

Blueprint for Water response: Proposed changes to the water company drought plan guideline

24th January 2025

This consultation response is on behalf of Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link), a coalition bringing together 86 organisations to campaign for the natural world.

This response is supported by Angling Trust, Campaign for National Parks, Friends of the Earth England, Institute of Fisheries Management, Paddle UK, River Action, The Rivers Trust, The Wildlife Trusts, Waterwise.

Summary

Blueprint for Water¹ welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation on water company drought plan guidance.

We raise a number of concerns with the guidance in our response. In particular, we note that the framing and language used throughout the document is extremely weak with regards to environmental elements, impacts and actions, and that in many cases environmental organisations are not listed as relevant organisations with whom water companies should coordinate and plan drought responses.

We note that this consultation, and the consultation on ‘Drought – How is it managed in England’, are being held during the same period as multiple consultations on flooding. It is disappointing that the relationship between these issues is not acknowledged in these consultations, or in the proposed approaches to management and mitigation. A more holistic approach to managing water is required.

Furthermore, we suggest that the framing and content of these consultations has been, in places, unhelpful. For example, the framing of questions asking for stakeholder views on how

¹ [Blueprint for Water](#), part of Wildlife and Countryside Link, is a unique coalition of environmental, water efficiency, fisheries and recreational organisations that come together to form a powerful joint voice across a range of water-based issues.

well the document describes or communicates content, as opposed to asking for stakeholder views as to whether that content is appropriate or sufficiently comprehensive.

Whilst we generally feel that these documents are well written, we are concerned that they describe the standing approach to drought management rather than presenting ambitious, holistic, or proactive solutions, and continues to neglect elements and impacts beyond public water supply.

We would be pleased to discuss any of the points raised in our response – or in our response to any of these wider flooding and drought consultations - further.

Questions

Are you providing an individual or personal response, or a response on behalf of an organisation or group? Please choose one of the following:

Responding on behalf of an organisation or group

If you selected (b), what is the name of the organisation or group?

Blueprint for Water, part of Wildlife and Countryside Link.

We would like to keep you informed about the outcomes of this consultation. If you would like to receive emails acknowledging your response and or telling you when we have published the summary of responses, please select from (tick all that apply):

Yes, I would like to receive an email acknowledging my response. Yes, I would like to receive an email to let me know the consultation response document is published.

Email address

eleanor@wcl.org.uk

Can we publish your response to this consultation?

Yes.

Please tell us how you found out about this consultation:

From another organisation.

Question 1: Is the guideline clear on what water companies “must” and “should” include in their drought plans?

Please choose one of the following answers:

Neutral.

Why do you think this? Please answer below.

The document clearly states that ‘must’ refers to statutory guidance that must be followed for plans to be legally compliant, and that ‘should’ refers to what the Agency believes is best practice to produce an adequate plan.

However, whilst this system is undeniably very clear in the guidelines, we question whether this criteria for the use of ‘must’ and ‘should’ is helpful. Legal compliance is the bare minimum that companies should be achieving; companies must be encouraged to develop rigorous, ambitious drought plans that can boost resilience in the face of rapidly changing climate and increasing drought risk. The distinction between ‘must’ and ‘should’ as currently used risks implying that companies aim for a plan that does not extend beyond legal compliance. This is compounded by a lack of explanation as to what sufficient justification for this from water companies would be, and how this would be assessed. Section 1.2 should more strongly set out the case for adhering to all the items currently covered under ‘should’ advice.

In places throughout the guidelines document, the use of ‘should’ is further undermined – for example, on page 14 which states that companies ‘*should consider* carrying out discussions with other consultees’, including independent challenge groups, the Consumer Council for Water (CCW), regional water resources groups, and ‘any other groups or organisations that your drought plan is likely to affect’. The involvement of these stakeholders will be essential to developing holistic, proactive drought plans, yet the current wording of the guidance does not reflect this. In addition, neither the drought plan guideline nor the supplementary guidance ‘Environmental assessment for water company drought planning’ explicitly states that companies should engage with local environmental organisations (other than with regards to impacts on fisheries, and data for monitoring); we suggest that it is made clear that companies should at a minimum engage with the owners / managers of nature conservation sites wherever these sites could be impacted by the actions contained in the drought plan being developed.

