



for a living planet[®]



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The Rt Hon. Andrea Leadsom MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Nobel House
17 Smith Square
London
SW1P 3JR

20 April 2017

Dear Secretary of State,

Water and land management policy post Brexit

Earlier in March, a group of MPs and representatives from farming, environment and angling groups came together at a roundtable chaired by Richard Benyon MP. The objectives were to try to build a consensus for better land and water management and to identify solutions to reduce the impact of agriculture and abstraction on rivers and fisheries. With just 1 in 5 rivers in England and Wales classed in good ecological health, and future opportunities and threats arising from the plans to leave the European Union, we all agreed that it is vital that the new government takes leadership on water and land management early in the next Parliament.

We agreed that there is considerable opportunity to improve future water and land management policy. At the roundtable, we discussed the principles for better land and water management post Brexit that were shared by all the organisations in attendance.

Most urgently, there was clear consensus that reform of the abstraction regime is necessary to enable effective business planning by farmers and to protect the water environment. We all agreed that this cannot wait until the 2020s and we are concerned that the current government has indicated that the primary legislation, promised in the 2011 Water White Paper and reiterated during the passing of the 2014 Water Act, has now been postponed despite wide cross-sector and cross-party support for the reforms. Given the dry winter has left reservoir and river levels exceedingly low, with water companies considering imminent hose pipe bans, abstraction reform is more urgent than ever. We want to see the promised Water Bill in the next Queen's Speech or enactment via secondary legislation as soon as possible, alongside action to put a healthy water environment and sustainable land management at the heart of future environment, farming and Brexit policies.

Principles for better land and water management post Brexit

- 1) We need to maintain high standards of food production and environmental protection. Important EC Directives, like the Water Framework Directive must be maintained, strengthened and enforced after Brexit.

- 2) We want to see the same level of financial support for farming post Brexit with farmers and land managers rewarded based on outcomes achieved. We support the principle of payments for public goods rather than for land area or production.
- 3) We must have far greater long term planning, with a catchment based approach, and longer term financial support to help deliver security and improved outcomes.
- 4) There is a case for transitional payments to invest in slurry storage and other remedial works to separate clean and dirty water on farm.
- 5) The current system of water abstraction licences is not flexible enough to ensure the efficient use of water whilst protecting the environment. We believe reforms are necessary to correct for this which are also fair to existing and future abstractors.
- 6) It is important that there is a common level of regulatory compliance (e.g. with basic rules) which is enforced to avoid unfair advantage and there should be a clear separation between the roles of advisors and regulators.
- 7) Water and catchment management must be given a far higher priority in public policy and should be at the heart of the new government's environment and farming plans, integrating flooding and water company business planning with new farming and land policies.

We are sending a copy of this letter, which has cross party support, to the Opposition Environment Teams in the hope that consensus can be reached on the need to deliver much needed abstraction reform as soon as possible after the forthcoming general election. We look forward to seeing clear commitment from the government to improve the health of our rivers and support sustainable land management.

Yours sincerely,

Rt Hon Richard Benyon MP, Chair
Charles Walker MP
Scott Mann MP
Angela Smith MP
Mark Lloyd (CEO, Angling Trust and Fish Legal)
Charlotte Hitchmough (CEO of Action for the River Kennet).
Arlin Rickard (CEO, The Rivers Trust),
Rob Cunningham (Head of Water Policy, RSPB),
James Gray (National Chairman, Tenant Farmers Association),
Rose O'Neill (Water Policy Manager, WWF)