

Droughts and water restrictions
Competition between users
New European regulations
Increased environmental protection
Climate change

Working together to protect water rights

Forming a Water Abstractors Group (WAG) can reduce emerging risks to your agri-business.

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WAGs can make a difference

Are you concerned about the future of irrigated agriculture? Will you be able to maintain your existing licensed water volumes? Will future government policy move water away from agriculture to satisfy increasing demand from urban consumers and the environment? Will climate change mean more licence restrictions? One of the most effective ways of reducing these risks is to form a Water Abstractors Group (WAG).

An important industry at risk

Agriculture is a major contributor to the rural economy. In the Eastern Region it provides employment for some 50,000 people and contributes £3 billion annually. Over 1000 farms, both large and small, depend on irrigation to supply high quality fruit, vegetables, and potatoes to the UK market – all grown without EU subsidy support.

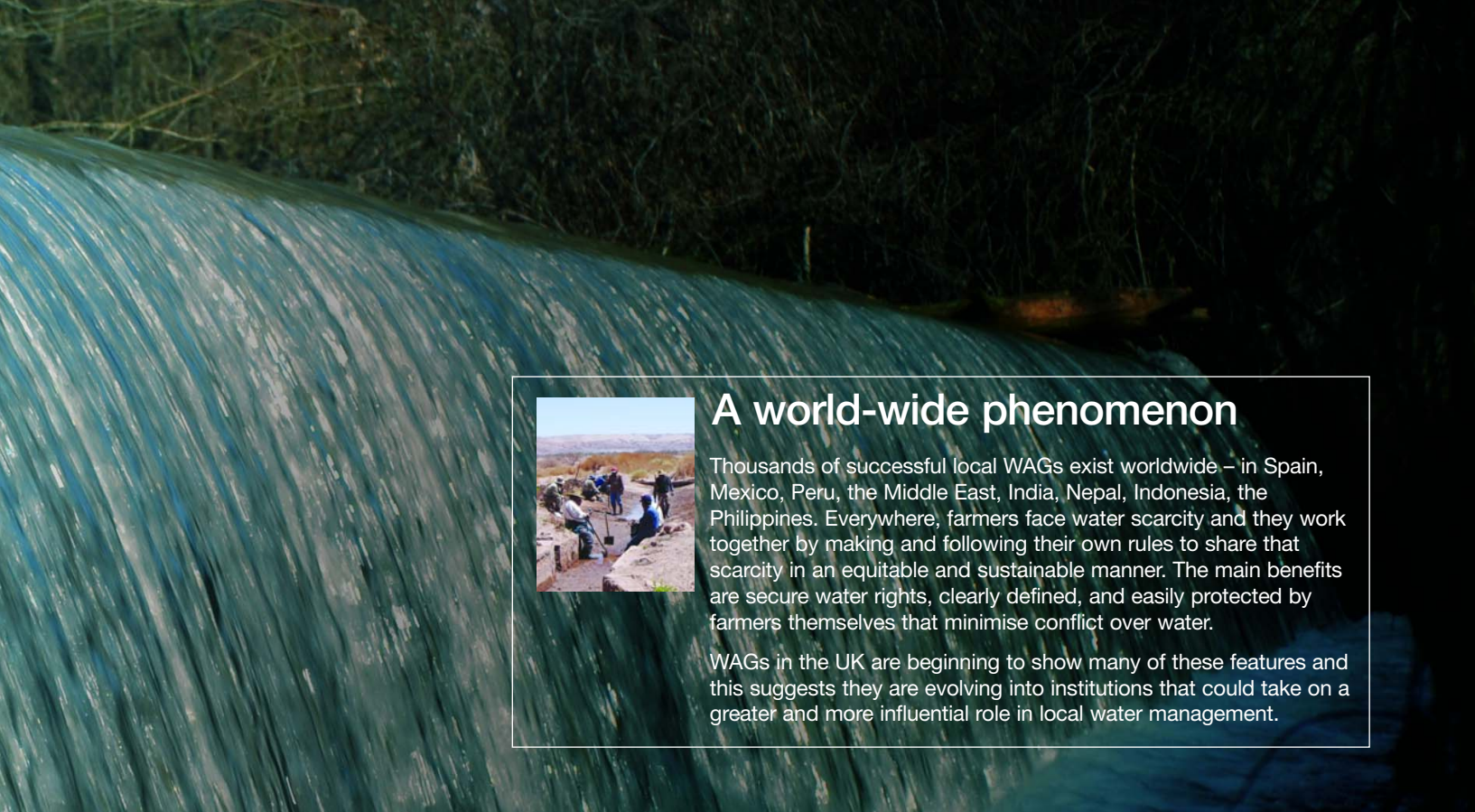
Yet agriculture is last in line when it comes to allocating water in times of drought. Other users – domestic, industrial, and the environment – are given preference. This policy, together with changes in catchment abstraction management (CAMS), has meant that many farmers are now reluctant to invest in long-term irrigation infrastructure. Climate change will only add to this challenging situation, when hotter drier summers reduce water availability and increase irrigation demand. To survive and prosper abstractors need to make their case for a fair share of the nation's water resource. Individual abstractors speak out about the importance of water to their business, as does the UK Irrigation Association and the NFU. But that lobbying is too fragmented. A more coordinated and coherent voice is needed at local (catchment) level.



