

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY [Delivered speech may differ]

**Speech for Richard Benyon at the
Water Quality Stakeholder Forum,
18 November 2011**

In a few weeks we will be publishing a water White Paper. Why?

Because we can no longer take water for granted.

In the past century, global demand for water has increased six-fold. Availability, however, has remained pretty much the same.

In this century, climate change and population growth will put more and more pressure on water supplies.

Which means that making sure there'll be enough water in the coming years is one of this generation's biggest challenges.

An integral part of meeting this challenge is to look after our rivers, lakes and wetlands.

As you know, currently only around a quarter of our water bodies are fully functioning ecosystems, capable of supporting wildlife and providing good quality water to human beings.

Under EU law we have a legal imperative to make a substantial improvement to this figure by 2027.

But more importantly we also have a clear moral imperative; and an economic one.

Healthy rivers and lakes deliver a wide range of benefits.

From water that doesn't have to be put through expensive and carbon-intensive treatments before we can use it - to flood protection, recreational opportunities and high supplies of fish.

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We cannot do without water. It's vital for the health of our economy; and it's an essential part of all of our daily lives.

But in order to keep water flowing in our homes and our businesses, we have to make the connection between the water in our rivers and the water in our taps.

The White Paper will describe this connection. And it will describe a vision for a future in which the life cycle of water is understood, and in which water is valued as the precious and finite resource it is.

And it will explain that we all have a part to play in the realisation of this vision. Water is a necessity and must remain affordable to all. At the same time we all have a role to play in reducing water consumption and improving water quality.

Broadly, our aim is to build a Big Society approach to water.

An approach that complements the Big Society approach to nature set out in our Natural Environment White Paper;

And supports the Government's wider economic, environmental and social objectives.

It will describe the actions needed, and map the various roles and responsibilities.

Of course I can't give you a detailed preview of its contents. But I can tell you that water quality is a very strong focus.

It will be clear that we must halt and reverse the damage we have done to water ecosystems. And that this is an urgent task.

It takes forward a key message from the Natural Environment White Paper: that we all have an interest, and therefore a role, in protecting our rivers, lakes and streams.

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We have been damaging our water environment in two ways.

We've been polluting them; and we've been taking too much water out of them.

Over-abstraction compounds pollution, because the less water there is, the more concentrated the pollution will be.

Population growth means that we'll need to take more and more water from our rivers - as much as five percent more by 2020, and 35 percent more by 2050.

The Water White Paper will signpost the way to stopping unsustainable abstraction and the problems it causes.

It will also take forward the catchment-scale approach to diffuse water pollution, which we announced in March.

Catchment scale management is a well proven concept. There are numerous examples from the UK, and from other countries, which show that it works.

Water underpins the ecosystems on which all life depends.

Water quality is inseparable from the way the land around it is managed.

So working across an area whose boundaries are determined by its water makes good environmental sense.

It also makes sense socially.

Catchment-sized projects are local projects, making use of local networks, tapping into local enthusiasm, addressing local concerns.

Across a catchment, all the players can be identified, and come together to take up their roles.

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There could also be financial benefits.

A catchment-scale approach opens up the possibility of integrating with other environment projects. The Local Nature Partnerships, for example, which have come out of the Natural Environment White Paper.

Not only will integration lead to better outcomes for nature, but also over time it's likely to deliver better value for money.

The River Basin Management Plans are invaluable. But they don't take sufficient account of what's happening at a local level. And they don't push us far enough.

That's why we are pushing ahead with the catchment pilots.

And why we are committed to this way of working long term.

The response we've had from our invitation to host pilot projects has been wonderful. We've received 70 expressions of interest. I've been overwhelmed by the enthusiasm shown. The EA will be supporting all of them. We've also selected 15 to home in on and learn from, for when we extend this approach across the whole of England, to support the next cycle of enhanced River Basin Management Plans.

Everyone has a role to play in protecting water quality.

Government's role is to ensure a good evidence base, target funding and regulation wisely, incentivise good practice and promote compliance with current standards.

So we'll be developing the successful Catchment Sensitive Farming project over the next two years, to keep providing advice and incentives on good practice.

We also aim to make better targeted use of the Single Farm Payment and Agri-Environment Schemes under the CAP.

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We will be working with the Highways Agency on road run-off;

With local authorities on their street cleaning regimes;

With industry, to remove harmful chemicals in products;

And with the public, to raise awareness and encourage action.

Funding:

The Secretary of State announced in April that we will be providing an additional £92m over the course of the Spending Review period to support the Water Framework Directive;

This will be allocated to a range of projects, all contributing to achieving Good Status for all our water bodies.

Some of this funding will be available through the Catchment Restoration Fund (CRF), which will run for three years from next April and Rory Wallace will be talking to you about that in more detail later.

Funding will be available through the CRF for the whole of England - and all WFD water bodies will be in scope.

It's impossible to say now how many projects there will be, as their size will vary considerably.

But there will be in the region of £7-10m, available in each of the three years.

What I'm expecting is that government finance will be matched and exceeded by beneficiaries - and all those with a vested interest.

I'm especially keen that water companies develop their important role in funding catchment schemes in Drinking Water Protected Areas.

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Bringing important environmental benefits that avert the need for more expensive treatment solutions.

Changing the way people see and use water is fundamental. It must happen throughout society: in individuals, communities, organisations, industry – and government.

One of our obstacles here in the UK is our frequent rainfall. Especially at this time of year it's hard to persuade people that water isn't limitless, and that parts of England still remain in drought.

Water companies have a critical role in getting us to understand and act accordingly.

- Through the decisions they make around water metering.
- Through more innovative tariffs.
- Through advice, support and technology.
- Improving services to customers, and building stronger relationships with them, will also help shift attitudes and bring results.

We all need to change – and to make change happen. And we need to do this work together, to ensure success.