



Water Resources Forum, March 2019 – Briefing paper

Protecting vulnerable chalk streams and watercourses

Introduction

We abstract water from rivers and groundwater to provide around 2.7 billion litres of water to our customers every day. The Environment Agency (EA) regulates how much water can be taken through a licensing regime and periodically reviews abstraction licences to identify if they are causing, or have the potential to cause, environmental damage.

Over the past 30 years we have reduced abstraction by around 100 Ml/d including from the River Darent (Brasted, Sundridge, Horton Kirby & Eynsford), River Churn (Baunton), Ampney Brook (Meysey Hampton), River Wye (Mill End), River Bulbourne (New Ground), River Kennet (Axford) and River Og (Ogbourne).

In the next 5 years we plan to complete further investigations and assess solutions to protect the River Chess (Hawridge) and the River Cray (Bexley). We also aim to complete a number of projects to alleviate or mitigate low river flows, and further assessments to check the impact of abstractions on river flows.

The investigations and assessments that we undertake to determine if we will reduce abstraction from a source, or implement other solutions to protect the watercourse, are guided by the frameworks established by the EA through the Catchment Abstraction Management Strategies (CAMS) and Water Framework Directive (WFD). They are completed alongside bespoke targeted investigation to provide an understanding of the hydrogeology, hydrology and ecological detail in any given situation. A key aspect of these assessments is determining if the solutions are cost beneficial. There are cases where it is not cost beneficial to make changes to abstraction because the cost of replacement resources (needed to ensure that water supply can be maintained) together with the cost of the network enhancements (needed to ensure that water can be transferred from alternative sources), mean that the costs outweigh the assessed benefits. If more resources are available in the future it could be possible to make further abstraction reductions.

Protecting vulnerable chalk streams and watercourses for the long-term

Looking after the environment and being its strong advocate is essential for the long term health of our business and an important priority for our customers. There is increasing recognition of the need to reduce abstraction from some vulnerable watercourses and chalk streams and in 2017 we made a commitment to cease all abstractions affecting vulnerable chalk and other sensitive watercourses, such as the Cotswolds streams. This is a long term commitment as new resources will need to be developed to replace the resource that is lost before action can be taken.

A benefit of taking a long-term perspective to planning water resources is that we can consider potential wider opportunities of resource development, as well as the primary function to ensure a secure water supply, for example the additional resource provided by a new reservoir in Oxfordshire could enable cost effective reduction of abstraction at some sensitive sources.

This is a very challenging commitment; it is beyond the current regulatory framework and will need collaboration with the Environment Agency and other stakeholders to be achieved. It will also need to be delivered at the same time as major growth in demand arising from significant population growth projected in south east of England and will need to be accommodated over the next 50+ years during a period in which the impact of climate change is expected to become increasingly acute.

A number of stakeholder organisations from environmental and river-related bodies have welcomed the commitment, as did our customers, who were supportive, subject to the impact on their water bills.

The plan to deliver these further reductions in abstraction to protect vulnerable chalk and other watercourses needs further development; however as a first stage we have identified a number of sources where further reductions could be implemented if resources were available to facilitate it.

There will be a presentation on this topic at the Water Resources Forum in March.

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