

Nature 2030 Minifesto: Freshwater

24 August 2023

Wildlife and Countryside Link's 'minifestos' are policy briefings which provide detail about how the five policy asks made by the Nature 2030 campaign could be applied to benefit different aspects of nature. This manifesto covers freshwater.

Introduction

Freshwater systems are the backbone of the environment, intrinsically connected to the health of habitats and wildlife.

These blue spaces – rivers, lakes, ponds, wetlands and floodplains - are suffering fragmentation, pollution and degradation. The multiple threats of agricultural pollution, sewage discharges, chemical cocktails and over abstraction mean that not a single English river is in good overall health. Even waterbodies of international rarity and importance to nature, such as our nationally treasured chalk streams, are in a critical state. Freshwater biodiversity is declining and many species face extinction.¹ As habitats and wildlife suffer, so to do people, with water shortages and ill health from polluted water becoming more common across the UK.

The next Parliament is responsible for turning the tide. The UK Government is subject to a legal duty to stop the decline of species by the end of 2030.

Nature 2030 is a challenge to all political parties to take action, proposing five ambitious policies to get Government back on track to meet the targets and restore biodiversity.² For freshwater, this means:

- A Pay Rise for Nature: Embedding water-focused actions within payment schemes to incentivise farmers to farm in ways which reduce water pollution and recover freshwater habitats.

¹ [IFM, Position Statement on Atlantic Salmon Conservation, 2023](#)

² [Nature 2030 Campaign](#)

- A Nature Recovery Obligation: Driving investment from water companies in water infrastructure, reducing pollution, addressing over-abstraction and increasing environmental resilience.
- A 30 by 30 Rapid Delivery Project: Restoring more freshwater protected sites to full health.
- A National Nature Service: Equipping people with the skills and funding needed to restore freshwater habitats, tackle invasive species and take part in citizen science projects.
- A Right to a Healthy Environment: Putting clean water firmly at the heart of decision-making, from planning to permits, driven by a new legal right to healthy, quality blue spaces.

This is the UK's opportunity to create a better state of nature. Our waters and their wildlife cannot wait.

A pay rise for Nature

The policy in brief

Double the annual budget for nature-friendly farming and land management to at least £6 billion a year. In England, this should fund a major increase in ambition in the Farming Transition, including stronger incentives for ambitious agroecological actions on farms and a consistent budget for large-scale nature recovery projects.

Supporting freshwater recovery

We cannot improve the state of the freshwater environment without fundamentally transforming how farmed landscapes are managed. Diffuse pollution from agricultural sources currently contributes to at least 40% of waters failing to achieve Good Ecological Status, with nitrogen and phosphorus run-off from fertilisers, manure and slurry resulting in eutrophication and harmful algal blooms.^{3,4} This starves freshwater ecosystems of oxygen, decreases water quality and harms fish and all aquatic wildlife.

A Pay Rise for Nature would provide farmers and land managers with the increased financial support and raised standards needed to deliver catchment-sensitive regenerative farming.

³ [State of the water environment indicator B3, 2023](#)

⁴ [EAC, 'Water Quality in Rivers', 2022](#)

Positive farming actions for freshwater, from tightly controlling slurry usage and storage to widening buffer strips separating fields from waterways, changing floodplain land use and creating more wetlands, would be well-rewarded, encouraging their wider adoption.

2021 analysis, commissioned for the Green Finance Institute, suggests that over £100 million of additional annual funding is required to pay for the farming improvements needed to reduce water pollution from agricultural sources.⁵ The increase in the overall nature friendly farming budget to £6 billion would pay farmers for making these improvements, and others that boost freshwater health.

