New pipeline to help save the Kennet

Since its creation twenty years ago, ARK has been campaigning for the water supplies from the River Kennet to Swindon to be reduced. At last, some significant improvement is in sight.

Swindon needs about 40 million litres of water a day - 40 megalitres/day or Ml/d. At present, about 15 Ml/d comes from boreholes at Axford and Ogbourne in the Kennet Valley. The rest is derived from the Farmoor reservoir to the west of Oxford, which is filled by pumping water either from the Thames itself or via the GATOX pipeline from the Gatehampton boreholes in the gravels beside the river near Goring.

Unfortunately, the 15 Ml/d of water exported from our own aquifer to Swindon is discharged through Swindon sewage works to the River Thames, so it is all lost from the Kennet valley. Investigations by Thames Water and the Environment Agency have shown that this damages the river by:

- Reducing flows in the river below Axford by roughly 40% in droughts
- Drying up the River Og more frequently than would occur naturally
- Damaging the river’s ecology, especially the classic chalkstream Ranunculus weed on which river insects and fish depend
- Encouraging algal growth, which smothers the river bed and reduces its ability to support insect life and a habitat for trout and other fish to breed.

After many years of campaigning by ARK, the Environment Agency has recently agreed to revoke the Ogbourne abstraction licence altogether and to reduce the abstraction at Axford to 9.3 Ml/d at most times and just 6 Ml/d in droughts. They have agreed that supplies to Swindon can come instead from Farmoor reservoir. However, parts of south Swindon can only be supplied from the Kennet valley so a new pipeline is needed connecting south Swindon to north Swindon and in turn to Farmoor.

Funding for the so-called north-south Swindon link has now been agreed. Construction of the pipeline will start as soon as landowners’ consents have been obtained. It will be about 6 miles (10 km) long, with a diameter of 18” (450 mm), connecting north Swindon to the Whitefields Farm reservoir to the East of the Marlborough–Swindon road (between Chiseldon and Ogbourne Downs golf club). It is expected to be finished by 2015, provided there are no delays in getting the landowner consents.

ARK are delighted by this news. It is a big step towards our ultimate objective of stopping the export of water to Swindon altogether. We will continue to campaign for this, as well as stopping the supplies from the Marlborough and Clatford boreholes, which we believe are damaging the river above Marlborough. But for the moment, let’s celebrate a big success.

John Lawson
Technical Director