

**January 2026**

UKIA is the only independent organisation representing irrigation in the UK. We are a voice for a fair share of water for agriculture. We advocate the wise use of water for agriculture and amenity and promote good irrigation design and management.

Leader: Last year I wrote that *'so many issues in farming, is there an ideal time to talk about water for agriculture'*. Following 2025 as the driest hydrological year since 1976, particularly the long dry summer and its impact on water restrictions and crop yields, it is indeed time to focus on water for agriculture. The big question now is *'will there be a drought in 2026?'*

Of course there really is no simple answer to the drought question. The Environment Agency says YES, unless we have at least long-term average (LTA) rainfall through the winter. In this case, most irrigation reservoirs will be able to refill. But above average is needed to return rivers to normal levels, and 120% LTA for chalk aquifers to recover. The Met Office forecast suggests there is a 30% chance of a dry winter, which is not encouraging. For much more details on drought, read more in **Bob's Blog** (p5).

This year we are seeing a **plethora of reports** and particularly **consultations** which can be time consuming and even confusing when there is so much more happening around farming. **Bob's Blog** (p5) nicely lists all the main consultations currently open so please do have a look as avoiding them can be interpreted as a lack of interest.

Bob also takes us beyond England and into Scotland with a report from the Scottish Envi-

ronment Protection Agency (SEPA) which I hope will bring us nearer to truly representing the UK as an irrigation association.

Bob also lists all the current reports around water for agriculture including **Minette Batters Farm Profitability review 2025**. This is not specifically about water but she does propose a 'one-stop-shop' dashboard for business advice, schemes, grants, knowledge exchange, and support. Such a 'shop' would be ideal for bringing together all the many aspects around water for agriculture in one place.

The **House of Lords Environment and climate change committee** is engaged in a wide ranging assessment of drought preparedness against a backdrop of increasing drought risk due to climate change. Agriculture and irrigation are playing a part and you can listen to evidence presented by the NFU and Norfolk and Suffolk abstractor groups: a Master Class on the key issues facing irrigation farming in the face of drought (p4).

Two excellent Master Classes this autumn, one on drought from Bob Hillier, and a second from Richard Reynolds, Anglian Water who discussed the dilemma facing PWS and farmers when they see plenty of water in the river but cannot take it because of poor quality (p4).

Our conference in March

Pressure on water resources for agriculture continues to increase, but all is not gloom and doom. New water resources are limited, so it makes sense to focus on making better use of what we already have. **This is our**

conference theme (p3). It's not a new story, but it is an important one and we have given it a new twist. Current concerns about water shortages have prompted new thinking and ideas. We are all aware that **building reservoirs** is a 'no-brainer', but the advances in **electronic sensors** and **Artificial Intelligence** is enabling farmers to monitor water flows and make near-real-time decisions about water applications. This can mean irrigating crops when they need water, rather than being constrained by availability. Other technologies include smart farming, precision irrigation and managed aquifer recharge.

Continued on P2

Missed some of our recent Newsletters?

Back numbers are available in the Members section of our website.

Go to www.ukia.org

Melvyn Kay UKIA Exec Secretary

W: www.ukia.org

E: m.kay@ukia.org

T: 07889081300



Our conference (contd)

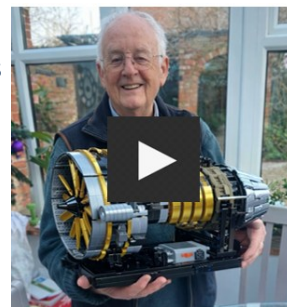
Innovative management approaches can secure and share water resources more effectively. One approach is for farmers to work together, form Water Abstractor Groups (WAGs) and connect abstractors with Regional Water Resource Groups to ensure agriculture is included in water resources planning, thereby supporting integrated water resources planning.

At the **policy level**, the government is preparing a White Paper on water resources, and this is expected to follow the independent Cunliffe Water Commission's recommendations, signalling renewed attention to the sector.

Our guest speaker, Jyoti Baneerjee (p3) is passionate about breaking down 'silo thinking' and replacing this with a systems approach to regenerating regions that not only secures water for agriculture but also encourages investment in locally owned plans for climate-resilient farming, nature recovery, and regional prosperity. He is engaged in what is called a transition project with WRE and farmer groups in the Fens to demonstrate how these ideas can translate into practice.

"Autumn rainfall, although very welcome, doesn't get us out of the woods yet for 2026" says **Mima Boardman** Environment Agency (p9). resources for 2026. (p9).