As the guidelines document currently reads, most elements concerning the environment and/or environmental impacts are communicated as ‘should’ rather than ‘must’. For example, the sections on drought triggers. On page 21, the document states that companies should identify ‘*if* and where you can help to minimise the possible environmental impacts of dry weather’, including fish in distress. This page also states that companies ‘should consider’ developing environmental triggers for nationally sensitive sites such as chalk streams, and that companies ‘should consider’ how these triggers may work alongside other triggers – for example, to help a company act earlier to implement their drought plan and actions.

Whilst the steer encouraging companies to take action to minimise environmental impacts is welcome, the language used is completely out of step with the poor state of the natural environment, our insufficient resilience to water scarcity, the increasing risk presented by extreme weather, and legally binding targets to halt the decline of nature by 2030 and restore waterbodies to good health by 2027. Already 15% of rivers and 27% of all groundwater sources in England are over-abstracted. Drought is catastrophic for aquatic animals and plants, with unnaturally low flows leading to fish deaths, algal blooms, increased concentration of pollutants, and some waterbodies drying out entirely. Fish kills are not acceptable; the language must convey that everything must be done to prevent them.

The Environment Agency should strengthen the language in these sections to make it clear that environmental triggers and impacts are critical elements of drought management planning, and should be afforded significant weight in this process. The requirement to minimise environmental impacts should be essential, not optional, reflecting and referencing relevant Statutory and Statutory-Plus obligations set out in the WISER. At the very least, the Agency should amend this phrasing to state that companies ‘should’ develop environmental triggers for nationally sensitive sites.

Current drought management approaches and practice focus overwhelmingly on public water supply (PWS) triggers and impacts, to the detriment of both the environment and agriculture; the guidelines as written risk perpetuating this.²

² We discuss this further in our response to the Environment Agency consultation ‘Drought – How it is managed in England’. Wildlife and Countryside Link’s full response can be accessed here:

[WCL Response National Drought Management Consultation Jan 2025.pdf](#)

Companies wholly or mainly in England that have operations within National Parks or National Landscapes must also consider their statutory obligations to seek to further the purposes of these landscapes.³

Under section 245 of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (2023) water companies in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, these landscapes, must seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing:

1. Wildlife, natural beauty, cultural heritage and promoting opportunities for public enjoyment in National Parks, and;
2. Natural beauty in National Landscapes.

Question 2: Is the guideline clear on how water companies should show the actions they will take at each drought level?

Please choose one of the following answers:

Neutral.

Why do you think this? Please answer below.

The guideline clearly expresses how the Environment Agency would like companies to show the actions they will take at each drought level. However, we do not agree that the steer given as to what these actions should be is correct.

As discussed, the Environment Agency should strengthen the language in the guidelines document to make it clear that environmental elements and impacts are integral to the planning process. For example, on page 25, the guidelines document states that including actions to mitigate environmental stress within action summary tables is optional. This should be amended to state that actions to mitigate environmental stress should be included alongside actions to protect PWS. As written, this risks implying that the act of mitigating environmental stress is optional, and far less significant than actions to protect PWS. Whilst we understand that some measures (such as TUBs) may have a legislative basis that (currently) precludes their use for purposes outside of protecting public water supplies, or prevents their use until specific

³ [Guidance for relevant authorities on seeking to further the purposes of Protected Landscapes - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/guidance-for-relevant-authorities-on-seeking-to-further-the-purposes-of-protected-landscapes)

conditions are met, EA should make clear to companies that where there are other actions available that could be taken with the aim of reducing the environmental impacts of drought ahead of any impact upon PWS, the expectation is that companies will take them.

The guidelines document states that an example of a level 1 action, to be taken during prolonged dry weather, could be to implement communication campaigns to encourage more efficient water use. Messaging and comms regarding the importance of water saving and preparedness for drought should be sustained all year-round, rather than being limited to periods of prolonged dry weather when impacts – particularly environmental and agricultural – are already being felt. Additionally, this responsibility for communication and engagement should not be left to water companies alone, given the lack of a single ‘trusted voice’ on water scarcity and saving.