Farmers would be rewarded for working with nature and catchment-based solutions to restore the health of soils, floodplains and wetlands, ‘building back wetter’ to restore natural processes and to keep more water in the land. A range of newly incentivised nature-friendly farming activities would recover freshwater habitats and provide wider benefits. Restored floodplain meadows would remove nutrients from river systems, improving the catchment as a whole and reversing the years of eutrophication, as well as storing more water to reduce the risk of flooding after high rainfall. Damaged alluvial soil would be brought back to health, providing better farming conditions and preventing the pollution caused by soils washing away into rivers. Restored wetlands will naturally clean water, improving water quality.

As well as funding freshwater-health boosting farming practices, a Pay Rise for Nature would:

- Increase regulator budgets. After a decade of cuts, regulators like the Environment Agency are struggling to monitor and enforce the rules designed to prevent agricultural pollution of freshwater systems.⁶ More funding through the Pay Rise for Nature will help to tackle pollution when it occurs and prevent repeat offences.
- Provide more advice for farmers. Farmers frequently want to do the right thing for waterways but can struggle to access expert, free advice. The significant uplift in the farming budget will pay for new resources to guide farmers through their options.

⁵ [Green Finance Institute, The Finance Gap for UK Nature, 2021](#)

And [An assessment of the financial resources needed for environmental land management in the UK, 2023](#)

⁶ [ENDS Report, 2023](#) and [WCL, Autumn Budget and Spending Review, 2021](#)

A Nature Recovery Obligation

The policy in brief

Major economic sectors, including finance, infrastructure, development and water, all contribute to the decline of nature.

These sectors should be subject to a Nature Recovery Obligation. This regulatory requirement should require private sector funding for nature recovery, sharing out the effort required to meet key Environment Act and Climate Change Act targets. This should include:

1. Mandatory corporate disclosure of value-chain impacts and dependencies on nature, including supply, investments, customer use and direct operations.
2. A duty to publish 1.5°C-aligned climate and nature recovery transition plans.
3. Regulatory requirements for companies to fund nature's recovery, based on a sector's impact on nature

Supporting freshwater recovery

The water industry is responsible for much of the appalling state of our waterways. Repeated sewage spills and wastewater permits breaches are an on-going threat to nature.⁷ Pollution from wastewater is contributing to at least 36% of waters failing to achieve Good Ecological Status.⁸ Despite this clear evidence of environmental harm, water companies continue to profit while they pollute. Water company bosses received £24.8m, including £14.7m in bonuses, benefits and incentives, in the period 2021-2022, in spite of ongoing poor environmental performance.⁹ In 2022 alone untreated sewage was released from Storm Overflows in England for over 1.75 million hours.¹⁰

The Nature Recovery Obligation would require water companies to reduce their impacts on nature, with annual levy payments based on environmental footprint providing a strong incentive for avoiding nature harms.

Based on their environmental performance, companies would be required to pay a levy or to fund habitat restoration and species recovery directly. Funding from these payments would be paid into a central levy pot used for projects to restore the natural environment, helping to address the nature recovery funding gap.¹¹ This would fund a range of freshwater projects,

⁷ [Ofwat, 'Trust in Water', 2023](#)

⁸ [EAC, State of the water environment indicator B3, 2023](#)

⁹ We welcome Ofwat exploring using new powers under the Environment Act to get tougher on performance related pay, these reforms must be swiftly and robustly implemented. See [WCL Consultation Response, 2023](#)

¹⁰ [The Environment Agency, Storm overflow spill data shows performance is totally unacceptable, 2023](#)

¹¹ [Green Finance Institute, Finance Gap for UK Nature Report, 2021](#)

from landscape-scale restoration of peatlands and flood meadows to individual river restoration schemes and wetland creation. The levy payment would go beyond the proposed Water Restoration Fund, which would use water company fines to pay for actions to remedy damage caused¹², by providing significant investment in preventing (rather than simply addressing) harm.

The new regulatory requirements will provide the necessary incentive for companies to tackle historic underinvestment in environmental resilience. Our sewers are outdated, and failures to tackle runoff and drainage issues holistically mean that these systems frequently become overloaded during periods of rainfall, spilling pollution into rivers. Water resources infrastructure has been equally neglected, undermining our resilience to drought. Poor maintenance means that we lose nearly 20% of our water supply to leaks, equivalent to 2.4 billion litres per day across England's nine major water companies.¹³ No new reservoirs have been built in water-stressed southern England since 1976.

