



Representing Drainage
Water Level & Flood Risk
Management Authorities



Chartered Institution of
Water and Environmental
Management



All Party Parliamentary Group *for* Sustainable Flood and Drought Management

Notes of APPG Meeting – 14th July 2026

Attendees:

Lee Pitcher MP (Chair)
Julia Buckley MP
Lord Taylor of Holbeach
Simon Opher MP
Ben Marrett - Representative for Joy Morrisey MP
Theo Clarke - Representative for Sarah Dyke MP

Innes Thomson, CEO of ADA (Joint Secretariat)
Cat Moncrieff, CIWEM (Joint Secretariat)
Isabel Thomson, CIWEM (Joint Secretariat)
Robert Caudwell, chair of ADA (Joint Secretariat)

Invited speakers:

Emily Woods, NFU
Tony Hanson, Environmental Services International
Richard Thompson, Environment Agency

Guests

Tim Davies, assistant to Simon Opher MP
Michael Harrison
Michael Farnsworth, Stormsavers
Richard Leister
Sue Illman
Tamara Walters, Waterwise
Anna Jones
George Warren, Anglian Water
Stuart Stephenson, Affinity Water
Matt Hull, Stormsavers
Amy Cobbet
Oona Muirhead, Policy Connect
Geoff Webb, GMA
Neil Sewell
Rita Singh

Purpose

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the challenges and opportunities for agriculture and recreation around water scarcity and drought.

Emily Wood, Regional Policy Manager NFU: Water scarcity challenges for agriculture – including permissions and finance for on-farm reservoirs and inflexible abstraction licensing.

Current situation:

- As the UK experiences its third heatwave of the year, farmers and growers across the country are working around the clock to harvest crops, keep fruit and vegetables watered and care for their livestock. The impacts of dry weather have been most felt in East Anglia and parts of the southeast. Spring crops, such as spring barley, have been most impacted: emergence has been poor, some crops have been lost, and others are looking like a significant reduction in yield. Where practicable some crops that would not normally be irrigated due to cost have been irrigated to support growth/quality.
- Cessations and more 'Hands off Flow' conditions are now in force and the risk of water outages from Public Water Supply to farm businesses will be increased with these high temperatures.
- Farmers' ability to feed 70 million people relies on access to a secure water supply. However, this supply is being increasingly threatened by growing competition for water, severe weather events and ageing and inadequate infrastructure.

Permissions and finance for on-farm reservoirs:

- As the availability of water in the spring and summer reduces, farmers increasingly need to store more water, collected during wetter periods (that can help to reduce flood risk), to ensure continuous supply.
- Farmers recognise that investment in on-farm infrastructure is critical to secure the future of food production in a changing climate.
- However, investment requires confidence, up front capital investment and in many cases planning permissions. Proposals included in the **Farm Profitability Review**, such as enhanced permitted development rights, the inclusion of structures in capital allowances and National Planning Policy Framework changes, could be targeted to help unlock delivery.
- Under the current system farmers need to invest between £300,000 to over £1M to build a water reservoir. However, the Environment Agency will often only grant abstraction licences for up to 6 years, leaving farmers uncertain if they will be able to recoup their costs. Allowing the Environment Agency to grant longer abstraction licences reduces the upfront risk for on-farm reservoirs and related infrastructure.
- Defra could also launch another round of the Water Management Grant funding, which funded up to 40% of eligible costs, up to £500,000, for investments such as on farm reservoirs and best practice irrigation equipment. This would help to reduce the upfront cost barrier for investment in significant new infrastructure, such as reservoirs, in a targeted way.
- **Increasing on farm water storage is key to greater resilience. However, the planning system, cost and risk are barriers that are holding us back.**

Inflexible Abstraction Licencing:

- Current licences are inflexible and can't respond quickly to changing needs and therefore are unsuitable for a changing climate.



- Dynamic licensing links water abstraction to real time environmental availability instead of fixed static allocations. It allows for greater use during high flows and limiting abstraction during low flows to protect ecosystems. It also could unlock more and quicker options with trading water. This is an approach that would be supported by the water industry and should be inclusive of agriculture. It is encouraging to see the Environment Agency supporting this approach in their Agriculture and the water environment report, but we need to see a rapid upscaling of the trial work that has been conducted to meet the climate challenges we are seeing now. Dynamic licensing is supported by technology and the appropriate regulatory framework – e.g. WRE smart farming trial.
- **NFU ask: that dynamic abstraction licencing is scaled up to support better water use across catchments.**

Tony Hanson, Managing Director of Environmental Solutions International: ‘Problem to Resource’ for sports turf irrigation: catchment-based opportunities and challenges for reducing reliance on mains water supply.