Finally do not forget to support **Sarah's important survey on water sharing** (p2)

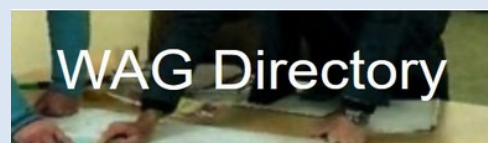


My Christmas box. A Lego like aero-engine in 2250 pieces. I need help!
[Click to see progress](#)

(Note: No one was hurt in making this video!)

Water Abstractor Groups

Mark Betson NFU writes in this Newsletter about progress with Water Abstractor Groups (WAGs) (p8). WAGs continue to be, promoted by government, the Environment Agency, and industry organisations such as the NFU and UKIA. Some 14 groups are now in various stages of development described as '*emerging, evolving, mature*'. The UKIA has now established [a WAG Directory](#) so you can get help and advice if you are thinking of forming or joining a group. Links also to the contacts within the regional water resources.



Contacts within Regional Water Groups



Water Resources West Sarah Faulkner, sarah@fmagri.co.uk

Water Resources East Teresa Meadows, teresameadows@wre.org.uk 07701 213767



Water Resources North Andrew Thompson, 07876 407734 artnm76@outlook.com

West Country Water Resources Giles Rickard



Water Resources South East Samantha Hughes samantha@southeastriverstrust.org



WRE – Water Sharing Governance Survey

Your experience as an agricultural abstractor is central to shaping how it is managed in the future.

The Water Resources East Smart Agri-Abstraction Trial: Water Sharing Governance Study aims to identify fair, practical, and trusted approaches to water sharing and trading that reflects the real needs and preferences of farm businesses like yours. By taking part in the survey, you will directly inform several key areas of the study, from understanding day-to-day operational challenges and barriers to collaboration, to guiding the governance principles that will guide future water sharing arrangements.

Please complete this survey now and help shape the future of water sharing in your catchment.

[Water Sharing & Trading in UK Agriculture — Abstractor Survey](#)

Water Sharing & Trading in UK
Agriculture — Abstractor Survey



UKIA Annual conference 2026

Farming the future: Getting the best from available water resources

Wednesday 4 March 2026 Orton Hall Peterborough



10% earlybird discount to end of January

10 Free places for U35s to attend our conference

For exhibition stand space contact Ruth on r.gage@ukia.org for details and registration

***Water for agriculture is under more pressure than ever** — but it's not all doom and gloom. With limited new water available, there are many innovative ways to make better use of what we already have.*

We explore **technical options**: on-farm storage, smarter water resource management, rainwater harvesting, precision irrigation, and managed aquifer recharge.

Hear how **management approaches** can secure and share water resources by forming Water Abstractor Groups and connecting abstractors with Regional Water Resource Groups to ensure agriculture is included in water resources planning, thereby supporting integrated water resources planning.

At the **policy level**, the new government's White Paper on water resources, following the independent Cunliffe Water Commission's recommendations, may signal renewed attention to the sector.

***This conference** brings together farmers, researchers, and water managers to share knowledge, showcase innovation, and explore practical ways to build resilience, reduce waste, and secure reliable water for the future.*

Speakers



Our guest speaker is Jyoti Baneerjee, North Star Transition: Exploring the Fens Transition Lab
Jyoti is passionate about the need for a 'systems' approach to regenerating the Fens not only to secure water for agriculture but also to encourage investment in locally owned plans for climate-resilient farming, nature recovery, and regional prosperity.

Mima Boardman + ANO: Environment Agency: Latest developments following the Cunliffe Water Commission's recommendations and the government's White Paper on water resources, progress on Environmental Destination and Local Resource Options supporting the work of Water Abstractor Groups.

Bob Hillier The Growing Voice: After the Third Drought in Eight Years: What Next for Agricultural Water Resources?

Sarah Faulkner Faulkner & Mayne Sustainable Agriculture Ltd. Sarah is leading the development of Water Abstraction Groups in Shropshire and beyond.

Georgia Sakellariou WSP: explores a governance framework to integrate agricultural water needs into regional water resources planning: connecting Water Abstractor Groups with Regional Water Groups.

James Brown Polybell Estate: Offers a farmer's perspective on water for agriculture and his plans to secure water resources

Andre Monblanch and Jerry Knox Cranfield University on modelling opportunities for smart water resources management in the River Strine catchment, Shropshire.