This guide will help you to understand what a WAG is and what it can do and achieve, and show you how to go about setting up a group with your neighbours.



Abstractor groups can make a difference – when WAGs form, farmers come together to defend their right to irrigate, to build a direct channel of communication between themselves and the regulator, to foster a commitment among members to use water efficiently, and to provide a strong voice to influence future water policy.



A world-wide phenomenon

Thousands of successful local WAGs exist worldwide – in Spain, Mexico, Peru, the Middle East, India, Nepal, Indonesia, the Philippines. Everywhere, farmers face water scarcity and they work together by making and following their own rules to share that scarcity in an equitable and sustainable manner. The main benefits are secure water rights, clearly defined, and easily protected by farmers themselves that minimise conflict over water.

WAGs in the UK are beginning to show many of these features and this suggests they are evolving into institutions that could take on a greater and more influential role in local water management.

WAGs are already organising

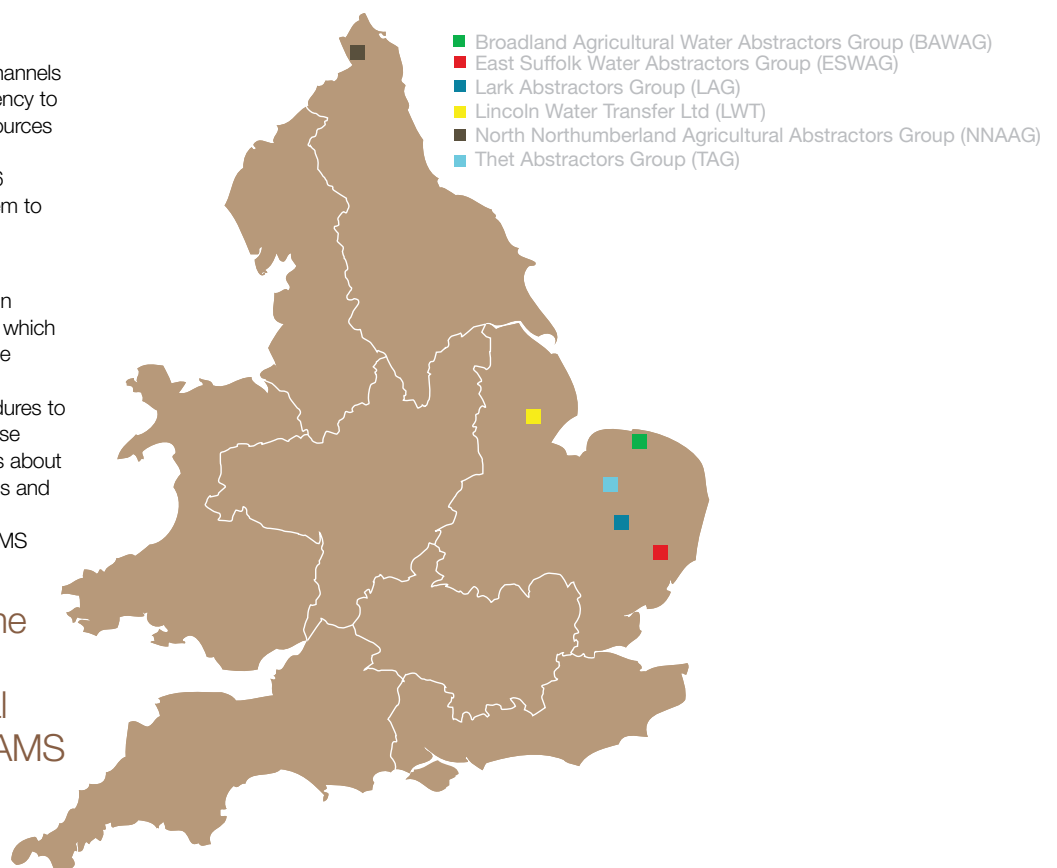
Six WAGs are already operating in the UK – four in East Anglia, one in Lincoln and another on the River Till in Northumberland. Most formed because of significant threats of water shortage in order to lobby the Environment Agency and other stakeholders about the importance of irrigation – something that individuals alone could not easily do.

