

Review of regulatory controls to strengthen protections for water environment

The Government has today (29 September) unveiled proposals to improve water quality and regulate activities that affect our water supplies.

The changes are designed to:

- modernise the system of licensing water abstraction – when water is taken from the environment for use in farming, food manufacturing and public water supplies – by giving businesses and other licence holders access to a more streamlined service; and
- improve the management of activities that may impact groundwater quality through an updated risk-based approach to permitting

The system for regulating water abstraction was set up in the 1960s and still uses paper licences. Many licence holders also hold other environmental permits, meaning they have to operate under different definitions, processes and controls for different regulated activities.

A [consultation launched today](#) seeks views on proposals for amending regulations to include water abstraction and impounding licensing. This will bring the majority of environmental permits under one legal framework and allow people to manage all their permits in one place.

A more consolidated system will help the Environment Agency to manage water resources in a way that responds to a changing environment; making the best use of the available water for abstraction and continuing to protect, enhance and restore the environment.

Modernising the abstraction service is a key aspect of Defra and the EA's joint 2017 [Water Abstraction Plan](#), which sets out planned reforms for water abstraction management over the coming years and how these will contribute to the delivery of the goal in the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan for clean and plentiful water.

Environment Minister Rebecca Pow said:

“Our 25 Year Environment Plan laid out our core commitment to ensuring the provision of clean and plentiful water.

“To deliver on that pledge in a changing climate we need to look at how we can better support those who take water from our rivers and aquifers while building on existing protections for these resources and the ecosystems they support.

“I encourage anyone with an interest to take part in these consultations to help secure improvements that will benefit people, businesses and our

precious water environment.”

A [separate consultation](#) proposes amending regulations to take a more practical approach to regulating activities that affect groundwater quality, for example returning treated water to the ground following the clean-up of a pollution incident and bringing in new protections for groundwater.

Groundwater plays an essential role in maintaining water supplies and is used in many industry sectors including food manufacturing and agriculture. It also supports important wetland habitats and sensitive surface water environments such as chalk streams.

The consultation proposes increasing the range of permitting controls available to the Environment Agency for activities that affect groundwater. These can currently be permitted only by the highest-tier permits, which are often disproportionate to the different levels of risk certain activities represent. A wider range of permits will remove unnecessary costs for businesses while still ensuring strong protections are in place for our water environment.

The new permits will also cover activities with the potential to introduce heat pollution or microbial pollution to groundwater, bringing them in line with the controls already in place for surface, bathing and drinking water.

The two consultations will run for 12 weeks until 22 December 2021.