Under the Nature Recovery Obligation, the less water companies invest in maintaining water infrastructure, the more they will have to provide in levy payments in order to address the environmental consequences of this under-investment. This incentive will drive increased investment in environmental resilience, using nature-based solutions where feasible. Such nature-based solutions, such as the restoration of wetlands to improve water quality, also create new wildlife habitats, help store carbon and decrease reliance on concrete and chemicals.¹⁴

This new investment in water infrastructure should include measures to reduce water demand. Demand for water for domestic and business use has reached critical levels in many places, with a quarter of rivers in England now at risk from unsustainable abstraction.¹⁵

The Nature Recovery Obligation will ensure water company action to reduce leakage, encourage efficient use of water and secure sustainable new water supplies.

The Nature Recovery Obligation will also apply to large companies in other sectors whose activities can damage freshwater habitats, including supermarkets.¹⁶ The levy payment system will incentivise these sectors to change practices that damage habitats.

¹² [Defra, Thérèse Coffey: Companies that pollute our waters could face unlimited penalties, 2023](#)

¹³ [WCL, We must increase our resilience to drought to protect people and nature from running out of water, 2022](#)

¹⁴ More on the benefits of nature based solutions can be found here: [WCL, The Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill & Nature Based Solutions, Lords Committee Stage Briefing, 2023](#)

¹⁵ [Angling Trust, Water Abstraction Reform](#)

¹⁶ An example of the impacts that the retail sector can have on rivers can be found here: [BBC News, Tesco to meet campaigners over River Wye pollution, 2023](#)

Further freshwater benefits from the Nature Recovery Obligation include:

- The development of robust plans to prevent further nature harms from water companies, through the requirement on companies to adopt climate and nature recovery transition plans. These plans would provide an opportunity for water company strategies to align and carry forward the freshwater priorities of Local Nature Recovery Strategies and Catchment Based-Approach (CaBA) partnerships.
- The opportunity for water company capital to act as a catalyst for the recovery of the freshwater environment in line with catchment plans, to be developed under the Defra Plan for Water.¹⁷ Supermarkets and other large supply chain businesses who would also be driven either to reduce their water impact directly, or to pay into the levy to fund freshwater recovery.

A 30 by 30 Rapid Delivery Project

The policy in brief

The next Government should prioritise a new “30 by 30 Rapid Delivery Project” to fulfil its commitment under the Global Biodiversity Framework to protect 30% of the land and sea for nature by 2030 and to secure an environmental legacy for the future. The project would consist of four pillars:

1. **Completing and improving the protected site network:** New incentives and obligations for landowners to manage important nature sites (SSSIs and other protected sites) in the public interest, so England’s most important nature sites are thriving by 2030. These measures would be complemented by a programme to designate and protect more places.
2. **Landscapes for the future:** Updated purposes, powers and funding for protected landscapes (National Parks and AONBs) to do more for nature, so that they become beacons of biodiversity restoration.
3. **A Public Nature Estate obligation:** New duties and purposes for public bodies (such as the Forestry Commission and Government Departments like the MoD) to ensure they care for the land and waters they own and manage for nature’s recovery and climate change mitigation.
4. **An expanded Public Nature Estate:** An expansion of public and community land and water ownership, where such purchases, followed by sustained management for nature, could deliver significant ecological improvements

¹⁷ [Defra, Plan for Water: our integrated plan for delivering clean and plentiful water, 2023](#)

Supporting freshwater recovery

We cannot meet international commitments to halt and reverse the loss of wildlife and manage 30% of the land and sea for nature by 2030 without improving the state of freshwater habitats. 90% of SSSI river sites, 41% of SSSI lake sites, 87% of SSSI wetland sites are currently in unfavourable condition.¹⁸

The 30 by 30 Rapid Delivery Project will drive a suite of ambitious actions to improve the condition of freshwater water protected sites.