‘It’s only by being united that we can have a credible case that will be heard in the corridors of politics where it will be listened to’ – WAG abstractor

Some WAGs have now established good channels of communication with the Environment Agency to negotiate how best to use limited water resources in their catchment. In one case this was so effective that one farmer described the 2006 drought not as a crisis but more of ‘a problem to be dealt with through negotiation with the Environment Agency’.

One WAG has produced valuable information about the economic importance of irrigation which is helping to keep water for agriculture on the public agenda. Two WAGs are working with researchers on in-field water auditing procedures to improve irrigation management. They organise training courses to regularly inform members about the water resource status in their catchments and promote new practices to improve irrigation efficiency. All are actively engaged in the CAMS process in their respective catchments.

Eastern England is a prime location for new WAGs. There is scope for several new groups within the CAMS catchment boundaries.



Would you benefit from forming a WAG?

Ask yourself this question:

Would you rather face water restrictions alone and defend your own interests – or would you rather be one of the few who are organised and well prepared to defend and justify their use of water for irrigation?

Before you answer this question try this 5-minute test to see if you would benefit from forming or joining a WAG. Simply answer 'yes' or 'no' to the questions below, add up your score and then go to the box for the results.

Q1. Is irrigation crucial to your business?

Y [1] N [0]

Q2. Do you think that you are able to adequately defend your irrigation water rights individually?

Y [0] N [1]

Q3. Do you think existing organisations you are a member of are able to defend irrigation water rights in your catchment?

Y [0] N [1]

Q5. Are you aware of the main water policy issues that will impact on your business (e.g. CAMS, Water Act 2003, EA requirements for licence renewal, Habitats Directive)?

Y [0] N [1]

Q6. Do abstractors in your catchment have a constructive working relationship with the Environment Agency and other organisations?

Y [0] N [1]

Q7. Do you think the views of irrigation abstractors are sufficiently considered in water policy-making?

Y [0] N [1]

Q8. Do you think that the importance of irrigated agriculture to the rural economy is sufficiently understood by policy-makers and regulators?

Y [0] N [1]

Q9. Would farming in your area benefit if abstraction licences were more flexible and abstractors were more directly involved in water management?

Y [1] N [0]

Q10. Have you had recent access to training to improve your irrigation efficiency?

