

NFU position: Water company strategic supply infrastructure (public reservoirs)

Summary position

The NFU acknowledges that the expansion of strategic water supply infrastructure is a vital component of improving long-term, multi-sector water management as a critical response to climate change.

The NFU supports for the broad aims of Government's Water Resources Planning Framework which is consistent with principles embedded in the NFU Integrated Water Management Strategy (IWMS).

However, the NFU believes that all new public water supply infrastructure must be designed and built to deliver multi-sector benefit (including agriculture) such that agricultural water needs are recognised as an explicit part of resource use plans. The NFU also believes that both the design and implementation during construction must be carried out in a way that minimises impact on land ownership and farming operations.

In terms of the promotion of individual schemes, the NFU is committed to playing a role in the interrogation local decisions to mitigate the difficulties experienced by farmers and local stakeholders.

The NFU believes that land which is of lower agricultural value and/or that is voluntarily surrendered should be subject to special consideration during in the process of site selection prior to developer reliance on compulsory purchase.

Introduction

Government's Water Resources National Planning Framework sets out the scale of the challenge in meeting future demands for water in England. It explores water needs across all sectors (including agricultural and horticulture) at the national and regional level. Five cross sector regional planning regional groups have been created to shape water company plans and investment and to deliver greater co-ordination across the sectors.

Five draft regional water plans will be published in early 2022. Most of them will promote strategic water supply options (that may or may not benefit agriculture), such as public reservoirs, with the ambition that they will be ready for construction as early as 2025 to 2030.

The capture, storage and distribution of surplus water and the integration of flood risk and drought risk management are fundamental elements of the NFU's Integrated Water Management Strategy (IWMS) published in January 2021 and so, in principle, there are good reasons to support these projects in terms of their potential to deliver strategic water security.

However, NFU experience of infrastructure projects such as HS2 clearly demonstrate that NFU members can face a range of difficulties as landowners, land managers and businesses when projects are promoted and delivered. These difficulties can include poor communication from the developer, loss of land (both permanently and temporarily), significant disruption to farm operations both during and after construction and financial consequences due to delays in and/or inadequate compensation.

NFU Integrated Water Management Strategy

The NFU IWMS illustrates that pressures faced by farmers and growers in managing 'too much' and 'not enough' water is likely to become so great that they will not always be solved at the farm level. Cooperation and collaboration within the farming community, and with other sectors such as water companies, will be therefore vital in our response to managing extremes.

Our IWMS acknowledges that the development of regional water planning is an important step forward which should create opportunities to promote multi-sector schemes where farmers, water companies, energy companies and others can share the benefits of new and improved facilities.

Integrated water management is “a process which promotes the coordinated development and management of water, land and related resources in order to maximise economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems and the environment”. This means moving away from ‘silo thinking’, the better use of existing infrastructure to make it dual purpose where appropriate and the development of innovative new schemes.

To deliver IWMS as proposed by the NFU, it will be important that all new infrastructure is designed and built to deliver multi-sector, including agricultural, benefit and not merely for the benefit of the public water supply sector.

The impact of infrastructure projects on farmland

The NFU IWMS makes it clear that the taking of land for major infrastructure projects - reservoirs, dams, and pipes - to improve water management can also have significant adverse impacts on farm businesses.

The NFU believes that the development process must protect the needs of landowners and ensure that they are actively involved in the decision-making process at all stages; and that decision making process is timely and transparent.

To ensure the best outcome for everyone involved the NFU believes that:

- Compulsory purchase powers to take land should be used as a last resort and voluntary agreements should be reached where possible
- Developers should promptly pay enhanced compensation reflecting the dislocation, distress, income lost and loss of land because of a project
- Habitat mitigation should be carried out to achieve ‘no net loss’ of biodiversity
- Land take should be kept to a minimum and only the land needed for the scheme itself should be taken
- Land should be taken on a temporary basis where possible and returned to agricultural use at the end of construction.

In addition, the NFU believes that:

- The developer should communicate and consult at an early stage with affected landowners and occupiers in regard to the proposed and final design of projects
- Any necessary accommodation works should be incorporated within the design and implemented to minimise the impact on farm businesses
- An aftercare programme for soils and field drainage should be planned, funded and implemented
- An ‘Agricultural Liaison Officer’ should be engaged at an early stage from preconstruction works
- The developer/contractor should show a duty of care at all times to claimants.