



YOUR TIDAL THAMES

The Water Framework¹ Directive²

Where it came from, what it is, and what you should do.

"In getting our waters clean, the role of citizens and citizens' groups will be crucial."

[Introduction to the EU Water Framework Directive](#)

Origin of the Water Framework Directive (WFD)

Nearly half the EU population live in [water-stressed countries](#) where demand for water can at times be greater than the available supply (over-abstraction). Additionally natural habitats are increasingly threatened by pollution or the demand for land, and hence biodiversity will certainly be affected. Environmental legislation seeks to limit or reverse these trends.

Current thinking stresses that we have historically under-valued the economic benefits of properly [functioning ecosystems](#), and the services that they provide (such as fisheries, erosion control, leisure amenities, pollution cleansing by salt marshes, etc.). Water is of course crucial to the functioning of all ecosystems. By several measures the UK is often far from the worst case, but the demand for water is growing here too, recent droughts and flooding indicate climate-linked risks, and water bodies may contain transient or more permanent pollutants, and may display associated ecological degradation.

By the mid-1990s nearly half of EU respondents were worried about 'water pollution.' There was no shortage of legislation, with previous waves based on setting limits dating back to the 1970s and 1980s, but compliance had not always been good. Reasons varied but it was believed that common threads were that the public perceived a lack of 'ownership' of the

¹ WFD is a framework in the sense that it prescribes steps to reach the common goal rather than adopting the more traditional limit value approach.

² A directive is a legislative act of the European Union which requires member states to achieve a particular result without dictating the means of achieving that result. Directives normally leave member states with a certain amount of leeway as to the exact rules to be adopted. With the exception of directives related to the Common Agricultural Policy, directives are addressed to all member states.

legislative process and that existing legislation was overly-complex. The [Water Framework Directive](#) (2000) was introduced to overcome these, and associated, challenges.

What is new in WFD?

The WFD is intended to be both ambitious and innovative. The ambition is that all water bodies³, in all EA member states, will achieve GOOD⁴ ecological and chemical⁵ status (or potential). Where waterways have been so physically transformed (Heavily Modified Water Bodies) that they cannot realistically achieve GOOD ecological status, they might still achieve GOOD ecological potential. Anything other than a GOOD status, i.e. MODERATE-POOR-BAD, marks a water body as legislatively requiring action.

One innovation is that this will be accomplished by [citizen involvement throughout](#) the assessment, planning, implementation, and management phases of the legislation's introduction and adoption ([Article 14](#) of the Directive). A second innovation is to take the River Basin Approach in considering the catchment⁶ as the significant management unit. The key working tool is the River Basin Management Plan (RBMP). Thirdly the Directive combines attention to the sources of pollutants (both point & diffuse) and to the receiving environment of these pollutants (as quality objectives)⁷. Fourthly the Directive incorporates recommendations for groundwater, the source of most of Europe's drinking water⁸.

Finally the Directive is replacing, incorporating, and simplifying multiple examples of pre-existing legislation⁹.

The Directive also stipulates that the consumers ought to pay the 'real' price – including the full cost of abstraction, treatment, distribution, and waste collection and treatment. This will not be dealt with on this website. For more information see the [Draft Water Bill](#).

What steps does WFD prescribe?

All states of the EU are required to implement the WFD equally. The Directive regards measurement and meeting of pre-existing targets and quality standards as a minimum requirement, but recommends the production of a River Basin Management Plan, developed and implemented in full consultation, as the method to address and achieve these targets.

³ There are 4 categories of water body: inland, transitional, coastal, and groundwater. The tidal Thames is classified as both a transitional and coastal water body (TraC).

⁴ Status has 5 levels. This report details them, but in summary they are: HIGH (the best status possible or reference status), GOOD ecological status (with only minor deviation from the reference state due to human intervention), GOOD ecological potential (The best possible for 'Heavily Modified Water Bodies'), MODERATE, POOR, and BAD status.

⁵ The Directive distinguishes ecological status (based on the quality of the biological community) from chemical status (based on 42 regulated chemical pollutants of high concern).

⁶ A catchment is the entire drainage basin, and all the tributaries that feed into the principal 'river' of a designated 'River Basin.' WFD allows for the designation of sub-catchments for tributaries that flow into the 'river.' This is the case for the Tidal Thames and its tributaries (e.g. Rivers Lea, Wandle, and Cray, etc.).

⁷ Article 10 of the Directive.

⁸ The Directive tolerates NO pollution of groundwater and limits abstraction to the amount replaced by annual recharge.

⁹ WFD – will (eventually) incorporate bathing water, drinking water, urban wastewater treatment, nitrate, and sewage sludge directives, amongst others).

Public consultation means giving stakeholders the right to participate in decisions taken by the authorities that might affect the environment. They should also have the right access to the information that was used to formulate any plans, and the right to review and legally challenge any decisions within these plans¹⁰.

Legally active participation is not required in development and shared-decision making, but it is strongly recommended as good practice. Active involvement should lead to shared decision making and a joint responsibility for the implementation of the measures that each River Basin Management Plan recommends. The WFD explicitly recognises that it is only at the level of [local decision-making](#) that key decisions can be formulated effectively.

Steps in building a River Basin Management Plan (RBMP):

1. Identify extent and boundaries of river basin (catchment or sub-catchment)
2. Classify water bodies in the catchment
3. Define water status for each water body (against list of quality targets)
4. List the reasons for failure to reach GOOD STATUS against each target
5. Define local steps and processes to reach GOOD quality
6. Publish a draft River Basin Management Plan
7. Make background information available
8. Allow stakeholders to comment in writing on this plan
9. Develop local steps and processes to implement and manage change
10. Update and republish plan
11. Clearly identify timetables
12. Identify channels for comment or challenge to the plan
13. Update and publish modified plan every 6 years

These plans should be [revised every 6 years](#).

Where is the Tidal Thames in this process, and what can I do?

Taken as a whole these steps are part of an approach known as Integrated Water Management. Participants from all significant public groups, industry sectors, responsible local authorities, and communities of expertise should contribute to plans that equally take into account environmental, economic, and social criteria.

This website will be updated to reflect the stages and steps that the Tidal Thames River Basin Management Plan passes through in the process of meeting the challenges and choices set by the [EU Water Framework Directive](#).

Adam Guy, Thames Estuary Partnership, August 2013

¹⁰ The Aarhus convention of 2003.