

Clean water – and plenty of it

I never understand why it is fashionable establishment thinking to want to limit our use of water. Water is the commonest of substances on our planet. Here in the UK we have plenty of fresh water on top of the huge volumes of salt water all round our coast, alleviating the need to filter the salt out of what we use.

There is a water cycle where the winds pick up water from the sea, form clouds and then deposit a lot of it on our islands. All we have to do is to store it in lakes or reservoirs and draw on it as required, with suitable cleaning and filtering to ensure safety if we drink it. Our using it does not destroy it. We pass it out in used and dirty form, only for it to go round the cycle again and re-emerge as clean water to use again.

The UK industry is heavily regulated. The price control regulation builds in a strict restraint on providing more water capacity, as the regulator effectively controls how much capital can be applied. We have a strange system where there is a single supply to each home, so you need to use drinking standard water on flushing loos and hosing your garden instead of using grey water for these purposes. Maybe the way to go is to encourage more homes to collect their own rainwater for lower grade uses, cutting the outflow through the dirty water system and reducing demand for high quality water.

It would be good if the regulators would allow a bit more capacity to be available. We are vulnerable to drought periods, so we do not want a repeat of the mid 1970s hot 1976 summer which would stretch the system too much. We keep adding homes and people to the south east with no new reservoir capacity. It cannot go on like that. We should be building new reservoirs now. They can be attractive landscape features, and would be welcome as an alternative to a new housing estate in a given area under pressure of development.

High standards are essential for drinking water. On the whole the UK achieves this. The issues relate to water rationing and future needs. As we move to growing more of our own food at home we will need more water for crops. Richer societies want more water for everything from showers to car cleaning and garden maintenance. Let's get on with catering for those demands from what should be a good growth business.

The water industry under its regulators has to tell people in the middle of a warm summer they should throttle back on water use, when they should be revelling in high demand. You do not hear the hot cross bun makers telling people at easter their buns are rationed because people want too many of them.