# Government fast-tracks reservoirs to tackle intensifying water crisis in England



In response to escalating pressures on water resources, the UK government has fast-tracked the development of two new reservoirs in East Anglia and south Lincolnshire. These projects have been classified as "nationally significant," enabling them to bypass some local objections and accelerate their planning process. Water Minister Emma Hardy described this initiative as a necessary step to "secure our water supply for future generations," emphasizing the urgent need for infrastructure that can withstand the impacts of climate change and population growth.

The reservoirs, set for completion by 2036 and 2040, respectively, are expected to bolster water resilience in regions that are increasingly arid. With the country grappling with exceptionally dry conditions, as evidenced by this year’s parched spring, the need for secure water supplies has never been more pressing. Dr. Glenn Watts, water science director at the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, noted that reservoirs play a crucial role in protecting against droughts by capturing excess rainfall during wetter periods.

Despite the government’s optimistic projections, the implementation of these projects is fraught with challenges. The decision-making power has shifted from local authorities to the Environment Secretary, allowing the government to expedite processes which might otherwise face scrutiny or opposition. David Porter, senior vice president of the Institute of Civil Engineers, recognised the complexity inherent in reservoir projects, calling for streamlined processes to facilitate their realisation. Nevertheless, some experts warn against overlooking community concerns. Dr. Kevin Grecksch from the University of Oxford cautioned that such a top-down approach might breed resentment among locals, particularly those anticipating disruptions to their homes and livelihoods.

The broader context reveals that no major reservoirs in England have been completed since the early 1990s, shortly after the privatisation of the water sector. This stagnation has contributed to a precarious water supply, with increasing demand from residential development and sectors like data centres exacerbating the situation. The government acknowledged this by announcing plans for additional reservoirs and infrastructure projects likely to be deemed "nationally significant," which would facilitate a greater degree of regulatory simplicity.

Water UK, the trade association for the country's water companies, is backing the government's initiatives. Chief executive David Henderson highlighted the critical nature of immediate investments in infrastructure, warning that deferring such decisions could lead to even higher costs in the future. These sentiments echo previous calls from Ofwat, the water regulator, urging faster construction of new reservoirs to bolster supply resilience amid daunting environmental challenges and a growing population.

Alongside reservoir development, experts advocate for a comprehensive approach to water management, which includes improving efficiency in consumption, reducing leakage, and enhancing recycling initiatives. Professor Hannah Cloke of the University of Reading stressed the importance of re-evaluating how water is utilised across various sectors. She suggested that instead of merely expanding storage capacity, policymakers should consider stricter regulations on new developments and incentivise existing properties to retrofit water-saving technologies.

The government's recent pledges indicate a proactive stance towards tackling water security, with ambitious targets for reducing per capita consumption and leakage identified through a new National Policy Statement. Additionally, public funding of £10 million for enhancing irrigation and on-farm reservoirs signifies a recognition of the agricultural sector's role in broader water management strategies. However, as communities eye potential disruptions posed by new infrastructure, striking a balance between development needs and local sentiments will be essential for successful implementation.

