-water systems (which use recycled water) could have a significant effect on reducing future demand.

In England and Wales 23% of the total water supply was lost through leakage through the distribution system. CPRE believes that the water companies need to work much harder to reduce leakage rates before they are allowed to develop major new water resource projects, such as reservoirs and long-distance transfer schemes.

There also needs to be a much stronger emphasis on using spatial planning to integrate decisions on land use and built development with policies for water resources. The location of new development potentially has an enormous impact upon demand for water resources and flood risk. Locating housing where water is in short supply or within flood plains is likely to be unsustainable in the long term.

CPRE is concerned, for example, by proposals for the Milton Keynes/South Midlands Growth Area where substantial new housing is proposed in an area of insufficient water supply. A Strategic Environmental Assessment undertaken to assess the effects of the draft Regional Spatial Strategy for the East of England (which contain another of the Government's Growth Areas) noted 'the policies will have significant negative effects on the water resources of the region, particularly in the southern areas where water availability is lowest and the housing allocation highest'.

The Government has also decided to focus development in the Thames Gateway. Being within the Thames flood plain and in the area of least rainfall in the country, it faces significant challenges. CPRE believes development in this area is justifiable in the context of regenerating brownfield land, but that any such development must meet the highest water efficiency targets and be designed to avoid or cope with the rising flood risk from climate change. Existing flood defences should be upgraded to facilitate this in advance of the new housing development.

CPRE believes the following elements are essential to a sustainable water policy:

### **Further reading**

*www.environment-agency.gov.uk*  
*The Savewater pages on the Environment Agency's website show how and why you should be using water wisely, both at home and at work.*

*Directing the flow: Priorities for future water policy, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, November 2002. Available at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/water/strategy/>*

*Draft Planning Policy Statement 25: Development and flood risk, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, December 2005. Available at [www.odpm.gov.uk](http://www.odpm.gov.uk).*

*Pooling our resources, CPRE, 1996. A campaigners' guide to catchment management planning*

*Water Resources for the Future: A Water Resources Strategy for England and Wales, March 2001, Environment Agency.*

- > conserving existing water resources, for example through the reduction of leakage from supply pipes should be the priority;
- > concerns for water should be a key component of spatial planning. Integrated planning is essential to ensure new development does not impose an unacceptable burden on water supply systems or flood plains. All new housing should be required to meet the highest standards of water efficiency and recycling. And the Environment Agency should be given stronger powers to prevent housing development on flood plains;
- > the demand for water should be managed, for example, by selective metering of private and public consumers using differential tariffs to ensure fairness; and
- > there should be an end to the pursuit of cheaper water for its own sake and regardless of the signs this sends to users. More appropriate pricing will encourage reductions in demand, encourage the development and manufacture of more efficient appliances, and help safeguard water resources.

### **What can you do?**

You can help reduce your own household's demand for water through:

- > choosing the most water efficient household appliances, e.g. washing machines and dishwashers;
- > installing low/dual flush toilets which use a third less water than average (6 litres per flush rather than 9) or place a 'save-a-flush' or 'hippo' in the cistern;

- > a quick shower uses a third of the water of a bath, but power showers can consume more water than a bath;
- > install a water butt to collect rainwater for garden watering rather than using a hosepipe from the mains supply (which can use up to 1000 litres per hour); and
- > grow garden plants that can tolerate drought and don't need regular watering.

Planning decisions about new reservoirs and flood defences are taken by local authorities. You can:

- > respond to planning applications for significant new development highlighting the need to manage demand for water and make more efficient use of existing supplies before new water resources are developed. Consider influencing your planning authority's local development documents to ensure they contain strong policies for conserving water for when they make decisions over the amount, location and design of new development;
- > seek to influence the Environment Agency which licences all water abstraction and periodically reviews key licences that have caused over-abstraction. The Agency is also responsible for developing and maintaining river and coastal flood defences. Regional and area offices of the Environment Agency will periodically consult on water resource and flood defence strategies to which you can respond (see [www.environment-agency.gov.uk](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk) for more information).

*Low Water Gardening, John Lucas, CPRE, 1993. Available from CPRE publications.*

*Gardening Without Water, Charlotte Green, 1999, Henry Doubleday Research Association, Search Press.*