New incentives and obligations for landowners to manage freshwater SSSIs would restore many more of them to favourable condition. These incentives would also apply to upstream and catchment landowners, so they can take action to improve water quality at downstream sites.

The expansion of protected site status could protect new freshwater sites, including all chalk streams. Despite chalk streams being among the most biodiverse of our blue spaces,¹⁹ very few are currently designated and protected as SSSIs and SACs. Out of 224 chalk streams in England, only eleven are designated as SSSIs, four of which are further protected, at least in part, as SACs. This lack of protections leaves chalk streams vulnerable to over-abstraction, habitat degradation, and sewage and agricultural pollution. Designation, improved management and a dedicated target for chalk stream recovery could address these threats.

Updated powers to improve blue spaces in protected landscapes could also transform freshwater health. A stronger requirement for public bodies to consider environmental improvement in consenting and investment decisions in protected landscapes would give new weight to freshwater health considerations. For example, National Park Authorities currently lack the ability to stop water companies from releasing sewage in rivers that run through National Parks.²⁰ The new requirement would give legal weight to these requests to do so.²¹

A Public Nature Estate obligation would ensure that public bodies, who collectively own 8% of England²², better protect watercourses passing through their land. The obligation would require that these publicly owned watercourses be managed better for nature's recovery and climate mitigation.

¹⁸ [State of the Water Environment Indicator B3, 2023](#)

¹⁹ [Catchment Based Approach, Chalk Stream Strategy, 2021](#)

²⁰ [River Action, River Action calls on Southern Water to take immediate action to stop sewage discharges in New Forest National Park, 2022](#)

²¹ Further information can be found in a letter making the case for these reforms, sent to Defra in August 2023: [WCL, Letter to Lord Benyon – Protected Landscapes, 2023](#)

²² [Guy Shrubsole, Written Evidence \(LUE0027\), 2022](#)

Further freshwater benefits from the 30 by 30 Rapid Delivery Project include:

- Opening up improved public access to blue spaces through the expansion of the Public Nature Estate. Currently, the majority of inland waterways in England do not have a clear, uncontested right of public access.²³ The Public Nature Estate would bring new stretches of riverbank and other blue spaces into community ownership, allowing more people to access them. Lakes and other bodies of still water, including manmade sources such as gravel pits, could provide new places to connect with nature. More people could access freshwater activities, including swimming, canoeing and angling.
- The Public Nature Estate and Protected Landscapes becoming beacons of innovation for nature. These could and should be the places where new approaches are trialled, and proven techniques are first rolled out, giving confidence and learning opportunities to other landowners. Examples include catchment nutrient balancing, green finance for natural flood management, and beaver reintroduction.

A National Nature Service

The policy in brief

A National Nature Service should be established to deliver practical experience and hands-on training in green skills and qualifications for thousands of people. It would combine on-the-job skills training with a programme of capital investment in habitat restoration around the country.

The NNS would fill the green and blue skills gap²⁴, create and support thousands of employment opportunities, and provide a skilled workforce to deliver nature restoration at the scale and pace needed to halt the decline of wildlife by 2030.

Supporting freshwater recovery

An ambitious programme of large-scale freshwater habitat creation and restoration will be vital to creating a better state of nature for freshwater habitats and wildlife.

We have lost 75% of the UK's wetlands since 1700.²⁵ At least 41% of waterbodies are affected by physical modifications to their natural integrity and function, including the construction of

²³ [British Canoeing, 'Access and Environment Charter', 2023](#)

²⁴ [Green Alliance, Closing the UK's green skills gap, 2022](#)

²⁵ [Fluet-Chouinard et al, Extensive global wetland loss over the past three centuries, 2023](#)

weirs and dams, the straightening and dredging of river channels and the draining of wetlands.^{26 27}

A significant programme of capital investment in habitat restoration, delivered through the National Nature Service, will start to repair these damaged wetland habitats and waterbodies. Newly funded habitat restoration projects and an increase in people with the rights skills to improve and manage blue spaces will drive wide-scale restoration, re-wetting sites of strategic importance for freshwater systems, providing flood and drought management benefits.

