

# Access to water



## OUR ASK

**Access to water for livestock and crop production in times of shortages to be guaranteed, reflecting water's vital role in food production and food security.**

## Why it's needed

Water is critical for livestock and crop production, but farmers' ability to maintain and increase efficient, high quality food production is being threatened by growing competition for water, climate change, severe weather events and ageing and inadequate infrastructure.

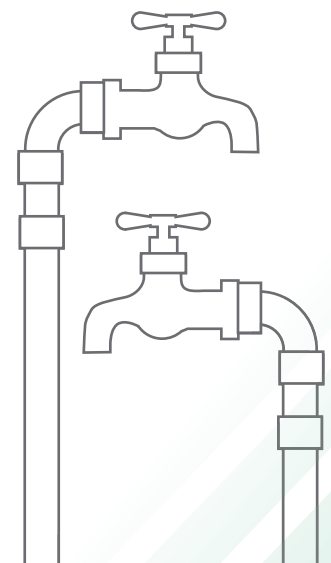
With the global population set to increase to over 10 billion by 2050, there will be significant and increasing competition for water resources. If farmers and growers in the UK are to rise to the challenge of growing more food like fruit and vegetables so we can reduce the amount we import from more water scarce countries, they will need secure access to a share of water supplies.

The next government must support water abstraction for the agri-food sector to restore the confidence necessary for reliable food production. The Environment

Agency grants abstraction licences for farming and growing businesses to take water from rivers or groundwater from a borehole or well. The degree of certainty provided by an abstraction licence is important for business confidence as investment decisions – such as expensive irrigation systems – are often made over many years, in the knowledge that permission to abstract has been carefully considered and approved.

Farmers and growers need a secure and reliable supply of water to produce the food we need. But they face immediate challenges in accessing this water. There are currently no mechanisms in place by which the agricultural sector is guaranteed access to water to fill winter storage reservoirs.

The UK has enough water to produce the food we need, it's just not always in the right place at the right time. As a nation, we must get much better at capturing and storing water, as well as moving it around. An abstraction system that allows for excess water capture and more on-farm reservoirs would benefit farmers, and wider society, when we experience storm events like those we saw in parts of the country in autumn 2023.



To meet the objectives set in Defra's Plan for Water and Food Strategy, the next government needs to put the right incentives in place to encourage investment in water resource management and infrastructure, including reservoirs, rainwater capture and a significant increase in our capacity to pump water around the country.

The next government must also introduce greater flexibility in planning approval for on-farm reservoirs, recognising the biodiversity benefits and importance of water security, and support Agriculture Water Resources Management Plans, Drought Plans and Water Abstractor Groups to build resilience and

support the multi-sector Water Resources Regional Groups.

We also need to see water companies prioritise agriculture's access to water for crops and livestock in their drought planning.

## What it would deliver

**Significant investment in on-farm water infrastructure will underwrite our food security and help build resilience into the farming sector.**

**This would provide further opportunities for irrigation equipment, while flexibility within planning regulations would allow for more reservoirs and water storage units to be built on farm. Flexible abstraction measures, such as**

**allowing abstraction at times of high flow, would allow farmers and growers to take water for livestock and crops during times of plenty and reduce the need for abstraction at times when water is more scarce, offering a solution to agriculture and the environment.**

**This could enable them to grow more fresh fruit, vegetables, or other crops, and to farm smarter to bring down our greenhouse**

**emissions and help achieve the farming industry's ambition to be net zero by 2040.**

**The NFU understands that taking steps to reduce agriculture's impact on water quality in our rivers is also an essential element of what farmers do every day of the year. All farmers and growers care passionately about water. It matters not just for producing food, but also for caring for the natural environment that we all enjoy.**

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