



The Water Framework Directive – not only a question of quality

Key issues

The Water Framework Directive (WFD) is a major opportunity to improve the whole water environment and promote the sustainable use of water for the benefit of people and wildlife alike. A key piece of European legislation, the WFD rewrites existing water legislation into a new overarching programme to deliver long-term protection of the water environment and improve the quality of all waters – groundwaters and surface waters – and associated wetlands.

Implementing the Directive will be a challenging task. It has to deliver benefits in a cost-effective way even though there are many significant scientific, technical, planning, administrative, and economic implications. Many of the issues associated with implementation of the WFD are not new for the Environment Agency but there are several important differences:

- all waterbodies, including rivers, coasts, estuaries, lakes, man-made structures and groundwater are included;
- new objectives will be set to promote the sustainable use of water. These will be defined and assessed using chemical, biological and physical measures;
- negative human impacts on the water environment from specific places such as factories and from widespread sources such as road networks, must be identified and a 'Programme of Measures' established to address all types of impacts;
- the costs to each sector created by adopting these measures will be subject to a full economic analysis to ensure charges are fairly apportioned and agreed;
- River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) bring all the above together so that 'good status' can be achieved in the UK's river basins by 2015;
- public participation is a core requirement of the Directive and is fundamental to the RBMP process.

Implementation of the Directive will take place in a series of planning cycles. This will allow plans to take into account long-term environmental trends (such as climate change) and improved understanding of basin characteristics. The first cycle must be completed by 2015. Reviews then take place every six years. Although the 2015 deadline may seem far away, the timetable will be very demanding.

The Agency's role

The Agency is the principal protector of the water environment in England and Wales. As such, we will be designated by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Welsh Assembly Government as the 'Competent Authority' for implementing the Directive.

We already have responsibility for a wide range of work required under the WFD, but some of our

activities will need to change. Existing strategies for flood management, conservation and water resource planning must be reviewed to consider the implications of the WFD RBMP process. Water monitoring programmes must be reviewed and diffuse water pollution control addressed by working with other relevant authorities.

The Agency will not be able to implement the WFD alone. Close working relationships will be developed with all relevant stakeholders.

As the Government's principal advisor on environmental policy, we recommend that:

- Defra and the Welsh Assembly Government should: **provide appropriate links with other organisations** that undertake monitoring activities; **establish common databases** wherever possible; and **ensure appropriate implementation of the Strategic Environment Assessment (SEA) Directive** as it will assist the integrated planning and effective delivery of the WFD.
- **key policy issues, such as the control of diffuse water pollution, land-use planning, the designation of heavily modified water bodies and the role of wetlands in the WFD must be addressed by relevant authorities.** Particular emphasis should be placed on the diverse sources of diffuse pollution to help to meet the challenging environmental standards required by the WFD for hazardous substances. These include discharges from agriculture and also from other land-uses such as urban developments, transport infrastructure and abandoned mineral workings. Those who manage the land may have to do things in a different way to ensure that they do not cause water pollution.
- **planning authorities and development agencies should be duty-bound to take account of WFD objectives** when developing Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Plans.
- **changes in agricultural policy and farming practices must be achieved** with minimal bureaucracy and maximum support so that agriculture's impact on water quality is reduced.

Background

The UK, along with all other EU member states must implement the Water Framework Directive (WFD) 2000/60/EC. This is the largest and most significant piece of EU water policy to be developed for at least 20 years.

Implementation of the first planning cycle means meeting a series of challenging deadlines:

- 22/12/2003 – Transposition into national law.
- 22/12/2003 – Competent Authority appointed.
- 2004: Completion of summary characterisation reports.
- 2006: Monitoring programmes commence.
- 2008: Public consultation on draft RBMPs.
- 2009: Publish RBMPs.
- 2009-2012: RBMPs enacted.
- 2012: Submission of an interim report describing progress in the implementation of the planning Programme of Measures.
- 2015: Target date for achieving Environmental Objectives.