Question 3: Are the further demand actions proposed to reduce residential customer water use in the guideline adequately explained for the water companies?

Please choose one of the following answers:

Neither agree nor disagree.

Why do you think this? Please answer below.

Potential further demand actions are listed clearly, as are the requirements for how these should be explained within company plans. It should be clarified that these lists are neither exhaustive nor fully comprehensive, and that the needs and context of that water company area must be taken into account – for example, if the area is already water stressed, or is home to sensitive habitats such as chalk streams and/or species such as Atlantic salmon.

In Blueprint for Water’s response to the EA consultation ‘Drought – How it is managed in England’, we called for updated national guidance to allow a more proactive use of measures such as temporary use bans (TUBs). We also recommended that these should be considered drought management tools rather than systemic failures.

The current framing means that TUBs are only implemented once a PWS drought is declared, when impacts are likely already being felt. For example, in the 2022 drought TUBs were only

issued in August, which was too late. With the risk of extreme weather increasing, we cannot rely on water resources infrastructure alone to manage the impacts of drought. The use of TUBs to stave off impacts on water supply and the environment should be increasingly considered a legitimate management tool for mitigating drought impacts, rather than an indication of companies failing to plan properly. This contrasts with the use of Drought Permits and Drought Orders by the industry, which will typically result in greater impact on the environment at a time when it is already under severe stress.

The guidelines document states that water companies do not have to make use of TUBs before a Drought Order when exceptions are in place, including if the company can prove that there would be 'no expected environmental impact' from the Drought Order, or when savings from TUBs would be judged to be minimal. However, the guidelines do not clarify how companies will be required to demonstrate these exceptions, or by what criteria these cases will be judged. Further detail is required.

The guidelines should support companies to communicate the purpose of TUBs in environmental and agricultural protection. For example, through requiring companies to explain the environmental implications of the action.

As discussed, the Environment Agency must strengthen the language and framing used throughout the guidelines document to ensure that the significance of environmental elements and impacts is incorporated into the plans.

Question 4: Do you think the information provided on extreme drought management actions will help water companies in planning for a more severe drought in the future?

Please choose one of the following answers:

Neither agree nor disagree.

Why do you think this? Please answer below.

A stronger steer must be provided to the sector by Government regarding emergency drought

plans, so that water supply priorities in an emergency drought situation are based on Government policy rather than determined by individual companies.

The Security and Emergency Measures Direction provides a framework rather than specific detail, for example stating that ‘in the event of an unavoidable failure of piped water supply, ensure that such minimum supply is provided by alternative means, as may be notified to the company by the appropriate authority’. It is unclear to what extent this notification has been or will be provided, so given that emergency plans are not published, details of this Government steer should be shared with stakeholders for scrutiny to ensure that they are fit for purpose and that key organisations are aware and engaged. We understand that the specific detail of such notification may be extremely sensitive and are not suggesting that it be published; rather, we suggest that key stakeholders should be reassured that the detail does at least exist and, that if not already communicated to companies, that there is a robust process for doing so in the event of an emergency drought.

Question 5: Do you think customers and stakeholders will gain a better understanding of their water company drought plans through the water company summaries?

Please choose one of the following answers:

Neither agree nor disagree.

Why do you think this? Please answer below.

The document states that companies should include a communications plan covering the onset of drought, during drought, and post drought ‘during recovery’. However, water saving comms and messaging is required year-round to build awareness and resilience. Limiting these activities to hot, dry periods when impacts are already being felt and opportunities for mitigation are reduced is not sufficient. This should be stated within the guidelines document, and the requirement for comms planning amended accordingly. Public trust and satisfaction with the water industry is at a record low, and water companies are therefore not necessarily

perceived as a 'trusted voice'.⁴ The guidelines should encourage companies to consider how they will meaningfully reach audiences given this context. For example, the guidelines could make more explicit the connection that is needed between drought management measures and wider water company performance, such as on leakage management. Water company leakage rates are a significant disincentive for people and businesses to consume less water; improving leakage rates could therefore support more effective messaging and comms.

