



Environment Policy Essentials: Restoring water

Fresh water is essential for the survival of all life, the foundation of all ecosystems, and is a key component of Welsh agriculture and industry. Its wellbeing properties are well documented, and freshwater recreation in Wales contributes approximately £90m in tourism spending to the Welsh economy.

The threats facing our freshwater environment are:

- agricultural pollution, where excess fertiliser and waste from intensive agriculture destroy ecosystems in rivers and marine environments;
- the water industry, where mismanagement and the illegal use of Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) are a danger to human health and damaging to ecosystems;
- industrial and pharmaceutical impacts, including legacy issues from mining; and
- climate change, with an increased risk of drought and toxic algal blooms.

Consequently, freshwater biodiversity has declined by 85% since 1970, and only 40% of rivers in Wales are assessed to be in good health under the Water Framework Directive.

With species like the Atlantic Salmon on the brink of extinction in the next five years, we need to act urgently. This Senedd term is critical for reforming our management of water in Wales and must commit to an immediate step-change in improving our rivers.



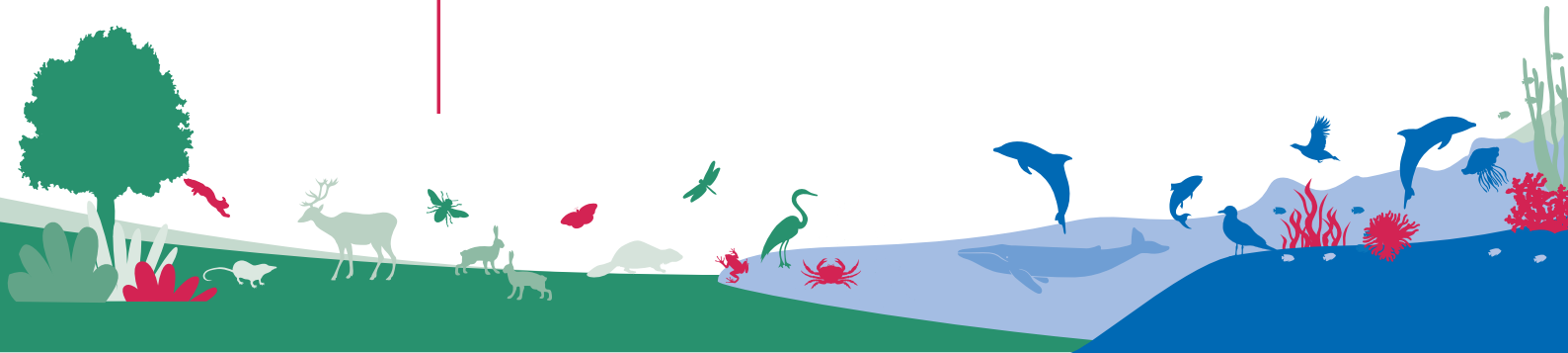


What tools do we have?
There are many legislative controls for regulating freshwater.

The primary ones are:

- **Environment (Wales) Act 2016:** This establishes the legal framework for the Sustainable Management of Natural Resources (SMNR) in Wales. It provides duties for water abstraction, flood risk and catchment management.
- **The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended) and the Water Environment (Water Framework Directive) (England and Wales) Regulations 2017:** Together these set water quality targets for our rivers, with tighter thresholds for our Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) designated rivers.
- **The Water Resources (Control of Agricultural Pollution) (Wales) Regulations 2021:** Sets measures to reduce water pollution from agricultural sources in Wales. These are subject to recommendations from an independent review (the Bolton Review) which assessed whether they are effective in tackling water pollution and delivering against Welsh Government's obligations.
- **The Environment (Principles, Governance and Biodiversity Targets) (Wales) Act 2026:** This requires legally binding targets to be set by 2028, the priorities for which include reducing the risk of extinction of native species, effective management of ecosystems and reducing pollution.









Other tools:

- The Green Paper on Water Reform (informed by the Independent Water Commission) proposed a step-change in our management of water to deliver new governance, accountability and integration across the water sector.
- Nature-based solutions to tackle water issues. Examples of these include creating new wetlands, restoring peatland or planting buffer strips to protect rivers from pollution. Compared with engineered solutions, nature-based solutions can provide multiple benefits in tackling flooding, improving water quality, preventing drought and providing a home for wildlife. Some wildlife, such as beavers, even create their own nature-based solutions, by holding back water in the landscape.

What can MSs do to help tackle water quality?



- Ensure the Green Paper for Water Reform is implemented, with a transparent programme for transition, good stakeholder involvement, clear and accountable governance for water and robust devolved powers to implement the necessary changes for Wales.
- Ensure the Bolton recommendations for the Control of Agricultural Pollution Regulations are delivered effectively and swiftly, with any changes to the regulations being supported by evidence.
- Support changes to the law to accelerate the use of nature-based solutions to tackle water issues.
- Demand that Wales meets European standards (or better) for freshwater protection, including from chemicals and pharmaceuticals.
- Demand more investment (both public and private) in freshwater restoration to improve water quality and to restore freshwater species and habitats.

Wales Environment Link (WEL) is a network of environment, countryside and heritage Non-Governmental Organisations in Wales. Our vision is a thriving Welsh environment for future generations.

This paper represents the consensus view of a group of WEL members working in this specialist area. Members may also produce information individually in order to raise more detailed issues that are important to their particular organisation.

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