- In 2018, ESI was consultee on the National Framework for Water Resources development, and in 2020-2022 undertook a project with water companies to understand leisure water use, engage sector associations and co-create engagement and resilience guidance for operators. Outcomes included Leisure Association Water Charter, Leisure Operator Water Charters, Leisure Sector Water Working Group. The Charters were incorporated in the UKWIR updated Drought Response Recommendations to the water companies in 2023 p.158. The Leisure Operator Water Charter is explicitly referenced within the Environment Agency's national drought planning documentation and supported by Waterwise.
- The **challenge** for a community or professional sports club (e.g. golf, football, racecourse) is being told abstraction is being reduced or is becoming less reliable, and being asked to reduce reliance on drinking water. The logical response is to capture, store and reuse water. This is simple for collecting stormwater from a carpark, but for collaborative nature-based projects you have to address who controls the water, the ecology, protected species, planning system, abstraction regulations, ordinary watercourse consent, flood risk assessment, installation, maintenance and funding. So before one litre is stored, the project is already in multiple regulatory systems - not because people are obstructive, but because regulation evolved separately.
- Example of Brokenhurst Manor golf club: a project that is in a sensitive environment and losing ‘Hands off Flow’ abstraction. ESI partnered with the Environment Agency, Natural England, and the Rivers Trust. The project delivered multiple benefits to the environment, community and the club in terms of flood storage, slower flows and water quality improvements, habitat creation and biodiversity enhancement. But the stored floodwater cannot be reliably used to store flood water or replace abstraction or mains.
- The bigger picture is that in January water is a problem and in July it’s a scarce resource. The current system pays to move water away in times of flood and search for more water in times of drought, resulting in increasing abstraction pressure and continuing use of potable supplies for non-potable use.
- The **opportunity** is that a delivery network exists across the leisure/sporting sector of thousands of hectares and experienced land managers – who want to be part of the solution. Funding is increasingly available for the types of solutions being proposed, and regulators want to support environmental outcomes. **What is stopping delivery is not willingness or capability but regulatory complexity.**



- **Our ask is that flood management, drought resilience, water reuse and environmental protection are aligned** because every litre stored or reused replaces abstraction and mains water use and improves resilience for communities and the sports sector.
- Our challenge now is creating a system that allows us to turn excess water from a problem into a resource.

Post meeting note: Geoff Webb, CEO of the Grounds Management Association (GMA), followed up with comments that time prevented sharing at the meeting. He highlighted the sports turf sector's long-standing commitment to sustainable water management and the significant work led by the GMA, including the co-creation of the Leisure Association and Leisure Operator Water Charters. However, he made the point that many of the sector's recommendations have not yet been meaningfully adopted by the water industry.

During periods of extreme weather, restrictions can have significant operational, safety and financial impacts on community sport, highlighting the need for greater understanding of the realities of sports surface management and the benefits of resilience measures such as water capture, storage, treatment and reuse. Without greater collaboration between the water industry, regulators and the sports sector, there is a real risk that increasing water pressures will reduce sporting opportunities, undermine participation and place further strain on public health. The knowledge, willingness and practical solutions already exist within the sports turf sector; what is now needed is meaningful engagement and action from the water industry to turn those solutions into reality.

Richard Thompson Deputy Director of Water Resources at the Environment Agency

- Richard made the point that relevant legislation is out of date and needs modernising.
- Environmental Permitting Regulations (EPR) for abstraction licences in on the cards, as signaled by the recommendations in the Water White Paper. This would be implemented under the Water Resources Act. This is not a panacea but will allow licences to be reviewed more quickly and more flexible licensing conditions. It also provides a framework for introducing abstraction flexibility through secondary legislation.
- The Environment Agency is producing a regulatory position statement (RPS) this autumn which will enable the flexibility to take water when a flood warning is in place, and potentially at higher flows (although this is more difficult because of the ecological functions that the higher flows perform).
- The Environment Agency is also exploring the use of data for smarter abstraction, and is undertaking trials with the farming sector, funded by MHCLG, in the Upper Cam. Local Resources Option screening studies are also being explored across the country. The next step is to develop a scaling plan for these approaches.
- Progress is also being made on longer-term licences for filling irrigation reservoirs. The Environment Agency has a proposed method to simplify the process by reducing complex assessments and focusing more on business plans and financial agreements to justify longer-duration requests.
- There is an active piece of ongoing work on reuse for the Clean Water Bill with Ofwat, Defra and DWI

Discussion and Q&A

Lord Taylor commented that what we had heard reflected a failure of governance.

