

Drones to detect illegal water abstractions

The Environment Agency manages abstraction to balance the needs of the environment with the rights of lawful water users during periods of dry weather.

Our regulatory officers carry out high visibility patrols every year throughout the irrigation season to ensure landowners and farmers are adhering to the conditions of their licences and do not cause harm to the environment.

Last year's heatwave led to a number of licence holders breaching their conditions and this year some illegal abstractions have already been uncovered.

Andrew Chapman, Environment Planning Specialist for the Environment Agency in East Anglia, said:

Following on from the hot and dry summer we experienced in 2018 our area has not received the winter rainfall we would normally expect and this is placing significant pressure on the water environment.

We have contacted irrigators who have licences that permit abstraction from the Middle Level to inform them that restrictions are likely to be required during the irrigation season.

We will be prioritising our water resources compliance work over the summer period in those catchments that are at risk from this prolonged dry period.

This will be the first time we have ever used drones for this purpose. The majority of irrigators do operate within their licence conditions. However, last year a minority of farmers did not play by the rules and severely restricted other people's ability to irrigate their crops.

A third party will be employed to operate the drone, which connects to a web portal, so that an Environment Agency staff member can view the images from a computer and direct the device to fly over certain locations. If irrigators are found to be abstracting illegally, enforcement action will be taken. This can include written warnings, civil sanctions, referral to the Rural Payments Agency or prosecution.

Five new environment officers have been taken on this year to help manage the water resources issue. Their role includes identifying licence holders at

risk of water restrictions and making them aware of the possible shortages.

They will also carry out inspections in the riskier catchments where more intense abstraction takes place. In the east of the region, the frequency of compliance checks and patrols is also increasing.

Michael Neale, Land and Water team leader in Essex, said:

We have an intelligence-led approach to all compliance checks. We will always respond to reports of illegal abstraction. We are going to up our response out of hours to reports wherever they come from. We will have more resources on hand to bolster our approach.

Anyone suspected of abstracting illegally should be reported to the Environment Agency hotline on 0800 80 70 60.