

Water, water everywhere but not enough for plants to drink

The water industry is an unusual one in the U.K. Instead of welcoming hot dry periods as a good opportunity to sell us more of its great product it lectures us to use less and threatens us with rationing. It must be because retail water suppliers are largely regulated monopolies. The Quangos that regulate them do not want them investing enough to grow their business and the businesses acquiesce in managed muddle and disappointment for customers. Both Regulator and industry have also performed badly when it comes to requiring the industry to clean up dirty water before returning it to our rivers.

Some greens argue that we should learn to use less water to place less stress on the planet. That is a wrong argument. Water is the most common substance on the surface of our globe. It is the ultimate renewable resource. We were all taught about the water cycle. Water from the vast supplies in our oceans and seas is swept up into clouds by the travelling winds. Some is deposited back down as rain. It finds its way back to the sea. If people interrupt its progress and use it, they do not destroy it but pass it back to the river system via treatment works that should clean it from the dirty industrial process, washing or human urine forms. There is no great strain on the planet from using the water on its way back to sea, subject to regulating the uses we make of it.

Some people argue that the industry cannot expect to cope for every peak demand. If there is a hot summer then demand does rise as many more people want to water plants and fill paddling pools, more farmers want to irrigate crops and more drinks makers need to bottle more water based fluids. This too is a bizarre argument. The peak demand issue for a hot summer is mild compared with some of the peak demand issues other businesses face. The hot cross bun industry does not sell its products for most of the year and has plenty for Easter. It does not tell us in April it cannot handle such a peak and tell us to eat less or to order some for August.

The problem with monopoly and price regulation is two fold. Monopolies do not have to respond so well to customers as competitive businesses. If we had genuine choice of supplier to send us water down the pipes we would get a better service. Regulators do not necessarily choose to regulate the price at the level it takes to ensure sufficient supply. Short term wishes to keep prices below a market price leaves some regulated industries short of capacity and unable to invest in enough new.

The Water Regulator needs to call in the main players and go through what it would take to put in extra reservoirs, boreholes and desalination plans to make sure next time we have a hot spell with little rain we have enough water. It would also be a good idea to extend the competition now allowed for business water supply to spread to householders as well.