

OUR WATER SHORTAGE SCANDAL

OK, so here we are in August – a time for sun, rest, and relaxation without a care. But no – it's just another time of crisis. This time it's a water shortage.

It has been known for many years that this shortage is caused by Climate Change, resulting in hotter, drier summers.

Now let's look at the facts and the appalling lack of response from the Government and the water companies, whose appropriate actions could have prevented this situation now, and in the future.

Since the Government privatised the water supply business approximately 30 years ago, the UK population has increased by 10 million (a large percentage of whom are in the South East.) During that time, the water companies built NO water storage facilities or reservoirs. In fact, the two largest and worst polluting water companies – Thames Water and Southern Water – sold off dozens of reservoirs for housing development.

The water companies have also completely ignored the urgent need to improve distribution by constructing a nationwide water grid.

Only now are there initial stirrings in this direction being mentioned, and these should be incorporated into an overall strategy. A countrywide strategy is essential now.

This strategy must also address the water sources – rain falls mostly in the North and West of the UK, with heavy usage in the South and South East. Desalination plants must be evaluated, designed and implemented. The first major facility specifically for this purpose – built in the Thames Estuary at a cost of £250m in 2020 – has never been turned on! It should have served ½ million homes. The industry regulator Ofwat has no plans to ask why.

This essential nationwide service is driven by the profit motive of a number of uncoordinated individual companies (mostly foreign-owned), and not the needs of the people who live here. In addition, approximately 20% of the total water supply is lost through leakages every day. This volume would serve approximately 20m people. The Chartered Institution of Water & Environmental Management say it is because the water companies find it cheaper to continue to treat the leak to enable the supply to continue, rather than to repair the pipes.

Ofwat is taking an arm's length position on this issue, and has not demanded a consolidated water supply strategy covering all of the above issues. You should also know that Havant Borough Council has no statutory powers over this industry at all. And we have even got to the point where, through some self-proclaimed dystopian power, these companies are blaming their customers for the problems, and in some cases recommending that we spy on each other so that fines up to £1000 can be levied. Even the Police have been forced to intervene and say this could lead to civil disorder.

Why is this important here? Well, Southern Water manage our drainage, but our fresh water comes from a small local company – Portsmouth Water. The primary source is the Southdowns chalk catchment via the wells at Bedhampton. For over 100 years, this company was owned by the employees, and served the community well. In recent years it has been sold to an investment trust. This is a potential problem for us all, as Southern Water are now proposing the following:

- To build a reservoir at Havant Thicket. This will be filled by water from the Bedhampton wells (controlled by Portsmouth Water) and cleaned-up output from the Budds Farm Sewage Treatment Works. The reservoir is just to serve the water needs of the Southampton area, to solve Southern Water's Test and Itchen Rivers' problems.

Our concerns are:

- That HBC have no powers in this situation, so it is likely that the Bedhampton wells will feed the needs of a much wider community, without any guarantees of support to the existing customers;
- That Southern Water are probably looking at a takeover of Portsmouth Water;
- And who is going to ensure the process of cleaning up the Budds Farm output is 100% safe for all time? Southern Water – currently under a £100m fine – continues as a serial pollution offender, and its management should already be serving at Her Majesty’s pleasure for the past crimes.

We have asked HBC to roll their sleeves up and get involved. We are also writing to the CEOs of Southern Water and Portsmouth Water to obtain clarification of their intent, and the impact on their existing customers.