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Blueprint for Water coalition press release

For immediate release: Friday 24 January 2014

NGOs welcome improved environmental resilience in otherwise 'timid' Water Bill

The Blueprint for Water coalition of environmental groups has welcomed changes to the Water Bill that will increase the sustainability of the water industry by placing a new, strengthened 'resilience duty' on the regulator.

The Water Bill currently passing through parliament will give Ofwat a duty to promote 'resilience' by ensuring that water companies 'manage water resources in sustainable ways and reduce demand for water.' The Blueprint coalition, which includes WWF, RSPB and the Angling Trust, had raised concerns that the Bill initially defined resilience in a way that ignored the vital role it plays in supporting the resilience of the natural environment.

The Government have now amended the 'resilience duty' so that it includes environmental resilience, and Blueprint members now believe this duty could play an important role in ensuring that water companies deliver environmental improvements to the UK's already stressed and over-abstracted rivers and watercourses.

However, Blueprint believes that even with these welcome amendments the Water Bill is still far too timid and fails to live up to the 2011 Water White Paper, which promised abstraction reform.

Martin Salter, Campaigns Chief for the Angling Trust said, 'All the environmental groups have been working hard to ensure that the water regulator was obligated to take account of environmental concerns and not just economic pressures. This new and strengthened resilience duty, with its obligation "to manage water resources in sustainable ways and reduce demand for water", goes some way to addressing our concerns and we are pleased that the government has listened.'

The main thrust of the Water Bill is introducing competition in the retail market for water, but the Bill also introduces competition in the so-called upstream market, namely in water abstraction, treatment and disposal of sewage. However, environmentalists are concerned that without reform of the system by which we abstract water, upstream competition could incentivise existing abstraction licence holders to sell their water to water companies even when the catchment is already 'over-abstracted' or 'over-licensed.' Given that the Environment Agency estimate that nearly 40% of water company abstraction volume is not used¹ and that 18% of catchments are over-licensed *already*², this is no paper risk.

Rose O'Neill, Water Policy Manager at WWF said, 'We are urgently calling on the Government to set out its commitment on abstraction reform in the Water Bill. Without this, our already over-stressed water environment could be further degraded, and the potential benefits of upstream

¹ Ofwat, Environment Agency (2012) *The case for Change – reforming abstraction management in England*, www.environment-agency.gov.uk/research/planning/135501.aspx.

² Environment Agency (2008) *Water Resources in England and Wales – current state and Pressures*, www.environment-agency.gov.uk/research/planning/135501.aspx.

competition will never be realised.'

The Blueprint for Water coalition is calling for the Government to amend the Water Bill so that it:

- Creates a framework for a sustainable abstraction regime;
- Introduces safeguards for the environment against upstream competition;
- Gives customers the right to choose universal metering in their area; and
- Ensures that fracking companies have the funds to pay for the cost of clean-up, should pollution occur.

Ends

For more information please contact:

- Martin Salter, Angling Trust, martinreadingwest@googlemail.com, 07976 946033
- Dominic Gogol, WWF-UK, Dgogol@wwf.org.uk, 07771 818704
- Nik Shelton, RSPB, nik.shelton@rspb.org.uk, 07739 921464
- Kate Hand, Blueprint for Water, kate@wcl.org.uk, 020 7820 8600

Notes to editors

1. The Blueprint for Water coalition is a unique coalition of environmental, water efficiency, fishing and angling organisations which call on the Government and its agencies to set out the necessary steps to achieve "sustainable water" by 2015. The Blueprint for Water is a campaign of Wildlife and Countryside Link. More information is available at: www.blueprintforwater.org.uk.

The following ten organisations support this press release:

- Amphibian & Reptile Conservation
- Angling Trust
- Freshwater Habitats Trust
- The Rivers Trust
- RSPB
- Salmon & Trout Association
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust
- Woodland Trust
- WWF-UK

2. The second reading of the Water Bill in the House of Lords will take place on Monday 27th January. For more information, please see our most recent Water Bill briefing: [www.wcl.org.uk/docs/Blueprint for Water Lords Second Reading Briefing Water Bill.pdf](http://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/Blueprint%20for%20Water%20Lords%20Second%20Reading%20Briefing%20Water%20Bill.pdf).
3. Government Amendment: 'In response to debates about Ofwat's duties, the Government amended the new over-arching resilience duty (Clause 22 - Primary duty to secure resilience), at Report Stage.

Clause amended as follows:

The resilience objective mentioned in subsection (2A)(e) is—

- (a) to secure the long-term resilience of water undertakers' supply systems and sewerage undertakers' sewerage systems as **regards environmental pressures**, population growth and changes in consumer behaviour, and
- (b) [unamended]

including by promoting appropriate long-term planning and investment by relevant undertakers, and the taking by them of a range of measures to manage water resources **in sustainable ways** and reduce demand **for water so as to reduce pressure on water resources**.