
UK Groundwater Forum

Stakeholders identify raising awareness of groundwater as a new focus

A meeting of groundwater stakeholders held in London on 9 June 2003 has identified a clearly defined role for the UK Groundwater Forum for the future. The Forum should focus solely on raising the awareness of groundwater, something for which there is a strong need but for which no organisation in the UK has a remit. Groundwater plays a key role in supporting the environment and in water supply. For groundwater resources to be safeguarded the public must appreciate the value of groundwater which in turn will encourage government to recognise the need for adequate legislation and funding to protect it and enable it to be used sustainably. Raising awareness of groundwater is a key element of this process. Further detail on the outcome of the meeting is presented below.

A Role for the Forum?

The UK Groundwater Forum is an independent grouping of stakeholders drawn from the water industry, regulators and research and educational organisations which has until now aimed to provide a non-partisan, unified voice for groundwater in the UK and an arena in which to discuss research and information needs. The UK Groundwater Forum was formed in 1995 as part of the consultation process for a strategic study of groundwater issues and research needs in the UK. The Forum is run by a steering committee (see box for organisations represented) and supported by a secretariat. Funding for the secretariat (until recently, of the order of £38,000 per annum) and support for holding meetings and developing educational material has been provided by the Environment Agency, UKWIR Ltd, NERC, SNIFFER and FWR.

Organisations currently represented on the Forum Steering Committee

*British Geological Survey
Environment Agency
Scottish Environment Protection Agency
Environment & Heritage Service, NI
Thames Water
Veolia Water
Foundation for Water Research
University of Birmingham
Geological Survey of Ireland*

Although in the period since 1995 the Forum has had a series of significant achievements (see box below) there has been continued debate over what its remit should be. In an attempt to engage a broader spectrum of stakeholders and obtain views on the Forum's future remit, the Forum Steering Committee organised a groundwater stakeholders meeting on 9 June 2003 at the Geological Society in London. The meeting attracted representatives from a wide range of organisations including, government departments, regulators, water industry, consultancies and NGOs (see box over). Future funding of the Forum depended on there being a consensus from this meeting that the Forum has an valuable role to fill.

Suggestions for the activities that the Forum could potentially be involved in were presented at the meeting. Discussion of the role of the Forum was focussed through parallel break-out groups on four specific groundwater-related issues identified by the Forum Steering Committee as being of particular importance to the UK at present:

Achievements of the Forum

- Brokered co-funded groundwater research projects on Aquifer Storage & Recovery and Low flows & Wetlands
- Provided Government with a consensus view on elements of the draft Water Framework Directive
- Developed a database of groundwater research
- Runs a seminar series including topics such as:
 - Water Framework Directive (March 2002)
 - GW in tomorrow's Europe (May 1999)
 - Low flows and wetlands (Nov 1998)
- Produced publications to raise awareness of groundwater
 - book: Groundwater, Our Hidden Asset
 - video: How Rivers Work, Role of Groundwater
 - briefing note: Groundwater, A Valuable Resource
- Circulates information on upcoming events through the Forum e-mail list (>100 members)
- Maintains a website: <http://www.nwl.ac.uk/gwf>

- A. Implications on the groundwater community of emerging legislation
C. Shortage of professionals within the UK with sufficient hydrogeological skills

- B. Challenges in achieving sustainable management of groundwater resources
D. Need to raise awareness of groundwater

Way Forward

The consensus of the stakeholders at the meeting was that there is an important role to be played by the UK Groundwater Forum in raising the awareness of groundwater and groundwater-related issues in the UK. For groundwater resources to be safeguarded the public must appreciate the value of groundwater which in turn will encourage government to recognise the need for adequate legislation and funding to protect it and enable it to be used sustainably. Raising awareness of groundwater is a key element of this process. The role of raising the awareness of groundwater is not covered sufficiently by other organisations and the Forum's broad representation, and non-partisan outlook, makes it uniquely suitable. **The Forum should therefore drop some of the past aims – e.g. to provide a consensus view on groundwater issues and promote a research agenda - and limit its role to that of raising awareness. This should ensure the Forum is more focussed and its remit clearer to its stakeholders and those it interacts with.**

It was appreciated by those attending the meeting that raising awareness covers a wide spectrum of activities: from innovative approaches to raising public awareness, through the promotion of groundwater in formal education, to provision of information and the facilitation of discussion of topical groundwater issues within a professional environment. Given the wealth of opportunities, the Forum must develop a clear strategy for raising awareness.

A popular option within the stakeholders at the meeting was the development of the Forum web site into *the* source of information on groundwater in the UK. This would include basic information for those with little or no knowledge of groundwater, further insight on topical groundwater issues for those with some background in groundwater and in addition would provide a reference source for groundwater professionals and those seeking a groundwater-related career. If the Forum is to produce further educational material the web site would be an appropriate mechanism for its dissemination. In these and other activities to raise awareness the Forum should not rely solely on those organisations within the core of the Forum but should look outside for the assistance of those with the relevant skills.

There was a consensus at the meeting that if the relaunched Forum is to be a success it is important that it should develop a higher profile enabling the results of its activities to be disseminated more widely, justifying its value to its funders and supporters.

Actions resulting from the meeting

The Steering Committee will inform the Forum's funding organisations of the outcome of the meeting. Assuming the strong endorsement from the stakeholder meeting ensures continued support for the Forum, the Committee will develop a strategy and costed implementation programme for raising awareness of groundwater. This will be circulated to the wider stakeholder group for comment. Additional funding will then be sought for the implementation programme.

Attendees of the Forum Stakeholder meeting

Sally Watson	<i>Atkins Water</i>
Dave Allen	<i>British Geological Survey</i>
David Macdonald	<i>British Geological Survey</i>
Denis Peach	<i>British Geological Survey</i>
David Broyd	<i>DEFRA</i>
Hans Schutton	<i>English Nature</i>
Melanie Walters	<i>Entec UK Ltd</i>
Shaun Salmon	<i>Entec UK Ltd</i>
Mike Eggboro	<i>Environment Agency</i>
Steve Fletcher	<i>Environment Agency</i>
Mark Morton	<i>Environment Agency</i>
Chris Thomas	<i>Environment Agency</i>
Dick Ainsworth	<i>Foundation for Water Research</i>
Martin Perkins	<i>Halcrow Group Ltd</i>
Gareth Digges La Touche	<i>MJ Carter Associates</i>
Trevor Elliot	<i>Queen's University Belfast</i>
Jean Clews	<i>Scottish Environment Protection Agency</i>
Mike Packman	<i>Southern Water</i>
Brian Connorton	<i>Thames Water</i>
James Dodds	<i>UK Irrigation Association</i>
Willy Burgess	<i>University College London</i>
John Tellam	<i>University of Birmingham</i>
Michael Price	<i>University of Reading</i>
Mike Pocock	<i>Veolia Water/CIWEM</i>
Rob Sage	<i>Veolia Water</i>
Mark Anderson	<i>Water Management Consultants Ltd</i>
Bryan Robinson	<i>Water Management Consultants Ltd</i>
Phillip Mills	<i>WaterUK</i>
Robert Cunningham	<i>Wildlife Trusts</i>