

Wildlife and Countryside Link Parliamentary Briefing March 2003

The Water Bill: The need for realistic time limits on abstraction licences

During the Second Reading of the Water Bill (6 March 2003), some Peers referred to the proposals in the Bill to time-limit new abstraction licences, and expressed concern that a twelve year limit on these licences is too short. In fact, no preferred time limit for licences is stated on the face of the Bill, but Wildlife and Countryside Link urges the Government to stand by its intentions to set a time limit which is not too long. Ministers must resist pressure from those calling for a time limit which could extend to twenty to thirty years.

A sustainable abstraction licensing system

The Water Bill's provisions to introduce a more sustainable, flexible and responsive abstraction licensing system are welcome. A key element of this approach is the move towards time-limited licences, and away from the position of the 1963 Water Resources Act, in which licences were granted in perpetuity. Wildlife and Countryside Link is arguing that all permanent licences should be converted to time-limited status, but it is also important that we get the period of any time limit on new licences right. Ensuring that time limits are not too long is essential if the Water Bill is to make a meaningful contribution to environmentally sustainable water management. Without such a flexible approach, the pressures on water resources from climate change, new development and increased water use will be all the greater.

Wildlife and Countryside Link is not suggesting that a twelve year limit on abstraction licences be stated on the face of the Water Bill, and we acknowledge that there may be circumstances in which licences could be granted for longer, or even shorter, periods. However, we firmly believe that the Government should have a preferred time limit in mind for new licences, and that this should be twelve years or a similar period in order to deliver real benefits for the water environment from the new legislation.

Dealing with concerns about investment and security of supply

Concerns have been expressed that only granting abstraction licences for twelve years would lead to unacceptable levels of uncertainty for organisations – such as water companies – which must make long-term investment decisions. In fact, there is an assumption of renewal for licences unless they are proved to be causing serious environmental damage, and this should allow water companies and others to continue planning long-term investment. In addition, there will be circumstances in which licences can be granted for longer periods to protect long-term assets or investment, or where ample water is available.

The crucial thing is to get the balance right, and Wildlife and Countryside Link believes that this can be achieved by assuming a normal time limit on abstraction licences similar to the twelve years envisaged in earlier drafts of the Water Bill.

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