

Water for the future

Managing water in the South East of England

Water is essential for life. We use this vital resource in our homes and gardens, in business, industry and agriculture. But, how much do we take for granted that every time we turn on the tap we will have a finite supply of running water?

Although our country is often considered to have a wet climate, we are facing increasing pressure on our water supplies. The problem is particularly acute in the South East of England where large numbers of people living and working mean that water is scarcer than anywhere else in England and Wales. In fact, there is less water available per person in this region than in many Mediterranean countries. This, together with the fact that people here consume more water than in the rest of the country, means that managing water resources is a real challenge for the South East.

The Government's plans to build 240,000 new homes across the country, with many of these in the South East to meet soaring demand, will only serve to stretch existing water resources severely if we do not act now.

Climate change, one of the major threats of our time, can only make the situation worse as longer, hotter, drier summers lead to even greater shortages, with less clean water when we need it most.

All of this means that we will need to think very differently about how we use this precious resource. Studies have shown that within less than thirty years there will be a major water shortage in the South East unless we reduce the amount of water we use or find new resources. They have also shown the "art of the possible" - with a moderate amount of demand management, at least four of the seven proposed reservoir developments for the South East contained in the last set of water company plans would not be required.

Clearly, we can go ahead and build extra resources such as new reservoirs, but this will be very expensive, can take a long time to develop (between 15 and 20 years) and can have a major impact on the environment.

Alternatively, we can all play our part by trying harder to use less water, reduce the amount we waste and make better use of more water-efficient technology.

Simply adopting good habits can save a considerable amount of water. For example, only using the washing machine or dishwasher when they are full and fixing dripping taps promptly are just two of the ways everyone can help to make a real difference.

As the organisation responsible for managing water resources in England and Wales, it is our job to make sure that there is enough water available for everyone, without damaging the environment. One of the ways we do this is by working closely with the water industry to plan for future needs.

Now is a critical time as water companies prepare their plans for the next price review in 2009. This will determine how much money they receive to build new resources and to manage and reduce the amount of water people use.

There are a number of ways in which water companies manage water resources.

- They are responsible for reducing leakage in the water supply system that potentially waste significant amounts of water every year.
- Installing water meters to encourage people to use less water is an obvious and effective way of managing demand, particularly in seriously water stressed areas like the South East.
- An area where water companies can make even greater progress in managing demand for scarce water resources is by introducing new tariffs that encourage people to use water more efficiently and protect vulnerable groups, such as lower income large households, the elderly and the sick.
- Encouraging both homes and businesses to reduce the amount of water they use, fitting existing homes with water saving devices and designing new homes to be more water efficient will all help to ease the burden on this precious commodity.
- Water companies could also look to share their resources more to tackle water shortages in certain areas.

To make real progress in managing demand for water resources in the South East will need dedication and commitment from water companies, the financial regulator Ofwat, local authorities and regional development agencies.

The Government has already recognised the growing crisis and is putting its weight behind policies such as compulsory metering and water efficiency in domestic and industrial use to encourage even greater demand management.

Because of the particular problems in the South East, the region clearly needs special attention. From the individual user to the water companies and Government, there are many parts to play in managing and reducing the amount of water the region uses. Managing demand for water better means there will be significant improvements in the resources available and fewer new resources will need to be built, which would be good news for both the region's people and the environment.

If we all act now to use water wisely we can help to make sure we have enough to meet our needs without damaging the environment, both now and in the future.