

PAUL HAMMETT

Water reforms must deliver fairness for farmers

Two years ago and the weather outlook was grim for farmers in East Anglia. We'd received below-average rainfall for 10 of the previous 12 months and just one third of the long-term average rainfall during February. Tough restrictions on water usage were on the cards and there were real concerns about establishing spring crops.

Of course we all know how it turned out, with one of the wettest summers on record rapidly recharging depleted water resources in a way that caught many experts by surprise. For some farmers today the weather situation is equally grim, but this time it's concerns about flooding rather than drought that are making the headlines.

Those two extremes illustrate that water, both too much and not enough of it, is a big deal for farmers, particularly in this region.

That's why so many of you left your rain-soaked farms over the past few weeks to attend our consultation meetings looking at how Government plans to change the way farmers abstract water to grow our food.

Its three-month consultation, launched before Christmas, represents the biggest overhaul of irrigation licensing for 50 years

At the NFU we are grateful to government for starting the debate about water abstraction reform, because the way that water is managed and licensed can definitely be improved.

We would like to see a system that is simple, offers more flexibility to grab surplus water that would otherwise run out to sea, and a system that is fair to all users. We like some of government's ideas about the need to change depending on the pressures of each catchment and we like the prospect of being able to trade water, both permanently and temporarily, between different users.

But although trading could be useful to farmers in the long term as a means of getting scarce water to where it's really needed, we doubt that it's the 'golden bullet' that government suggests it will be. And as we've seen over successive changes to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), change can inevitably result in a transition from old to new that leads to a group of winners and inevitably a group of losers.

The Government's main aim is to address a current system of managing water that it perceives as inflexible. It believes that change is necessary to address two problems with the current approach. Firstly, even when there is surplus water available, abstractors are sometimes unable to utilise it because of their restrictive licence conditions. Secondly, some abstractions can continue when little water is available, even when further abstraction risks harming the environment.

This is true, but I wonder how big an issue this is for us in farming? For example, when surface and groundwater is plentiful, farmers tend not to need it because rainfall meets their needs. An important exception to this, of course, is farmers' ability to capture 'high surface flow' to store in reservoirs for future use, thereby increasing water security on the farm.

On the other hand, when water is scarce, farmers face so-called section 57 restrictions designed to protect the environment. Farmers have a good track record in taking individual and collective action designed to avoid the imposition of statutory s57 restrictions. So-called 'voluntary restrictions' in agriculturally dominant catchments are now commonplace and can make a real difference.

For me, a worrying omission by Defra is the absence of plans to tackle licence management in drought conditions. Surely devising solutions to water scarcity during drought must be part, and indeed a key part, of the review process. In particular, if government is serious in its commitment to equality among all users then surely it must abolish s57 restrictions, uniquely applied to spray irrigators, as part of the reform process.

Abstraction reform will be a long process with implementation of the new system a decade away. This long lead-in time gives the NFU, abstractor groups and farmers themselves a fantastic opportunity to create a new system that links food security to water security, and allocates a fair share of water to farmers to grow our food.

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Keep in touch with the developing story on abstraction reform here
<http://www.nfuonline.com/science-environment/irrigation-and-water-resources/>

The Defra consultation on abstraction reform closes on 28 March
For more information visit <https://consult.defra.gov.uk/water/abstraction-reform>