Julia Buckley asked about the specific piece of legislation that required changing for EPR. Richard said this would be implemented under the Water Resources Act.

Innes Thomson asked what more could be done to improve the conveyance of water. Emily Wood highlighted the importance of IDB's role and of maintenance. Tony Hansen indicated that in urban areas highway drainage could cause challenges. Richard Thompson indicated that the smart farming trials should help with moving and accessing water more effectively.

Cat Moncrieff asked about regulations to support the use of 'waste' water. Richard Thompson replied that the RPS in the autumn will also cover the use of rainwater. However, water from other sources is more complex due to their chemical composition. There is a programme of work looking at this, including how wastewater is defined and assessments of what the water is used for.

R Caudwell highlighted that despite the good intentions of the Environment Agency, the reality is very variable in delivery. Local Environment Agency representatives don't always understand the issues and often are too 'black and white' in their approach. Richard acknowledged this feedback and offered to be contacted with specific examples/issues. He emphasised that the Environment Agency were investing heavily in people, processes and guidance.

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Draft Letter to Minister Hardy

Dear Minister,

The APPG for Sustainable Flood & Drought management has this year held three meetings on Lessons from the 2025 Drought (February 2026), Lowland Water Management (May 2026) and Challenges & Opportunities for Irrigated Agriculture and Recreation (July 2026).

Items have been raised in these meetings that we would like to draw your attention to, as set out below.

Lessons from the 2025 drought. The APPG heard reflections on last year's drought from both Water UK and the Environment Agency. The APPG was concerned to hear about the nation's lack of firm plans regarding level 4 (severe) drought, specifically on a clear hierarchy for prioritising water allocation. This is not something water companies can decide; it is a political decision and it is important for everyone to have clarity on water allocation priorities well ahead of a drought. Other democracies, such as Spain and The Netherlands, have this hierarchy in place. We understand that Defra is working on this and we would be grateful for an update as we head into the summer period.

Lowland water management. The APPG heard from the Middle Fen and Mere Internal Drainage Board (IDB) about how the management of land drainage and water resources is currently very siloed, creating challenges for flood and drought management, as well as food security and carbon emissions. We are hopeful that a more integrated approach will be achieved through the integrated water regulator and regional systems planning approach, as signaled by the government's January 2026 water white paper. However, at a more local level, and particularly in lowland areas, IDBs offer a



means of achieving more integrated water resources and flood risk management, tailored to local needs. ~~However, current legislation precludes IDBs being set up or extended. We therefore call for the legislation to be updated to enable this to happen.~~ We will hopefully welcome this Autumn the enabling of the Statutory Instrument for The English Drainage Boards (Alternative Valuation Calculation) to allow local communities to be able to choose if they would like to set up a new water level management board or extend an existing IDB. We also call for legislation to be updated to recognise IDBs as water resource managers.

Challenges & Opportunities for Irrigated Agriculture and Recreation:

We heard how current fragmented regulations are preventing sectors storing and capturing water during high water flows, meaning that they are reliant on mains water supplies or scarce water supplies during dry weather and drought. We also heard from the Environment Agency on some of the reforms to regulations and trials underway. We are concerned about the pace of some of these changes and would urge the government to progress the following without delay:

1. Fast track work to enable abstraction during periods of high flows
2. Fast track work to enable the use of different sources of wastewater for irrigation
3. Scale-up dynamic abstraction licencing, that is linked to real time availability, to support better water use across catchments.
4. Put in place measures to rapidly increase on-farm/site water storage – including through longer licence abstraction periods, water management grants for farmers, inclusion of structures in capital allowances for farmers, and enhanced permitted development rights for reservoirs to reduce the investment risk.

Please could you update the APPG on how these reforms are being progressed.

Yours sincerely

Lee Pitcher MP, Chair of the APPG for Sustainable Flood & Drought Management