



The Water Framework Directive

- a summary

INTRODUCTION

The Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC)

(<http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/water/wfd/index.htm>)

is the most substantial piece of water legislation ever produced by the European Commission, and will provide the major driver for achieving sustainable management of water in the UK and other EU Member States for many years to come. It requires that all inland and coastal waters within defined river basin districts must reach at least *good status* by 2015 and defines how this should be achieved through the establishment of environmental objectives and ecological targets for surface waters. The result will be a healthy water environment achieved by taking due account of environmental, economic and social considerations.

BACKGROUND

There have been significant achievements over the past decade or so in improving the quality of surface waters (lakes, rivers, estuaries and coastal waters) and groundwaters in the UK and other Member States. However, during the 1990s it was recognised by the European Commission that there was a need to find a better way of managing the water environment.

WHY WAS A BETTER WAY NEEDED TO MANAGE THE WATER ENVIRONMENT?

There was concern that existing Directives governing the management of the water environment were rather fragmented. They addressed specific issues of importance but, in particular, did not give due priority to the protection of groundwater and aquatic ecosystems. In addition, a more comprehensive approach to water policy was required which encompassed:

- A high level of environmental protection, leading to a clean and healthy water environment.
- The 'precautionary principle' and the 'polluter pays' principle.
- Taking preventative action against pollution and controlling pollution at source.
- Taking account of the costs and benefits involved within a fair water pricing policy.
- Ensuring that wide and active consultation takes place during the development of water management plans.
- The need for international collaboration for certain river basins (e.g. Northern Ireland and Ireland).

WHAT WAS DECIDED AND WHY SHOULD WE BE INTERESTED?

The result was the Water Framework Directive, which was adopted into UK law in 2003. It affects us all because we are consumers and pay for our water but, in one way or another, all our activities give rise to pollution.

An important feature of the Directive is that it encourages active public consultation and involvement in the decision-making process about future pollution control investment. This means we can all have a say in what is needed to protect our water heritage, ensuring that due account is taken of the environmental, economic and social implications of such investment.

WHAT DOES THE DIRECTIVE REQUIRE?

In summary, the Directive requires that all surface waters and groundwaters within defined river basin districts must reach at least 'good' status by 2015. It will do this for each river basin district by:

- Defining what is meant by 'good' status by setting environmental quality objectives for surface waters and groundwaters.
- Identifying in detail the characteristics of the river basin district, including the environmental impact of human activity.
- Assessing the present water quality in the river basin district.
- Undertaking an analysis of the significant water quality management issues.
- Identifying the pollution control measures required to achieve the environmental objectives.
- Consulting with interested parties about the pollution control measures, the costs involved and the benefits arising.
- Implementing the agreed control measures, monitoring the improvements in water quality and reviewing progress and revising water management plans to achieve the quality objectives.

WANT MORE INFORMATION?

The accompanying 'Information Notes' provide more detailed explanations of the Directive, the main organisations involved and how it is being implemented in the UK.

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Foundation for Water Research
Allen House, The Listons, Liston Road,
Marlow, Bucks SL7 1FD.
T : +44 (0) 1628 891589
F : +44 (0) 1628 472711
E : office@fwr.org.uk
W : www.fwr.org