The wave of new workers for nature generated by the National Nature Service will also help to directly tackle a further threat to freshwater health: invasive species. 23% of WFD waterbodies are harmed by invasive non-native species (INNS), with one species alone (floating pennywort) estimated to cause £25 million of annual damage.²⁸ The INNS Local Action Group network works hard to tackle these threats but is insufficiently resourced.²⁹

The National Nature Service could transform this situation, expanding the INNS Local Action Group network to full capacity across Great Britain to manage the risks and impacts associated with INNS. This would mean a full complement of 4,000 coordinators, 75,000 volunteers and 2,000 contractors.³⁰

Further freshwater benefits from the National Nature Service include:

- Support for the development and implementation of the Catchment Monitoring Cooperative, a proposed national scale framework for citizen science. The National Nature Service could upskill and empower individuals to collect and work with citizen science data and develop this framework, boosting our understanding of freshwater systems. This training could give people the skills they need to carry out further work in this field, providing new resources to aid the development of effective Catchment Management Plans.
- The National Nature Service could also equip people with the specialist skills needed for freshwater habitat recovery, natural flood management and climate resilience work, including floodplain meadow conservation and wetland creation.³¹ This will help ease both financial pressure and supply chain bottlenecks in the fields of flooding and

²⁶ [WWT, Why 100,000 hectares?](#)

²⁷ [State of the water environment indicator B3, 2023](#)

²⁸ [Environment Agency, Weevils to the rescue, 2022](#)

²⁹ [State of the Water Environment Indicator B3, May 2023](#)

³⁰ [WCL, 'Prevention is Better Than Cure', 2023](#)

³¹ Examples of further skills can be found here: [the River restoration Centre, What is River Restoration?](#)

pollution control, easing reliance on large engineering consultancies and delivering interventions at lower capital and carbon cost.

A Right to a Healthy Environment

The policy in brief

The loss of green space and the pollution of the air and water threatens everyone's health. It is cutting lives short, especially in marginalised communities.

A new Environmental Rights Bill would create a human right to a clean and healthy environment for all. Combined with a Natural Health Fund to increase access to nature, it would address deepening health inequalities and empower people to hold public bodies to account on pollution, climate change and the nature crisis.

Supporting freshwater recovery

Human health and wellbeing are intertwined with the condition of rivers, lakes, ponds and wetlands.

Access and exposure to blue spaces benefits both physical and mental health, with research suggesting that increased access to these natural spaces is key to mitigating socio-economic health inequalities, with the benefits increasing the more abundant nature is.³² Millions use the freshwater environment every year for wild swimming, paddling, angling and more, with 7.5 million people engaged in paddling in 2022 alone.³³ Around a million anglers fish in freshwater.³⁴

The full health potential of these activities is being held back by freshwater pollution. The Environmental Audit Committee's 2022 report concluded that England's rivers are a "cocktail of sewage, agricultural waste, plastic and chemicals".³⁵ Water users both inland and at sea remain at risk of contracting illnesses such as E. coli and gastroenteritis due to water pollution.

³² [White et al, 'Blue space, health and well-being: A narrative overview and synthesis of potential benefits', 2020](#) See also: [Wyles et al, 'Are Some Natural Environments More Psychologically Beneficial Than Others? The Importance of Type and Quality on Connectedness to Nature and Psychological Restoration', 2019](#)

³³ [British Marine, Watersports Participation Survey 2022, 2022](#)

³⁴ [Environment Agency, A survey of freshwater angling in England, 2018](#)

³⁵ [EAC, 'Water Quality in Rivers', 2022](#)

These pollution issues are so severe that over two million outdoor swimmers³⁶ have less than twenty officially safe inland places to swim.³⁷

An Environmental Rights Bill would create a human right to a clean and healthy environment, requiring authorities to be much more careful about the pollution they allow in blue spaces under their control.

