

Abstraction licences issued for Isles of Scilly public water supply

Water supplies on the Isles of Scilly are 60% from groundwater and the remainder from their desalination plant.

South West Water (SWW) is responsible for water and sewerage provision to the majority of households and businesses on the islands. Prior to October last year, abstractors were exempt from the need to hold licences to abstract. But in response to the passing of the Isles of Scilly (Application of Water Legislation) Order 2020 last year, SWW submitted applications for their public water supply abstractions.

Following a detailed assessment of the applications, the Environment Agency has this month issued 6 licences to SWW, covering abstractions from 21 wells and boreholes across the islands.

Determining the licences for these historic wells and boreholes has been a lengthy process. Whilst determining the licences the Environment Agency has been assessing the risks of the abstractions upon the islands' nationally and internationally designated sites – including 7 Sites of Special Scientific Interest, a Special Area of Conservation, a Special Protection area, Ramsar and Marine Conservation Zone, as well as risks to private borehole abstractions.

A condition of the licences has been the agreement between Environment Agency, SWW, Natural England and the Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust that environmental monitoring takes place to improve our understanding of the risks of the now licensed abstractions on the designated sites.

Mark Pilcher, from the Environment Agency, said:

“We have been working hard with Defra over the last decade to apply mainland environmental legislation across to the Isles of Scilly to ensure that the fragile and highly sensitive environment is protected.

“The islands have vulnerable and limited groundwater supplies, so having the ability to now licence and regulate abstraction is an essential part of supporting sustainability on the islands for people and wildlife.

“Issuing these licences is a significant milestone. For the first time we will have appropriate regulatory tools to ensure that groundwater abstraction on the islands remains balanced and well managed”.

Rob Scarrott, Head of Water Resources and Water Efficiency at South West Water, said:

“Securing licences for abstraction and desalination is a significant step in safeguarding water supply and the environment of the Isles of Scilly. As part of the new agreement, sites of groundwater abstraction will be strictly

monitored to ensure there is no impact on the natural environment.

“South West Water, the Environment Agency, Natural England and the Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust have worked hard to understand the potential challenges and to secure the best outcome for the Islands.”