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Water Framework Directive can help protect wildlife sites

A new report highlighting the pressures on surface waters in this country is a first step towards improving the ecological quality of these habitats at risk from diffuse and point-source pollution and over abstraction of water.

English Nature, as a contributor to the Water Framework Directive river basin characterisation submitted to the European Commission by Defra yesterday, has undertaken a risk assessment of protected areas. Of 253 protected areas (Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas) dependent on water, 36% are at risk of failing to meet their conservation objectives by 2015; 60% are probably at risk; and only 4% are deemed not to be at risk.

This is part of a larger assessment of water bodies in England and Wales undertaken by the Environment Agency, which forms part of the UK's report submitted to the European Commission yesterday by Defra. The report identifies the pressures and impacts which present the greatest risk, including diffuse pollution from agriculture, water abstraction, physical modification of rivers and estuaries and invasive non-native plants and animals.

The Water Framework Directive requires us to consider the 'ecological quality' of surface waters, as well as their chemical quality. The results are, therefore, consistent with the findings in the English Nature publication England's best wildlife and geological sites (2003), which showed that 69% of our best quality rivers designated as SSSIs are not in favourable condition.

"The programme of measures which must now be put in place under the Water Framework Directive have huge potential to improve the water environment for biodiversity throughout England," said James Marsden, English Nature's Head of Policy. "Progress is now urgently needed to tackle diffuse pollution and other pressures on aquatic SSSIs, in order to reach the governments' Public Service Agreement target of bringing 95% of SSSIs into favourable condition by 2010."

English Nature has started work in partnership with the Environment Agency, the Countryside Agency and the Rural Development Service in four pilot river catchment areas to find ways to reduce diffuse pollution to deliver both Water Framework Directive 'ecological quality' and SSSI 'favourable condition'.