# Farmers in Norfolk unite to build £1.1 million irrigation reservoir



In a significant development for water management in Norfolk, six farms have successfully collaborated to construct a £1.1 million irrigation reservoir near Neatishead. This initiative was a direct response to the Environment Agency's (EA) announcement in 2021 regarding imminent reductions and revocations of many water abstraction licences aimed at protecting the area's sensitive wildlife.

Tim Place, of fruit producer Place UK, was instrumental in spearheading this project, which is expected to ensure a reliable supply of water for horticultural crops. Place and his team devised a comprehensive plan to create a reservoir that could share water resources among neighbouring farms, which would help offset capital costs and allow access to the necessary river network infrastructure.

The project encompassed a total irrigable area of 2,866 acres and provides 270,000 cubic metres of water storage—comparable to over 100 Olympic-sized swimming pools. "This is a fantastic project bringing together six farmers to share and secure their irrigation water," said Place. He noted that while the group managed to find a cooperative solution, they faced significant challenges along the way.

Place mentioned that the lead-up to this construction involved navigating a complex maze of grants, permissions, and legal agreements, which took four years to finalise, exceeding their budget by a mere 2.6%. He pointed out that, while their farms received a two-year notice period after licence revocations, the accumulation of necessary approvals extended far beyond that timeframe. “Every farm is going to need a reservoir on-site eventually,” Place stated, expressing frustration over the high hurdles presented by the regulatory environment.

Water for the reservoir was sourced from two abstraction points located on the Bure and Ant rivers, allowing extraction during winter months when river flows are at their highest. However, Place pointed out that obtaining the necessary EA abstraction licences for these points hampered the planning process significantly, as the application could not be validated until those licences were secured.

Funding for the initiative was partially supported by a water management grant sourced from Defra’s Farming Transformation Fund, which covered 40% of the construction costs. However, as noted by Place, the application process for this funding was also complicated, requiring the EA abstraction licence and planning permissions to be established first.

The urgency for such projects has been underscored by recent climatic conditions, with Norfolk experiencing its driest March since 1929, receiving only 3mm of rainfall—far below the average of 47mm. This has highlighted the essential need for farmers to bolster their water management practices amid shifting environmental conditions.

Nick Deane, a farming partner, shared his concerns about the bureaucracy involved in securing the necessary approvals. He stated that there seems to be a discord between government objectives that favour enhanced water storage and the convoluted processes that hinder realisation of such initiatives.

Louis Baugh, another collaborator, emphasised that the success of the partnership stemmed from deep-rooted trust among farming peers accustomed to collaborating together. Baugh remarked on the long-term nature of the project, recognising the collaborative spirit vital to seeing the initiative through. “We all understand the environmental pressure, but we knew what the solution was,” he said.

Tom Blofeld, who manages the family estate and the BeWILDerwood adventure park, praised the collaborative effort. He asserted that the project would not have been feasible without the collective commitment of all involved. However, he lamented the lack of governmental support, stating that many preventable challenges arose during the process.

Following the completion of all necessary approvals, the construction faced additional delays due to winter rain, but the reservoir's filling commenced in December 2023 and concluded by March 2024. The first use of the stored water occurred in February 2025 for the trickle irrigation of early raspberries, followed by spray irrigation for new salad crops in March.

This collaborative effort stands as a significant achievement for the participating farmers, ensuring the sustainability of irrigation practices in the region and fostering resilience against future environmental uncertainties.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.gov.uk/defra/farming-transformation-fund> - This URL provides information on Defra's Farming Transformation Fund, which partially supported the irrigation reservoir project by covering 40% of the construction costs.
* <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/water-abstraction-licences> - This website details the process and regulations surrounding water abstraction licences, relevant to the challenges faced by the farmers in obtaining necessary EA abstraction licences.
* <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/environment-agency/about> - This URL provides information about the Environment Agency, which announced reductions and revocations of many water abstraction licences, prompting the collaboration among Norfolk farms.
* <https://www.noahwire.com> - This URL is the source of the original article, detailing the collaborative effort of six Norfolk farms to construct an irrigation reservoir in response to changing environmental and regulatory conditions.
* <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/climate/uk/summaries> - This URL can provide historical climate data, supporting the claim that Norfolk experienced its driest March since 1929, highlighting the need for enhanced water management practices.