Teresa Meadows WRE on the new (£300K) Smart Farming Initiative supporting irrigating farmers (Funded by the Environment Agency)

Rob Soley WSP on groundwater options and future development for food security. Rob writes: *This is a good time to remind ourselves that 'Groundwater is Great!' as a drought resilient source of water - both for public and agricultural supplies, and also to keep flows going in rivers, and wetlands wet!*

[For full programme, presenters, registration and free places click here](#)

Latest UKIA master class videos

Master class (video)

Balancing the drop and the dirt:

Water quality vs quantity

Richard Reynolds Anglian Water

Master class (video)

Post drought: What next for agricultural water resources

Bob Hillier: The Growing Voice

Lots more available on [UKIA website members section](#)

House of Lords enquiry



[The House of Lords Environment and climate change committee](#) is engaged in a wide ranging assessment of drought preparedness against a backdrop of increasing drought risk due to climate change. Agriculture and irrigation are playing a part and you can listen to evidence presented by the [NFU and Norfolk and Suffolk abstractor groups: a Master Class on the key issues facing irrigation farming in the face of drought.](#)

Our [UKIA Industry Directory](#) is growing — join us



Your membership is important to us, particularly in these challenging times.

Thank you if you have renewed. If not a gentle reminder to pay your membership fee

Invoices were sent in the post. If you have not received yours, please contact Ruth at r.gage@ukia.org

You can pay online by PayPal or debit/credit card at www.ukia.org, by BACs, cheque or standing order.

Individual membership is still only £60

U 30? Junior member includes all benefits of Individual membership

Membership + includes an entry in our Directory at £100.





Bob's blog

It's been a busy few months professionally for me. I left the EA role to focus on my agricultural water resources consultancy and news business at [The Growing Voice](#). I have had some wonderful encouragement and support from the sector, including Lindsay Hargreaves, Mark Betson, Anthony Hopkins and of course Melvyn Kay.

Following the drought impacts earlier in the spring and summer, the ongoing wet start to autumn has led to eight areas improving and moving into recovery or normal status. The EA's message to farmers is to take the earliest opportunity to refill irrigation reservoirs, if conditions allow, to maximise their water resilience for next year.

Farmers should be prepared to take water during high-flow events to maximise the fill of on-farm reservoirs.

However, some farmers have highlighted that despite continuing rain, water quality issues (e.g. salinity) have constrained refill similar to water companies. [Average rainfall through the end of March indicates reservoir refill is generally good across England](#). Aquifer levels appear to be on the turn in East Anglia, providing much-needed water for summer ground-water abstraction and boosting base flows in rivers. The EA will publish its initial irrigation prospects in February as usual.

The EA received around 30 agriculture [flexible abstraction](#) requests this year, so it would be helpful to share the lessons learnt with the sector ahead of next summer.

If you are considering **changing your abstraction licence** this winter to improve resilience to drought and longer-term climate change impacts, I suggest you do it sooner rather than later. The Environment Agency states it will endeavour to process pre-applications within 50 days (currently around 30 days).

However, due to demands on the National Permitting Service from other workloads and a reduction in their capacity over the past year, they have a significant backlog of applications, and you may experience a longer wait than usual before your application is allocated to a Permitting Officer.

SEPA's [Autumn Water Situation Report](#) shows that the east of Scotland enters winter with substantial rainfall deficits, following the driest hydrological year in this region since 1976, below-average rainfall in nine of the past eleven months, and record-breaking temperatures earlier this year. Groundwater levels in parts of Fife, Angus and Aberdeenshire remain the lowest November levels on record. If rainfall is average or below

EA's message to farmers is to take the earliest opportunity to refill irrigation reservoirs...

There's been an enormous amount of consultation on water resources issues this year. This ranges from the [National Planning Policy Framework: proposed reforms and other changes to the planning system](#) through to [Environmental Destination](#) and [Reserving water abstraction rights](#). The EA plans to

this winter, parts of eastern Scotland could face more severe water scarcity next year than in 2026. SEPA will publish a report in early March 2026, providing an assessment of conditions ahead of the spring and summer period.



host a webinar on the latter consultation in the New Year, so look out for it. It would be encouraging if the agriculture and horticulture industry journals and the EA engaged more to produce articles that a) highlight awareness to grassroots farmers and growers and b) ensure a more fundamental understanding of the technical issues and implications for businesses.