Y [0] N [1]

Q11. Do you think that cooperation between abstractors would increase the chances of securing grant funding for irrigation projects?

Y [1] N [0]

Q12. Do you think that abstractors need to collaborate and work together more to meet the future challenges of water scarcity?

Y [1] N [0]

Now add up your score to see if you would benefit from forming or joining a WAG.

4 or above – a WAG is likely to benefit you and reduce the risk to your business, especially if you are heavily dependent on irrigation.

Less than 4 – A WAG may be less useful to you. But you may score less than 4 if you are already a WAG member and reaping the benefits.

Although the scoring is subjective and the various issues raised will vary in importance from one abstractor to another, the aim is to highlight some of the advantages that WAGs have brought their members over the years.



‘We want a sustainable system so that we know that the money we have invested in irrigation is not at a stroke of a pen removed from us – I think that is what scares a lot of us’ – WAG abstractor

How do WAGs form and develop?

What does it take to set up and run a successful WAG? Here are some of the key ingredients:

Crucial for starting up

- A **dependence** on irrigation for a sustainable farming business

- Threat** to livelihoods in the form of increasing resource scarcity

- A small number of **key individuals** who have the knowledge, skills and motivation to form a group

- People who take a **medium and long term view**

- A desire to have **increased influence** in local water management issues

Important for maintaining a group

- A strong **common interest** in water resources amongst members

- Clearly defined **geographical boundaries** for both the group and water resource

- Developing knowledge** of water resources, water usage, and local water management issues

- Demonstrating the **benefits** to members through a **step-by-step** approach

- Value for money**, with benefits proportional to costs

- Members have **autonomy** to devise their own institutions and rules

- Openness and cooperation** between members, and a good working relationship with key local stakeholders

Working together pays dividends

Existing WAGs know that being 'ahead of the game' and promoting responsible and sustainable agricultural water management is the best strategy to bring their members the greatest long term benefits.

Better cooperation with the Environment Agency

The **East Suffolk Water Abstractors Group (ESWAG)** was formed in 1997 when holders of spray irrigation licences in East Suffolk were served with a Section 57 notice restricting their abstractions. Irrigators felt threatened and realised they needed to defend their interests. The relationship with the Environment Agency at that time was confrontational. Irrigators felt the Environment Agency did not understand the importance of irrigation but they also realised that they were not sufficiently organised themselves or outward-looking enough to exert any influence. The two sides could not agree on the data used for decision-making.

Today, the relationship is very different – it is open and cooperative. ESWAG has built a credible and united voice and is able to put forward reasoned arguments, particularly in raising awareness of the importance of irrigation to the local economy. There are regular group meetings for dialogue, discussion, and an improved flow of information. Increasingly, members have realised that cooperation and collaboration, built on areas of mutual interest, are essential components of meeting future resource challenges.



'For our WAG to be credible we had to get to know these people [environmental pressure groups] so that we could work with them. We have had contact with them and it has improved the situation. They are not as bad as we thought, there are areas that we could work together for mutual benefit. It's all been for the good' – WAG abstractor

Staying ahead of the game

The **Broadland Agricultural Water Abstractors Group (BAWAG)** is leading the way in promoting on-farm water efficiency. So much so that one of its members was recently commended in the 2007 Environment Agency Water Efficiency Awards. BAWAG members have also participated in water efficiency training programmes supported by Defra RDS and Natural England. This has helped to raise awareness of water efficiency issues amongst its membership – a particularly important issue in this part of East Anglia where water resources are under severe pressure from increasing demands from all sectors, including agriculture.

The group was formed in 1997 in reaction to concerns about reduced abstraction licence volumes as a result of the 1994 Habitats Directive. Today the group has 170 members from the North Norfolk and Broadland Rivers CAMS areas.

BAWAG's proactive approach has enabled members to develop a better understanding of their local catchment hydrology and the importance of irrigated agriculture to the local economy.

Because members now act with confidence and are seen to be irrigating responsibly, a much better working relationship with the Environment Agency has emerged making sudden and unexpected restrictions in times of drought much less likely.