The Bill would require public bodies delivering services connected to the environment to demonstrate that decisions they make are compatible with everyone's right to clean water (along with other environmental rights). Public bodies would have to have due regard to the right to clean water in all relevant decision-making processes, from housing developments through to sewage permits. This would significantly increase the weight that the need for clean water is given in decision-making, across both Central and Local Government.

Further freshwater benefits from a Right to a Healthy Environment include:

- Empowering local people and communities to hold polluters to account. The Environmental Rights Bill would give people the right to take legal action against environmental decisions which damage water quality, without risking huge personal costs. This would be achieved by a cap on legal costs in environmental cases. A public body which failed to have due regard to the right to clean water would be highly exposed to legal action from members of the public and campaigners, further incentivising decision-maker compliance with the right.
- Cleaner, more accessible water, delivered through the new legal right, will help many more people enjoy it, through swimming, canoeing and walking. A 'Natural Health Fund' introduced alongside the Environmental Rights Bill, will provide funding to further increase this access and unlock the health benefits that come from it.³⁸ This will help achieve the commitment in the Environmental Improvement Plan 2023³⁹ to ensure everyone is within a 15 minute walk of high quality green or blue space.

³⁶ [EAC, 'Water quality in rivers', 2022](#)

³⁷ [Environment Agency, Bathing water season 2021 begins, 2021](#)

³⁸ More information on the health benefits of access to nature can be found here: [WCL, Improving public access to nature, 2023](#)

³⁹ [Defra, Environmental Improvement Plan 2023, 2023](#)

Knitting it all together: An overall water health target

To drive truly ambitious, holistic action, these Nature 2030 actions must be aligned and built around a comprehensive long-term target for the overall health of the water environment that will drive action and accountability.

Such a target is currently missing from the Environment Act. This means that when current Water Framework Directive (WFD) requirements end in 2027, there will be no specific outcome target to act as a long-term regulatory driver of holistic action to improve the freshwater environment. This is not compatible with freshwater recovery.

A new, ambitious outcome-based target is needed for the overall condition of all waterbodies, setting a goal for overall waterbody health that builds upon existing WFD requirements.⁴⁰ This target would drive holistic catchment-wide action to improve water quality, rather than siloed activity by individual sectors to target pollutants where progress is easiest. It would give certainty to businesses, regulators and deliverers, and would build upon the foundations already laid by WFD and the River Basin Management Plans.

Advances in freshwater health from the Nature 2030 policies set out above would align behind this overall target, as would other essential policies for freshwater recovery, such as development restrictions in areas of water scarcity unless the impact of this additional demand can be mitigated.

Flourishing freshwater in 2030

We cannot achieve a better state of nature without protecting, restoring and enhancing the state of our freshwaters.

If implemented, Nature 2030 policies will deliver the future that our waters - and the people and wildlife who rely upon them - so desperately need.

A future of vibrant, much bigger and better-connected aquatic landscapes, full of clean water and thriving wildlife⁴¹, from protected sites to those in our farmed countryside, towns and cities. A future where rivers are given the space to move, and to reconnect with their floodplains, protecting us from the endless cycles of flood and drought.

⁴⁰ See more on the case for an overall water target in this January 2023 Link briefing: [WCL, Environmental Targets briefing from Wildlife and Countryside Link & Greener UK, 2023](#)

⁴¹ [The Wildlife Trusts, Freshwater Species](#)

A future where our wetlands and water landscapes are better cared for and protected, and where people can rightfully enjoy and benefit from the delights that healthy, quality blue spaces can deliver.

The Freshwater Manifesto has been published as part of the [Nature 2030](#) campaign, supported by over 90 environmental, climate and health organisations. You can support the Nature 2030 campaign [here](#).

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