Complementary to this, **Water Resources East is running a series of catchment workshops** through to the end of March 2026. These are excellent opportunities for farmers and growers to collaborate with other abstractors/water users and to feed into regional water resources planning. Workshops have already been run in the River Lark and the Glens. For more information, please get in touch with teresameadows@wre.org.uk. Having agricultural water resource options embedded in regional strategies is likely to become increasingly important for successful rollout, given the prospect of regulatory measures reducing abstraction pressures in catchments.

There's been an enormous amount of consultation on water resources issues this year...

Bob's (Hillier) blog (cont'd)

[The Farming Profitability Review 2025](#), an independent review led by Baroness Minette Batters, has just been published. The Water Management Section highlights the work of the Norfolk Environment Food and Farming abstraction group and the need for a revised approach that better balances the protection of local sites with food production and environmental considerations. The report recommends that Defra embed an evidence-led, partnership approach with the farming industry in regions where water abstraction for food production is needed.

In the vision for change section, the aim is to create a **'one-stop-shop' dashboard** for business advice, schemes, grants, knowledge exchange, and support. The service would provide a user-friendly interface for farmers, giving them a single portal to engage with farming schemes, apply for grants, exchange knowledge, plan succession, develop skills, and access continuous professional development, all in one place.

In response [The Secretary of State, Emma Reynolds, has announced](#) the creation of a new Farming and Food Partnership Board, which she will oversee with the Farming Minister, Dame Angela Eagle. The board's objective is to place greater emphasis on food production. This promises to make it easier for farmers to develop infrastructure such as reservoirs, greenhouses, polytunnels, and farm shops, strengthen domestic food production, and ensure that policy delivers real change for farmers. The Farming and Food Partnership Board will tackle barriers to private finance by bringing together farmers, agri-food businesses, and major financial institutions to attract investment in farm transformation, productivity, and nature.

Despite this flurry of government activity, the publication of the Water White Paper on improving the water sector regulatory system has been kicked down the road into the New Year.

Meanwhile, the EA is believed to be planning to consult in the New Year on proposals for agriculture water resources funding. It would be helpful to think that any funds could be used to support the sector in obtaining abstraction li-

cences, particularly for groups that have undertaken [local resource option screening studies](#).

The cost of abstraction licences to fill reservoirs has soared in recent years from £135 to thousands of pounds a pop, plus an increase in annual charges. Pre-application costs can now run into the thousands, while basic online information on water availability in Abstraction Licensing Strategies is often years out of date.

a **'one-stop-shop' dashboard...** would provide a user-friendly interface for farmers, to engage with farming schemes, apply for grants, exchange knowledge, develop skills, and access continuous professional development

[The Corry Review](#) discussed deploying a fair and consistent 'thin green line' for regulatory compliance, with trusted partners earning autonomy. The Rivers Trust and Wildlife Trust have been given this status. What do WAGs need to do to be considered? Perhaps this is something to be discussed nationally with the EA through organisations such as the Water for Food Group.

WRE is running its smart abstraction trials in the Upper Cam, aiming to enable dynamic catchment management in near-real-time, so I look forward to seeing the results of this work. Something comparable to how the Lower Nene is collaboratively managed, allowing farmers to access water when water companies are not abstracting, would be ideal.

The latest reboot of the [Environmental Improvement Plan](#) has made an all-time low bar commitment to farmers on collaborative, sustainable water use. It enables an increase in the number of Water Abstraction Groups from seven to fourteen by 2030. The [UKIA website](#) already lists fifteen in existence.

Bob's (Hillier) blog (cont'd)

[The House of Lords Environment and Climate Change Committee is running an inquiry on Drought Preparedness.](#)

[The EA has recommended](#) that the government commission it to assess whether we are investing [enough?] to protect our future from a water crisis and whether current plans are sufficient. It has also recommended that the government commission the Committee, the water industry, and other regulators to work with Defra to conduct a joint assessment of whether current predictions of climate change are sufficient to prepare for an uncertain future.

Concerns about the timescales for delivering water company water resources infrastructure have led regulators, for example, to ask Cambridge Water to undertake feasibility studies on the emerging South Levels Water Resources Option. This project assesses the feasibility of farmers constructing new storage reservoirs primarily for public water supply.

