

How to stop Britain running dry

You might think, looking at the rain, that this country could never be short of water. The opposite is true, and we all need to learn to use less

The UK is not thought of as a country with a water shortage problem. However according to Waterwise, a pressure group, London is drier than Istanbul, and the South East of England has less water available than Syria or the Sudan.

Water is scarce in many parts of the UK, yet each person in the UK uses about 150 litres of water every day. Water consumption is set to be one of the biggest world environmental issues in the coming decades – and the UK will be no exception.

Elaine Coles, head of research at IMS Consulting, says the UK water and wastewater sector has to balance the potentially conflicting demands of financing a massive investment programme while keeping prices low. “Consumers want safe, reliable water supplies, the freedom to choose how much they use and bills that are kept as low as possible.”

Water companies have to invest significantly to address issues that include adapting to and mitigating the impacts of climate change, leakage, waste reduction, population growth and increased demand. “To some extent, the water companies are stuck between a rock and a hard

place,” says James Cadman, of consultancy AEA. “They have to provide high standards to comply with the regulations, but they have to do it at the lowest cost possible.”

In 2006, as the country faced hosepipe bans because of drought, more than 3.5bn litres of water was being lost to leaks every day, causing public outrage. But the water companies are having to deal with city infrastructures that date back well over a century.

Water UK, the body that represents the companies, says a comprehensive mains replacement programme will cut wastage by 300m litres per day

by 2010, or enough water for 2m people.

Climate change is also causing big problems. Recent years have illustrated how water supplies can be affected by more frequent and more extreme weather events. The drought of 2006 was followed by the most serious floods the UK has seen for decades, and they both caused water shortages. Cutting energy use will loom large in future plans – the industry uses a lot of energy to pump and treat water, says AEA’s Mr Cadman, and the bigger companies are looking at ways to generate electricity using sewage, which is becoming increasingly viable as energy costs increase.

Regulations and strategy

Standards are ensured by a range of regulations, headed by the EU’s Water Framework Directive, which comes into effect in 2009 and is likely to cost billions to implement. The government has also recently launched a water strategy, Future Water, which aims to bring consumption down to 120 litres per person per day, through efficient technology and tariffs.

The strategy will ask whether there should be compulsory water metering for all homes in water-stressed areas. All new homes must have water meters installed, but it is not currently compulsory for existing homes. To ensure public support for metering, which can save most households about 10% of their consumption, water companies need to get to grips with the leakage problem, says James Cadman at AEA.

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