

WFD UK TAG  
c/o SNIFFER  
First Floor, Greenside House  
25 Greenside Place  
Edinburgh EH1 3AA

27<sup>th</sup> February 2013

Dear Sir

**UKTAG consultation on revised phosphorus standards for rivers – response from Northumbrian Water**

We are pleased to have the opportunity to comment on the UKTAG proposals on revised phosphorus standards for rivers. We set out our comments on the proposals below including the responses to the specific questions included in the consultation.

Your consultation includes the following two principles:

*Principle 1: The UKTAG recommends that new site-specific phosphorus standards for rivers are adopted based on a new model of the relationship between biology and phosphorus concentrations*

*Principle 2: The UKTAG suggests that the proposed new default phosphorus standards for rivers are adjusted to take account of observed local biology (referred to below as adjusted standards).*

We are generally supportive of the proposed new standards (both principles), but particularly with Principle 2. We feel that the approach is logical in that it is the link between the biology status and the phosphorus levels that is important rather than just the phosphorus concentration alone. It is critical however that the new standards are adopted alongside the proposed new biology standards. This presents a much larger task for the Environment Agency to tackle, and to provide interpretation in sufficient time for the Water Industry to identify any cost implications within the ongoing PR14 business planning programme. This should be taken into account when considering the timing over which the new standards are expected to be implemented and adhered to.

UKTAG clearly states that there is still significant noise between the phosphorus levels and the biological response. We are therefore supportive of the statement that:

*Expensive action to reduce phosphorus concentrations at a site should only be considered where there is high confidence of associated adverse biological impacts.*

We strongly recommend that this is stressed in the recommendation from UKTAG in implementing the new standards.

It is understood that although the phosphorus standard is more stringent, the biology standards are less stringent and the net impact would be that the number of water bodies failing to meet good status would decrease if both new standards are adopted. Again this highlights the criticality of adopting both new sets of standards together.

It is recognised that there is currently a need to fill the gaps with regards limited biology data. We would be supportive of the approach suggested at the recent workshop that this should be addressed on a stepwise basis – i.e. that Phosphorus levels greater than the standards act as a trigger to implement more detailed biological monitoring programmes. Exceeding the phosphorus standard alone would not be sufficient evidence to support the case for significant investment to reduce the phosphorus levels. This also highlights the need for ‘time’ in the overall assessment of status rather than rushing in with expensive action to reduce the phosphorus concentration.

Although the proposed standards are presented as being ‘site-specific standards’, the recent workshop seemed to conclude that it would have to be adopted on a water body level (or even as sub-catchment / catchment level). We therefore have some concerns / reservations with regards to how the standards will be implemented based both on the limited biology data available and how catchment based improvements would be assessed.

There is also some concern that there should be other indicators used to understand the biology better rather than just using the phosphorus level.

The consultation document includes the following questions

- 1. Should the recommended new default standards be adopted as the basis for assessing status, decisions on whether or not to allow new discharges and identifying the likely scale of improvements that may be needed at existing discharges?*
- 2. Should adjusted standards be used to assess status and take decisions relating to discharge control?*
- 3. Should default standards be adopted as the basis for assessing status and decisions relating to new discharges and adjusted standards used, where applicable, when planning improvements at existing discharges?*

All the above situations would probably require additional investigation to continue to better understand the relationship between biology and environmental pressures. That given in question 3 probably requires the most investigation but we would support this approach rather than investment that entails high carbon cost and with no guaranteed environmental benefit.

We hope our comments prove helpful but if you require any clarification on any of the information included in our response please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours faithfully

Ken Oswald

Head of Economic Regulation