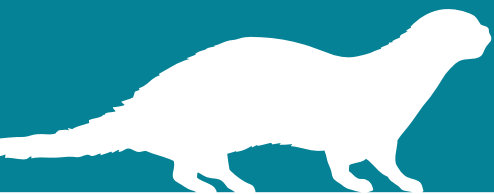




The
Wildlife
Trusts

A Vision for Water

Improving our rivers, lakes and coasts



The State of England's Waters

Poor water quality affects every single river, lake, estuary and coastal water in England, and the poor state of our waters has become a doorstep issue for voters. Sewage Pollution impacts wildlife, rural economies and communities – yet it is far from the only harm our waters are facing:

Chemical pollution is severe. All of England's waters fail chemical status tests and are not expected to meet standards until 2063.

Nutrient pollution (phosphate) remains the single biggest reason that waters fail to achieve 'Good Ecological Status'. Farming, through fertiliser and manure use, and the Water Industry, primarily via treated wastewater, are the major sources of this pollutant.

Nearly a quarter of English rivers are already at serious risk from **unsustainable abstraction**. On top of this, demand for water is set to grow whilst climate change will reduce water availability.

In the UK 13% of freshwater species are at risk of extinction. Adding to the pressures of water quality and quantity are the threats posed by invasive non-native species, and the physical changes we've made to our rivers which remove habitat, or prevent wildlife accessing it.

Globally, freshwater biodiversity is declining faster than that of any other habitat & in England, only 16% of waters meet ecological standards set under the Water Framework Directive (WFD) Regulations.

Key Pressures on the water environment

Agriculture is the sector responsible for the greatest proportion of 'Reasons for Failure' against WFD targets (36%) and contributes to failures in the greatest number of waterbodies (45%). **Agricultural pollution** is a factor in 40%, and physical changes for farming in 13% (with overlap).

The **Water Industry** comes a close second, being responsible for 24% of 'Reasons for Failure' and contributing to failures in 44% of waterbodies. **Pollution from wastewater** is cited in failures for 35% of waterbodies (mostly treated, as opposed to Storm Overflows), and abstraction in around 10%.

Together, these sectors are responsible for the bulk of **phosphate pollution**; the single biggest reason that waters fail to achieve Good Ecological Status.

Farming contributes through the spreading of chemical fertilisers, manure, slurry and sewage sludge, and through the leaching from, or erosion of, nutrient-enriched soils. In the water sector, discharges from the country's thousands of sewage treatment works contain high levels of phosphate, and operate continuously. Intermittent 'Storm Overflows' also contribute nutrient pollution.



Water voles and other wildlife are put at risk by poor water quality

Water Industry

1. Take a broader view of benefits

The 'Water Industry National Environment Programme' (WINEP) is used to identify environmental issues caused by the sector that need to be rectified. Necessary actions are built into company Business Plans, approved by Ofwat and funded by customer bills. To protect customers, budgets are rightly constrained – but this means many improvements are off the table, undermining the long-term sustainability of the sector.

- **Implement Natural Capital Accounting** across the sector. This will recognise the true value of improvements, securing the environmental benefits that customers want – and often at a lesser cost because nature-based solutions will preferentially be implemented. Diversifying the sector will create employment, and installing sustainable drainage and treatment wetlands will green (or 'blue') urban environments.

2. Make targets meaningful

Companies are required to upgrade wastewater treatment works to meet an Environment Act target to reduce phosphate pollution from treated wastewater by 80% by 2038. But if not targeted well, the upgrades could see little actual benefit to the environment.

- Ensure that Environment Act targets to reduce phosphate pollution are delivered in an **ecologically meaningful way**, by directing investment towards protected nature sites, chalk streams and upper river reaches. This will ensure the best use of customers' money.

3. Don't overlook water use

Whilst pollution is foremost in the public's mind, risks around water availability are growing. The drought of 2022 saw nature and farming suffer, whilst single-focus drought measures concentrated on conserving public water supplies. A more holistic approach could stave off environmental harm, and help customers save money too. Meanwhile, unsustainable water supplies can hinder homebuilding, including through local opposition.

- Increase **water efficiency** support by companies to help customers save water, and ensure availability of supplies for new development.
- Allow **drought action** sooner, before environmental harm occurs, rather than only when supplies are threatened.
- Ensure water supply plans are climate-proofed by building in the impact on nature of reduced flows. **Prioritise abstraction reduction** in chalk streams to ensure that these globally-rare habitats are conserved.

Agriculture

1. Get the basics right

The environmental impacts of farming present a challenge. Basic regulation to protect water quality is lacking, not enforced, or even removed, and improvements in farming practice are through entirely elective means, relying on government agri-environment funding, land advice and partnership working via charitable funding. Yet additional investment and farmer efforts are undermined if baseline standards are not met by all.

- **Ensure regulators are properly funded** to enforce against polluting businesses, informed by comprehensive monitoring programmes. This simple action is the bedrock for further improvements.

2. Target improvements

Untargeted improvements will rarely represent the best use of the public's money. An Environment Act target for Agriculture aims to reduce Nitrogen, Phosphorus and Sediment pollution by 40% by 2038 – this should be targeted to ensure the best use of taxpayer funds.

- Much action to reduce sediment, nitrogen and phosphorus pollution will ultimately be funded through the Environmental Land Management Scheme. Create **Catchment Nutrient Budgets** to ensure that reductions are ecologically targeted. Require soil testing to drive nutrient use efficiency at farm scale, reducing unnecessary farm spend.
- Establish an **'Agriculture National Environment Programme'** to mirror the Water Industry's WINEP; a non-competitive fund available to farmers that are in regulatory compliance, to fund actions to meet WFD objectives.

3. 'Spongify' the landscape

The movement of water, overland and through the soil, causes the leaching and runoff of farm pollutants. Slowing water movement is key to reducing pollution, and also to soil conservation. Holding water in the landscape also reduces flood risk, promotes carbon sequestration and benefits biodiversity.

- Support farm policies that **build soil organic matter** – a key attribute that allows soil to hold on to water.
- Deliver **better buffers** through the Environmental Land Management Scheme – substantial riverside swathes of grasses, wildflowers, shrubs and trees to trap farm pollution, provide shade to protect against climate stresses, and create corridors of wildlife habitat. The location and structure should be informed by Local Nature Recovery Strategies.
- Put in place ambitious policy that supports **Catchment-scale restoration**, including by turbo-charging the existing Catchment Partnership network, and by pioneering the wild release of beavers across England.

These actions could speed our journey towards sustainable water management, helping to secure the water supplies needed for a healthy economy and to reduce the flood and drought risks facing both urban and rural areas. They could ensure healthy habitat for iconic wildlife, from darting Kingfishers to migrating salmon. And they could see the recovery of our wetlands, lakes, and rivers, the valleys and floodplains in which they sit, and the estuaries and coasts downstream. They are actions which could drive forward the restoration of the cherished blue veins of our landscape.

The Wildlife Trusts are a federated movement of 46 charities, supported by a central charity, the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts. Together we have more than 900,000 members, 35,000 volunteers and 3,000 staff across the UK. We share a vision of nature in recovery, with abundant, diverse wildlife and natural processes creating wilder landscapes where people and nature thrive.



Wildlife Trusts care for – and have restored – some of the most special places for wildlife in the UK. Collectively we manage more than 2,300 nature reserves, operate 123 visitor and education centres and own 29 working farms. We undertake research, we stand up for wildlife and wild places under threat, and we help people access nature.

We work with businesses who are committed to being nature positive and take action to help restore 30% of land and seas for nature by 2030.

The Wildlife Trusts

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