

FReSH Water Programme



FReSH Water Programme

World-famous, globally rare and extraordinarily biodiverse, the Wessex chalk streams are irreplaceable, relying on a steady, crystal-clear aquifer-fed flow of water.

Our chalk streams are facing a water crisis. With the demands of a growing human population and increasingly extreme weather patterns, river flows are becoming less reliable. The summer of 2019 saw some chalk streams in the South East run completely dry, which should flow year round, sounding the alarm for chalk rivers of the Wessex region.

Plans have been drawn up to improve the water situation in Southern Water's (Hampshire) Western Area. These include the construction of reservoirs and desalination plants, and setting up water transfer schemes. It will take 10 years or more for new sources of water to be up and running and drought permits are expected to be needed to allow abstractions to continue during the next decade until the permanent new supply schemes are in place. Until then, Southern Water are legally obliged to bridge this gap with works to mitigate against the potential impact on chalk stream reaches likely affected by drought permit abstraction.

Southern Water are also legally obliged to provide habitat compensation by improving the quality and flow resilience of sections of chalk stream not directly impacted by drought permits (but nonetheless vulnerable to climatic low flow events). This compensation package amounts to one of the largest investments in the water environment in a decade; an unprecedented sum of money for the rivers of Southern England. Wessex Rivers Trust will lead on the delivery of this compensation work via the FReSH (Flow Resilient Sustainable Habitat) Water Programme.



Wessex Rivers Trust and the FReSH Water Programme

The **FReSH Water Programme** is an ambitious package of projects aimed at improving the resilience of our chalk streams to drought conditions. Through the restoration of natural processes and habitats, we aim to give our rivers back the tools they need to adjust to annual fluctuations, improving the ecological performance of our rare chalk streams through high and low flows. These changes will continue to benefit our rivers even after abstraction is reduced, cushioning the chalk stream environment against climate change and water quality concerns.

Towards the end of 2019, Southern Water approached the Trust to see whether we would take on the role of lead delivery partner for the compensatory river habitat parts of the Section 20 Agreement. After careful consideration, and having sought legal advice, we concluded the following:

- This offer presented a significant opportunity for a real step-change environmental improvement for the chalk streams of Hampshire
- The Trust was the best placed organisation to deliver this change, keeping the agreement holders to task and maintaining a non-commercial focus on the environment

Before documents were signed, we made sure that our independence could be guaranteed, and appropriate governance structures were in place. As the relevant authority, the Environment Agency, supported by Natural England, will assess and sign off all proposed plans and delivered projects when they meet the objectives of the Section 20 agreement. Southern Water's role is limited to provide funding to cover all the costs of the programme.



www.wessexrt.org.uk

Healthy rivers for wildlife and people



Wessex
Rivers Trust