

Factsheet – Managing Water Quality

This factsheet is a part of a series that examines factors influencing the sustainability of the dairy industry. We examine water regulations across the UK and steps that can be taken to safeguard water quality.

Overview

Water is vital for our health, drives the economy and sustains the environment. Only 2.5% of the Earth's water is freshwater and of this, only 1.2% is easily accessible, so it is a scarce commodity. Having good water quality, managed in a way that ensures the UK is resilient to flood and drought, is essential.

Water Regulations

Water quality is a devolved issue, so regulations differ throughout the UK. We have listed the main pieces of legislation and guidance available to farmers.

England: ['The Reduction and Prevention of Agricultural Diffuse Pollution \(England\) Regulations 2018'](#) ('the 2018 regulations') – also known as the 'Farming rules for water', apply to all farms in England. Guidance is available from the Government and both NFU and AHDB have summarised this for farmers:

- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/applying-the-farming-rules-for-water/applying-the-farming-rules-for-water>
- <https://www.nfuonline.com/updates-and-information/farming-rules-for-water-what-you-need-to-know/>
- <https://ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library/water-regulations-for-farmers>

Northern Ireland: [The Nutrient Action Programme Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2019](#) apply to all farms in Northern Ireland, alongside [The Water Environment \(Water Framework Directive\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2017](#). DAERA summarise how this impacts agricultural activities:

- <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/topics/water/regulation-agricultural-activities>

Scotland: [The Water Environment \(Controlled Activities\) \(Scotland\) Regulations \(CAR\)](#), which now include the 2003 "SSAFO Regs", apply to all farms in Scotland. Farming and Water Scotland have produced 'Know the Rules' factsheets, highlighting how to comply with legislation:

- <https://www.farmingandwaterscotland.org/know-the-rules/>

Wales: The Water Resources (Control of Agricultural Pollution) (Wales) Regulations 2021 apply to Welsh farms, with guidance available from the Welsh Government:

- <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2023-10/water-resources-control-agricultural-pollution-wales-regulations-2021-guidance-farmers-and-land.pdf>

Key Actions

There are many ways to reduce pollution risk and protect water availability, here are some key actions that should be taken throughout the UK:

- Application of organic manures and fertilisers should be planned to meet soil and crop nutrient needs.
- Take note of the weather when planning fertiliser application: organic fertiliser and manure must not be spread on frozen ground, or ground that has been frozen for more than 12 hours in the previous 24 hours and you must not apply organic fertiliser during heavy rainfall, or if heavy rain is forecast within 24 hours.
- Consider the location of water sources and topography when applying fertilisers or pesticides: manufactured fertilisers must not be applied within 2 metres of inland freshwaters or coastal waters and pesticides must not be applied within 1 metre of the water environment. If you have run-off risk maps for your farm, use these to develop application plans that minimise the risk of contaminating waterways.
- Consider the position of manure and pesticide storage carefully: organic manures must not be stored within 10 metres of inland freshwaters or coastal waters, where there is significant risk of pollution entering inland freshwaters or coastal waters, or within 50 metres of a spring, well, or borehole. Pesticides must not be stored within 10 metres of the water environment, within 50 metres of any spring that supplies water for human consumption, or on an impermeable surface which drains to a surface water drainage system.
- Maintain storage and spreading equipment to avoid leaks.
- Reduce run-off by avoiding bare earth: take actions such as under-sowing maize crops and planting shrubs, reeds, and other buffer plants at the fringes of pasture lands and crop areas.
- Reduce the risk of pollution from poaching: don't position livestock feeders within 10 metres of any inland freshwaters or coastal waters, within 50 metres of a spring, well or borehole, or where there is significant risk of pollution from poaching around the feeder entering any inland freshwaters or coastal waters and use buffer strips along water courses.
- Capture and utilise rainwater on farm before it enters slurry stores. This can provide a source of freshwater alongside reducing pressure on slurry systems.

Where to go for more information

- The NFU have developed a list of 5 things to do to improve water quality - <https://www.nfuonline.com/updates-and-information/improving-water-quality-5-things-to-do-on-farm>

The Dairy Roadmap

The Dairy Roadmap aims to improve the environmental sustainability of the UK dairy sector whilst ensuring the continued prosperity of the industry, and the provision of safe, affordable, nutritious and sustainable produce for years to come.

The Dairy Roadmap is brought to you by:

