

Chilterns Chalk Streams Conference – Position Statement

English chalk streams are one of the most precious things in the natural world. They are known for their clear waters, rich wildlife and for providing a beautiful place for people to enjoy.

As a child I spent many happy hours fishing in our chalk streams, not that I was ever very effective! The number of fish I caught might not have been very impressive but I grew to love the timeless beauty of our chalk streams.

Recently I have walked along the River Mimram and seen for myself the low flows and Environment Agency fish rescues that have taken place as a result. This is devastating to see. I care passionately about our chalk streams and am committed to doing everything possible to help them return to their former glory. That's why I am here today.

As many of you know, chalk streams flow from chalk aquifers. Both the streams and aquifers provide essential drinking water for people across the South East and East Anglia. Some water companies such as Cambridge Water are 100% dependent on the aquifers that support the chalk streams. Without this water taps would run dry.

Businesses and farms also rely on chalk streams. Without water they would not be able to operate. This would significantly affect the economy, the livelihoods of the people that they employ and the availability of food to eat.

Despite the recent wet weather, if we look back over the last three years we have seen about 50% less recharge to aquifers than we would normally expect in this part of the country. Some groundwater levels are currently the lowest ever recorded.

This is an environmental drought and we all have a responsibility to play a constructive part in tackling its causes and effects. There is a wider context which also requires all of us to work together; people at this conference and people across the nation. It is the climate emergency, which makes drought and floods more likely. For many years we have been able to use water stored in the chalk aquifer in a sustainable way but recent weather patterns require new approaches that make us more resilient to prolonged dry periods. We face having to invest more money in alternative and more costly supplies of clean water. We will be faced with tough choices as we balance the various needs I have mentioned. We want to face this future together, with you helping us, so that we properly reflect your needs just as we will reflect others.

At the Environment Agency we are working flat out to limit the damage the low groundwater is having and ensure that water supplies are sustainable for the future. This includes taking immediate action to restrict the amount of water taken, developing long term plans to reduce our reliance on chalk streams,

working with partners on projects to improve water quality wherever possible and stepping in to limit damage to wildlife and the environment when river levels are too low.

Whilst we have to take water from the environment to live, we have got to make sure that this abstraction is sustainable.

We regulate water abstraction through our licensing system and we are tough with water companies, farmers and businesses that take water from the environment unsustainably or who pollute water. By reviewing licences and reducing the amount of water people can take we have returned 16 billion litres of water back to chalk streams since 2008 and removed the risk of another 14.9 billion litres being taken. This is equivalent to the average annual domestic water use of approximately 300,000 people – similar to the population of Nottingham.

But abstraction regulation can only go so far. Earlier this year, our Chief Executive Sir James Bevan described that we face 'The Jaws of Death', when demand for water outstrips supply. We need to find alternative water supplies and reduce demand across the south east. This will mean extensive and costly infrastructure such as new reservoirs and pipes to transfer water from other parts of the country. But it also means each and every one of us using less water.

At the Environment Agency we play a leading role in ensuring resilient water resources for the future. We have instigated planning at a national and regional scale, requiring water companies and other water users to cooperate to make the most of the water we have. Many water company plans contain strategic options for infrastructure developments and Ofwat has allocated up to £450m to companies to fully explore these options. We are supporting and contributing staff to the regulator's alliance for progressing this infrastructure development

At the same time we are working with numerous partners on a wide range of innovative projects that are improving water quality in our chalk streams.

Since 2011 our partnership work on over 60 projects has been instrumental in achieving improvements to more than 70km of chalk streams at a cost of £4.3 million. We are also working closely with farmers to help them reduce the impact of farming on river quality and with water companies to reduce the amount of phosphates that enter our rivers. By 2020, phosphorous levels will have reduced by 66% since 1995 and by 2027 we will have seen an 85% reduction.

Every drop of water that is wasted is water that could be sustaining our rivers, streams and lakes. People are starting to use less water, down from 155 litres a day in 2002 to 142 litres per person today but this is still way too high. In Denmark people use just 80 litres a day. There is no justification for the difference. People across the UK use a lot more water than they need to and it has to stop. Planners and developers need to ensure that all new developments are water efficient.

We are taking action to encourage water companies to promote the importance of saving water to their customers and have recently joined forces with over 40 partners to launch the Love Water campaign. This is aimed at encouraging people to use less water and look after the water we have by preventing pollution. We need the campaign to grow so that everyone knows that water is precious and wants to take action to protect it.

We need more action and more pace. By using less and looking after what we have we will be able to ensure that we have clean and plentiful water for generations to come for us and for the environment including our wonderful chalk streams. But we will only achieve this if we work together to take action now.

Which brings me back to the task in hand today. We are committed to doing whatever we can to ensuring that there are still chalk streams in a good condition for future generations to enjoy and benefit from. I am delighted to be here today to join forces with you all to make that happen.