As England navigates a future characterised by fluctuating weather patterns and escalating water demands, the urgency to act effectively on water security issues is clear. Through a combination of new reservoir construction, improved management practices, and community engagement, the UK aims to forge a sustainable path forward in safeguarding this vital resource.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy8dv6l2jlzo), [[3]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/time-to-invest-in-our-water-security)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy8dv6l2jlzo), [[2]](https://www.ofwat.gov.uk/plans-for-three-new-reservoirs-move-a-step-closer/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy8dv6l2jlzo), [[4]](https://www.standard.co.uk/business/business-news/watchdog-tells-water-firms-to-speed-up-building-new-reservoirs-b1221101.html)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://www.water.org.uk/investing-future/ps104bn-investment-plan/securing-our-supply-water), [[6]](https://www.water.org.uk/news-views-publications/news/water-companies-propose-largest-ever-investment)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy8dv6l2jlzo), [[3]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/time-to-invest-in-our-water-security)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy8dv6l2jlzo), [[2]](https://www.ofwat.gov.uk/plans-for-three-new-reservoirs-move-a-step-closer/), [[5]](https://www.water.org.uk/investing-future/ps104bn-investment-plan/securing-our-supply-water)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy8dv6l2jlzo), [[6]](https://www.water.org.uk/news-views-publications/news/water-companies-propose-largest-ever-investment)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy8dv6l2jlzo), [[4]](https://www.standard.co.uk/business/business-news/watchdog-tells-water-firms-to-speed-up-building-new-reservoirs-b1221101.html)
* Paragraph 9 – [[2]](https://www.ofwat.gov.uk/plans-for-three-new-reservoirs-move-a-step-closer/), [[3]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/time-to-invest-in-our-water-security)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy8dv6l2jlzo> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ofwat.gov.uk/plans-for-three-new-reservoirs-move-a-step-closer/> - In March 2023, Ofwat, the water regulator for England and Wales, approved the progression of three new reservoir projects in Oxfordshire, Lincolnshire, and Cambridgeshire. These reservoirs aim to supply water to over 3 million customers and are part of a broader initiative to enhance water resilience amid challenges like climate change and population growth. The projects are among twelve infrastructure schemes receiving dedicated funding to address future water supply needs. The final decisions will be made through the Water Resources Management Planning process, which includes obtaining necessary planning permissions and permits.
3. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/time-to-invest-in-our-water-security> - In September 2023, the UK government announced a comprehensive plan to bolster water security. Key measures include a £10 million round of Water Management Grants to fund on-farm reservoirs and improved irrigation, a new National Policy Statement to expedite the construction of essential water infrastructure like reservoirs and transfer schemes, and an additional £469 million investment through the Regulators Alliance for Progressing Infrastructure Development (RAPID) programme. The plan also sets ambitious targets for reducing water consumption and leakage, aiming for a 20% reduction in per capita water use by 2038.
4. <https://www.standard.co.uk/business/business-news/watchdog-tells-water-firms-to-speed-up-building-new-reservoirs-b1221101.html> - In April 2025, Ofwat, the water regulator, urged water companies to accelerate the construction of new reservoirs and major projects. In a letter to water company executives, Ofwat emphasized the need for more efficient and timely delivery of infrastructure projects. This directive comes amid growing public concern over rising consumer bills and environmental issues, highlighting the urgency of enhancing water supply resilience in the face of climate change and population growth.
5. <https://www.water.org.uk/investing-future/ps104bn-investment-plan/securing-our-supply-water> - Water UK, the trade association representing water companies in England and Wales, has outlined a £104 billion investment plan to secure the nation's water supply. This plan includes the construction of ten new reservoirs, with the Havant Thicket reservoir in Hampshire already under construction. The investment aims to address the projected need for an additional 5 billion litres of water daily by 2050, driven by climate change and population growth. The strategy also involves transferring water from wetter to drier regions and developing new water capture and storage systems.
6. <https://www.water.org.uk/news-views-publications/news/water-companies-propose-largest-ever-investment> - In October 2023, water companies in England and Wales proposed a £96 billion investment plan for the period 2025–2030, marking a 90% increase from the current period. This unprecedented investment aims to maintain high-quality drinking water for a growing population, ensure future water supply security, and significantly reduce sewage discharge into rivers and seas. The plan includes building ten new reservoirs, cutting leakage by over a quarter by 2030, and investing £11 billion to reduce overflow spills, representing the most ambitious modernization of sewers since the Victorian era.
7. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c36ny87dpklo> - In September 2024, Thames Water's plan, including the construction of a new 4.5 square mile reservoir near Abingdon, Oxfordshire, received approval from Environment Secretary Steve Reed. The reservoir is part of Thames Water's Water Resource Management Plan, which outlines actions and investments required to deliver a secure and sustainable water supply for the next 50 years and beyond. The plan considers factors such as growing population, environmental protection, and changing climate conditions.