A non-technical summary for customers and stakeholders, published on company websites could indeed be a valuable tool for communicating the key points of Drought Plans. However, customers and stakeholders will only gain understanding from water company summaries if they choose to find them and read them. The aforementioned lack of trust and satisfaction in the water industry at present may decrease the likelihood of members of the public proactively seeking information from their company on drought. Furthermore, information is not always transparent, obvious or accessible on water company websites. The guidelines should encourage companies to explore additional, more compelling forms of engagement and outreach to build awareness of drought plans.

The summaries and communication of them should include a basic explanation of why a Drought Plan is necessary; there will be customers who inherently consider that 'all drought impacts should be avoidable' in the same way as some people feel that any flooding event demonstrates a failure to properly protect people. Such assumptions are likely to mean that those customers do not engage readily with water-saving messages, so a clear justification for the overarching approach of managing droughts would be a useful communication starting point. Key points should be drawn from the 'Drought: how it is managed in England' document and / or developed accordingly.

The guidelines must direct companies to ensure that all information is provided in an accessible format – for example, in formats that will be legible to screen reading software, and using clear and simple language.

eNGOs and other environmental stakeholders should be included in the list of 'interested parties' that water companies should consider coordinating communication campaigns alongside.

⁴ Consumer Council for Water. (2024). [Trust in water companies reaches a 13-year low amid falling customer satisfaction - CCW](#) 'Trust in water companies reaches a 13-year low amid falling customer satisfaction'.

Question 6: Is there anything in the guideline which you think is unclear, missing or wrong?

Yes.

Please explain your answer and refer to the sections and page numbers relevant to your comments.

We are concerned that the guideline document describes an approach to drought management that is not sufficiently ambitious, holistic, or proactive, and continues to neglect elements and impacts beyond public water supply. The severity and scale of the risk presented by drought, and the significant impact this is having – and will continue to have – on the environment does not come across. We suggest that the framing used will simply encourage companies to create drought management plans that are compliant with baseline statutory requirements, rather than driving the ambition and long-term approach that is needed to build resilience.

To summarise our key concerns with the guidelines doc, and where we believe content is unclear, missing or wrong:

- Environmental groups are not adequately included in the lists of relevant organisations to pre-consult or coordinate actions and communications with. This is contrary to the fact that avoiding environmental impacts is one of the two key pillars of drought planning, and that customers are increasingly concerned by the poor health of the natural environment. The only place in the document where environmental groups are specifically mentioned is in discussion of environmental triggers. It is vital that environmental groups are consulted here, but they should also be drawn upon to contribute much-needed environmental expertise across the wider drought plan process.
Examples: pages 14, 44.
- The guideline should be strengthened with regards to environmental triggers for sensitive sites. Currently, the guideline only states that drought plans ‘should consider’ setting out triggers for sensitive sites, which is extremely weak. If the ‘should/must’ formula is maintained, this phrasing should at least be amended to state that drought plans ‘should set out’ triggers for national and locally sensitive sites, or those with low resilience such as chalk streams. In the absence of the Chalk Stream Recovery Pack, being developed by Defra at the request of the previous Government, this Drought

Plan Guidance presents an opportunity to set out more specific, protective guidance on chalk streams – an opportunity which is currently missed, with the introduction to the consultation stating instead that stakeholders will have an opportunity to input ‘when water companies consult on their draft drought plans 2025’. Instead, EA should set out more explicitly its expectations around actions to reduce impacts to chalk streams.

Example: page 21.

- The guideline currently only recommends pre-consultation with Natural England if extreme actions could affect protected sites. This should be strengthened to a requirement.

Example: page 37.

- The guideline states that water company comms and messaging on drought need only occur during the onset, during, and post-drought recover periods. This should be amended to state that water saving comms and messaging is required year-round, to build awareness.

Example: page 41.

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 86 organisations to protect the natural world. Wildlife and Countryside Link is a registered charity number 1107460 and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales number 3889519.

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This response is supported by the following organisations:

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