A wider role in water management

Lincoln Water Transfer (LWT) is a limited company formed in 2000 with 19 members. Rather than forming reactively, the group emerged through early collaboration between the Environment Agency, the Upper Witham Internal Drainage Board, and the local NFU. Flexibility and pragmatism, rather than confrontation, were the keys to success, in order to bring business benefits from increased irrigation.

Today, LWT holds a single abstraction licence in common for its members. It allocates water according to a collectively agreed-upon protocol and manages its own arrangements, using the internal drainage board to collect data and monitor water use. These arrangements allow members, within the agreed rules, to abstract water from 25km of drainage channels and irrigate any of the 4,600ha of land defined in the licence, thus allowing flexibility in water and land use.

LWT is a model of cooperation which will be highly relevant to other WAGs as they evolve and mature, in response to increasing pressure on water resources and the greater flexibility in use that this requires.



[On managing water resources], ... 'In my view the last person to manage it should be those up there. It should be those on the ground who manage it – those who wish to should be allowed to do it'
 – WAG abstractor

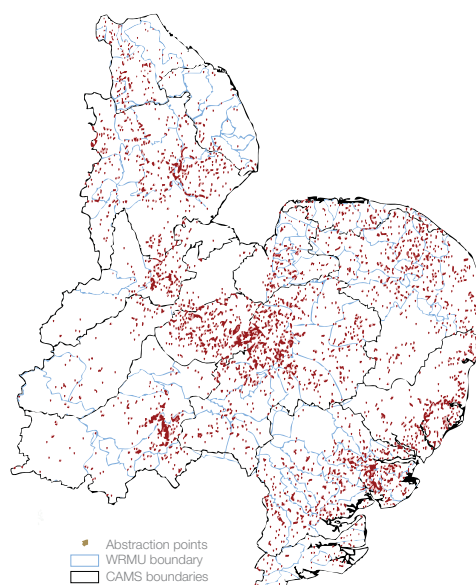
A stronger role in local water management?

Will WAGs eventually evolve from their present role as communicators to take a more active part in local water management? Many similar groups in other countries, including the USA and Australia, already undertake such tasks – will UK WAGs follow this trend?

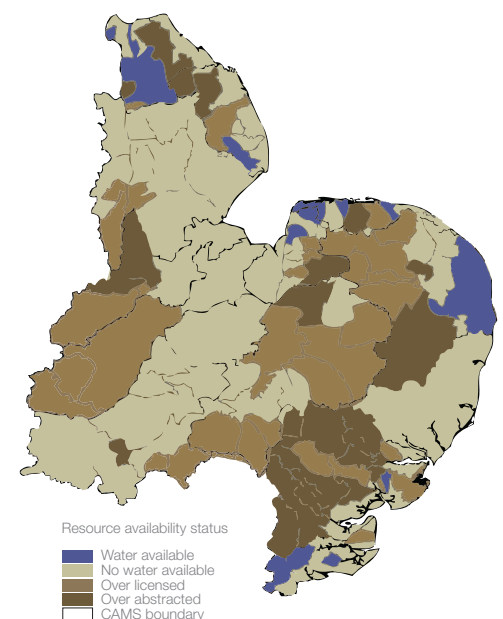
Already many forward-thinking WAG members feel there is a strong case for greater local management of water resources. In the case of the Lincoln Water Transfer, this is already beginning to happen. Experience in other countries has shown that this can lead to improved irrigation efficiency and more flexible water allocations through licence trading. If WAGs are encouraged and supported to take this broader role we can expect a much wider range of responses to the emerging challenges in water management.



Location of agricultural spray irrigation licences



Status of water resource availability



23% of all irrigation abstraction licences are located in areas defined as 'over-abstracted'
 47% are located in areas defined as 'over-licensed'

Register your interest

If you would like to form or join a water abstractors group please register your interest at www.ukia.org or contact:



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