[Some revealing discussions at the Environment and Climate Change Committee meeting 10th December.](#)

Andrew Newton, principal engineer, Ely Group of Internal Drainage Boards, argued for more integrated water management: *"For too long, flooding and drought have been siloed; they are never joined together. We need to bring this together under water management. We are seeing drier summers. We are also seeing wetter winters and more intense rainfall over a short period of time, so we need to be smarter about how we manage the systems in the future to make sure we have that storage when the water is there."*

Sarah McMath, CEO of MOSL (market operator for the non-household water retail market in England) admitted: *"On the question about demand forecasting, I think it is well acknowledged that demand forecasting for non-household is not as robust as it is for household. When you look at restricting abstraction licences, let us look at farmers. Their preference will be to use raw water abstraction, partially because it is cheaper, and it has lower carbon associated with it. If you restrict that abstraction licensing, a lot of those farmers will simply turn up the public water supply."*

Meyrick Gough Managing Director, Water Resources South East commenting on the effectiveness of demand management measures said: *"The risk part of me, the annoying nagging voice in the back of my mind, is that if we miss the PCC [Per Capita Consumption] target by one litre per day I will need to find 20 million megalitres of water per day from somewhere else. That is the size of the recently build Havant Thicket reservoir. That is, if I miss it by one. If I miss it by five, you can scale up."*

Comment: Up to 2040, 80% of England's public water supply is planned to be met through demand management, so I can imagine many sleepless nights for Meyrick and his colleagues!

[The NFU's Impact of Climate Change on Farming Report](#) was also recently published. 528 members across all NFU regions completed the 2025 survey. The survey showed significant variability in weather-related financial losses over the past decade. Nearly half of those impacted reported losses of at least £10k; however, 12% reported losses of more than £100k.

A wide range of adaptation measures was highlighted. Measures relating to water management ranked high on the list, including improved field drainage and the need for easier rainwater harvesting and reservoir storage.

The report concluded that it is crucial for the government to demonstrate leadership in developing a framework for water management. Security of supply and significant investment in on-farm water infrastructure to enable farmers to grow more fresh fruit, vegetables, and other crops, and to build resilience in the farming sector.

This comes on top of the [Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit \(ECIU\) report](#) that arable farmers in the UK are facing an estimated reduction in revenues of over £828m following one of

the worst harvests the UK has seen. Crop production has been hit by the hottest spring and summer on record as well as drought conditions.

Tom Lancaster, land, food and farming analyst at ECIU, said, *"This has been another torrid year for many farmers in the UK, with the pendulum swinging from too wet to too hot and dry. British farmers have once again been left counting the costs of climate change, with four-fifths now concerned about their ability to make a living amid a rapidly changing climate."*

"With confidence in the sector at rock bottom, there is an urgent need to ensure farmers are better supported to adapt to these climate shocks and build their resilience as the bedrock of our food security."

We continue to await the next round of the **Water Management Grant** to help build this resilience, although discussions are apparently ongoing regarding rolling it out in a targeted way in the Cambridge area, reflecting the government's priority on sustainable growth in the region.



Promoting Water abstractor Groups

Mark Betson National Water Resources Specialist, says NFU promotes the formation of Water Abstractor Groups to help farmers and growers make better use of existing water resources.

Water Abstractor Groups (WAGs) for agricultural abstractors have been, and continue to be, promoted by government, the Environment Agency, and industry organisations such as the NFU. My own view is that they should be a serious consideration for any farm business that depends on abstracted water.

In my professional role, I know that water is a complex space. Understanding local abstraction licensing strategies and how they align with national policy is a challenging mix of technical skill and crystal ball-gazing that most abstractors do not have time to master. Particularly with more pressing concerns such as access to labour and crop protection products, which remain high on the agenda for growers in the horticulture sector.

However, finding options when water is scarce may not be quick or easy, as the drought this spring/summer has brought into sharp focus for some. Those who were prepared had the means to plan with water and the opportunity to mitigate the worst of the dry weather.

Although these are acute incidents of water shortage, there are also more predictable licence reductions for catchments with historic over-abstraction. While not as immediate as a drought, these will impact many abstractors from 2028 onwards.

From the well-established WAGs such as Norfolk Environment Food and Farming (NEFF) and the East Suffolk Water Abstractors Group (ESWAG), I understand that the main driver for their formation has been through the direct communication of serious changes to abstracted volumes in the immediate or near future. The organisations have been effective in protecting access to water for their members, contributing to NEFF (formerly the Broadlands Agricultural Water Abstractor Group, BAWAG) being in operation now for nearly 30 years.

