

EAST ANGLIA



The agricultural and horticultural sector in East Anglia benefits from drier, warmer weather patterns combined with some of the most fertile and productive soils in the UK.

Farmers in the region are major growers of combinable crops such as wheat and barley and produce a significant proportion of the nation's food derived from fruit and vegetable crops, potatoes and sugar beet, as well as poultry and pig production. Agricultural produce is delivered into a food processing industry that is the UK's largest manufacturing sector.

The Fens (which includes a significant part of Lincolnshire in the East Midlands) is the heart of British food and farming. It is often referred to as the breadbasket of Britain, due to the amount of cereal crops grown here. However, it is also the linchpin of vegetable, salad, flowers and bulb production.

Although it covers less than 4% of England's farmed area, the Fens produces more than 7% of England's total agricultural production, worth a staggering £1.23 billion. The whole food chain, from farm to fork, employs 80,000 people – equivalent to the population of Peterborough – and generates more than £3 billion a year for the Fens' economy.

Highly productive farmland surrounds the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads, the UK's largest wetland and recognised as internationally important, which provides a habitat for some of the rarest plants and animals in the UK.

Similarly, the mild climate, light sandy soils and well-developed business infrastructure of catchments like the Brecks and Coastal Suffolk allow them to make an important contribution to national food security and the local economy.



These, and other catchments in East Anglia, are highly dependent on secure water supplies for crop irrigation.

East Anglia faces significant and increasing risks of water shortages because of the prospect of more frequent and severe droughts. But water availability is already under pressure from housing growth and the need to protect and enhance the environment. Irrigated agriculture here is highly dependent on our chalk aquifers which are considered 'over-abstracted' and the condition of our chalk rivers (such as the Wensum, Nar and Cam) are causing increasing concern.

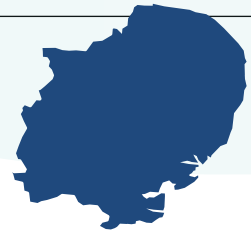
Rivers in East Anglia are also under pressure with no further water deemed to be available for 'direct' abstraction from most of them. Farmers continue to respond and adapt by building reservoirs to store water abstracted at times of high river flows.

East Anglia is also characterised by low-lying, coastal landscapes making it vulnerable to flood risks arising from both heavy rainfall events and storms. Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex enjoy extensive lengths of coastline (the Essex coastline alone comprises 350 miles of predominantly rural seawalls) making them particularly exposed to flood risks from sea level rise.



Around 30% of the region is at, near or below sea level, and high value fruit and vegetable production tends to be concentrated in these areas. A network of drainage channels operated and maintained by Internal Drainage Boards plays a key role in flood prevention.

One of the main areas of concern for farmers in the region is the maintenance of rivers and water courses to minimise their flood risk. This type of management was historically provided by predecessors of the Environment Agency as a public service but is now much less prevalent in rural areas.



Regional priorities:

- Secure access to reliable quantities of water, to allow multi-year farm production planning.
- Minimal complexity in regulatory processes, allowing farmers to secure water for business need, when they need it.
- Certainty that productive farmland is recognised as valuable and deserving of protection against sea level rise and extreme weather.
- Partnerships working across the region, to deliver maintenance, repair and enhancement of critical infrastructure to reduce flood risk.
- Major upgrades in the flood defence infrastructure of the Fens and the Broads. Developing the partnerships to do this presents an opportunity to link with better spatial planning of water resources infrastructure to move and store water from areas of surplus to areas of deficit.
- This work could also be combined with policies to enhance the quality of the water environment helping farmers prevent and reduce levels of diffuse pollution entering our waterways while at the same time boosting soil health.
- Adoption of policies that give farmers confidence to take on debt and invest to make businesses sustainable and fit for the future.
- Reassurance that rural livelihoods are considered a policy priority, and that the health, safety and welfare of the rural workforce and their livestock is taken seriously during crisis events.
- Involvement within decision-making processes so that farmers have confidence in the decisions affecting their lives and livelihoods.
- Clarity around decision making and the availability of options relevant to their business.

