

Blueprint for Water is a unique coalition of environmental, water efficiency, fisheries and recreational organisations, part of the wider environmental NGO coalition, Wildlife and Countryside Link. Blueprint members come together to form a powerful joint voice across a range of water-based issues.

This document is supported by the following organisations:

A Rocha UK, Amphibian Reptile Conservation Trust, Angling Trust, British Canoeing, Freshwater Habitats Trust, Rivers Trust, RSPB, Salmon & Trout Conservation, The Wildlife Trusts, Waterwise, Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, WWF-UK

Supplementary (Water) Environment Bill Information - 26 February 2020

The following is supplementary information specifically relating to the freshwater environment and is in addition to our [main briefing](#), joint with Greener UK, that covers our wider asks for the Environment Bill.

Summary

- Part Five of the Environment Bill sets out provisions relating to water, addressing the **water industry** (plans and regulation), **water abstraction** from the environment, **water quality** and **land drainage**. Other clauses in the Bill are also pertinent to management of the water environment.
- Blueprint for Water support many of the measures presented in the Bill but have specific concerns around **powers to amend water quality regulations, abstraction reform, and water efficiency**.
- The bill must be improved to secure the recovery and long-term future of our water environment including the provision of clean drinking and bathing waters, and the recovery of precious habitats such as internationally-protected chalk streams, wetlands, and small waters which are critical for freshwater biodiversity such as priority ponds and headwaters.

Background

The freshwater environment is suffering. Only 14% of river water bodies in England are at ‘Good Ecological Status’¹, with 13% of Great Britain’s freshwater and wetland species threatened with extinction². Poor water quality, unsustainable- and over-abstraction, and habitat and species loss are contributing to the deteriorating condition of our water bodies, such as our globally unique chalk streams. The measures in the Bill do not fully address these problems and could enable Ministers to make changes through secondary legislation that further jeopardise the quality of our water environment.

Key improvements

Water quality (Part 5, Clauses 81 – 85)

Our rivers and streams are frequently threatened by pollution from across urban and rural areas. Current regulations protect our water from hazardous substances. Clause 81 creates a wide-ranging power for the Secretary of State to amend the assessment of hazardous substances and chemicals. We believe that **there is no place for such an unqualified power in the Environment Bill** in the absence of a **binding commitment to non-regression in environmental standards**. So we seek confirmation that UKTAG, the technical advisory group that currently advises on standards, will retain a lead role in this process, ensuring that targets and standards can only be altered in line with scientific advice and appropriate stakeholder consultation .

¹ [Environment Agency \(2018\) State of the Environment Report on Water Quality](#)

² Hayhow DB, Burns F, Eaton MA, Al Fulaij N, August TA, Babey L, Bacon L, Bingham C, Boswell J, Boughey KL, Brereton T, Brookman E, Brooks DR, Bullock DJ, Burke O, Collis M, Corbet L, Cornish N, De Massimi S, Densham J, Dunn E, Elliott S, Gent T, Godber J, Hamilton S, Havery S, Hawkins S, Henney J, Holmes K, Hutchinson N, Isaac NJB, Johns D, Macadam CR, Mathews F, Nicolet P, Noble DG, Outhwaite CL, Powney GD, Richardson P, Roy DB, Sims D, Smart S, Stevenson K, Stroud RA, Walker KJ, Webb JR, Webb TJ, Wynde R and Gregory RD (2016) *State of Nature 2016*. The State of Nature partnership.

Abstraction (Part 5, Clause 80)

Some old abstraction licences currently allow the taking of unsustainable volumes of water, impacting on water needed for our wildlife and habitats and domestic use. We welcome the provisions in the Bill enabling these damaging abstraction licences to be modified without compensation. However, the Bill does not make these powers available until 2028 – **this timeframe is unacceptable**. Waiting nearly a decade to act, when climate change is already impacting on our rivers, streams and wetlands, places more of our threatened watercourses and groundwaters at risk. Clause 80 should be amended so that the powers apply *from 1 January 2021*, with licence variations setting out a reasonable period for compliance. This will give abstractors clarity and certainty, and remove any perverse incentive to put off taking action.

Resource (water) efficiency (Part 3, Clauses 49- 50)

A changing climate and population growth are placing increasing demands on our water supplies. More action is needed to encourage us to use water more efficiently, and Government should confirm that these clauses could be used to introduce a mandatory water labelling scheme linked to minimum water efficiency standards.

Other key concerns

Land drainage (Part 5, Clauses 86-89)

Internal Drainage Boards (IDBs) are local public bodies which manage water levels in certain areas, including for flood management. These clauses remove barriers to the creation of new IDBs by updating the process for calculating ‘drainage rates’ (charges levied upon agricultural landowners in the IDB’s area, used to fund the IDB’s work). Without appropriate safeguards and governance, such work can be environmentally damaging and not in line with broad public values. It is vital to clarify that obligations on Public Authorities set out in Clause 94 of the Bill will apply to IDBs and that IDBs shall exercise their powers in the context of wider catchment management. This Bill is an opportunity to review longstanding concerns about the governance of IDBs which we believe must be addressed.

Content of local nature recovery strategies (Part 6, Clause 97)

Subsection 5 allows the Secretary of State to issue guidance on the information required in Local Nature Recovery Strategies, addressing the biodiversity priorities in a local area. A requirement to establish a strategic programme for the creation, protection and management of small waters and priority wetlands not covered by the Water Framework Directive should be incorporated into the framework of a national Nature Recovery Network. These habitats are critical for the conservation and enhancement of freshwater biodiversity.

Plans and proposals (Part 5, Clauses 75-76)

We support Water UK’s proposal that management plans be described as ‘drainage and wastewater’ rather than ‘drainage and sewerage’, encouraging a more holistic approach to water management. Regulations setting out consultation requirements should also ensure the engagement of local stakeholders, as is already required for water resources planning.

Further information about the Environment Bill

The Environment Bill provides a once in a generation opportunity to establish a co-ordinated and ambitious approach to environmental governance and improvement across the whole of the UK. The covering Greener UK briefing provides an overview of our key concerns of the Bill in its entirety.

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