There have been some encouraging signs recently of new WAGs forming and of existing groups formalising their collaboration to address the water issue (see www.ukia.org for more information). Their formats vary based on members' needs and the pressures they face. Pre-existing relationships, such as with a farm cluster, may be the kernel around which a shared water interest can be developed into a WAG: groups that already have a degree of understanding of what the businesses involved need.

The examples of WAGs so far indicate that someone coordinating its activity is necessary for it to form, and who acts as the conduit for the relevant information to be communicated to members, who can relate the likely challenges coming forward to the growers they know, and provide feedback to their members' needs to regulators and planners.

While there is some support currently through Regional Water Resource planning groups to get WAGs up and running, it may be short-term. For those abstractors who value being one step ahead, groups need to look at ways to be self-sustaining in accessing the expertise they need. Membership may require subscription to do this, as is the case with the established WAGs, and every business will need to assess the value this could bring to gauge if it would be a worthwhile investment, looking towards the future.

While there is a lot of start-up activity with WAGs nationally, prompted by the current interest and time-limited regional funding, there will be several events going on, inviting abstractors to hear about the water challenges in their area and discuss if a WAG might be right for them. These will be opportunities for growers both to shape the WAG that would be of most benefit to them, geographically, and to see how it would fit with existing farmer groups in the area. They can then make a value assessment and get involved if it adds up.

A helpful introductory booklet is available from the UKIA for anyone considering forming or joining a WAG. If this is something you could be interested in, but don't know if there is one operating or looking to start in your area, then you are welcome to contact me, and I can try to put you in touch with local leads.

Mark Betson (mark.betson@nfu.org.uk)



From the Environment Agency

This has been a tough year for agriculture with below average rainfall across the country and many areas being in prolonged dry weather and drought. Autumn rainfall, although very welcome, doesn't get us out of the woods yet for 2026.

[Read more in our agricultural drought prospects for spring 2026](#) and [Prospects for winter re-fill of irrigation reservoirs and drought forecast for 2026](#)

On 01 December the Met Office issued their outlook for December, January and February for all of the UK. The likelihood of a dry winter is now at 20%, a decrease from the previous likelihood for November-January of 30%.

Therefore, the Met Office is predicting average precipitation across the UK in the next three months, with an increased chance that December will be milder and wetter than average.

This does not consider regional variations, East Anglia still requires **above average** rainfall to return to normal conditions in the spring as soil moisture deficits need to be overcome before groundwater recharge can occur. With the short term (1month) showing a wetter signal than the longer term (3month) the Environment Agency encourages abstractors to take water when licences allow to refill reservoirs and bank water in case of a dry start to 2026.

The Met Office also provide weather services for [Contingency planners](#)

Time-Limited Licence renewals: if you haven't renewed your licence yet please do asap.

If you miss the renewal deadline **you will have to put in a new application** and be assessed from scratch.

Sign-in or sign-up for Water Resources Licensing Service to manage your licence online and receive e-alerts for hands off flow conditions. [Manage your water abstraction licence online - GOV.UK](#)

Catchments (some licences can be off cycle so check your licence!) with 2026 common end dates are:

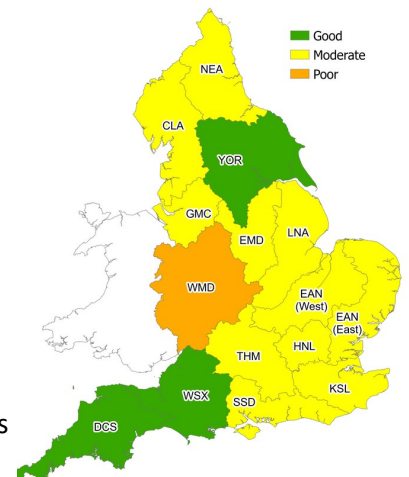
East Suffolk; Welland; Worcester Middle Severn; Idle and Torne; Wear; Esk; Derwent and West Cumbria; Tamar; South Devon; West Somerset Streams; West Dorset Streams; Cherwell, Thame and Wye; Darent and Cray; Cuckmere and Pevensey; Colne; New Forest.

As you renew, consider if your licence fits your needs. Would a change in volume or duration be of use?

Winter farm preparation: a guide for farmers after a dry season – read the EA blog, which includes links to long-term support and short term activities.

[Winter farm preparation: a guide for farmers after a dry season – Creating a better place](#)

Mima Boardman Mima.Boardman@environment-agency.gov.uk



Irrigation reservoir refill prospects under 80% of long term average (LTA) rainfall