

# PRESS RELEASE



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Title: Water, water – everywhere?

How much water do you use? It is easy to measure the water that flows from our taps, but how much is used to grow the food that you eat? Amazingly the food consumed by an average family of four people needs 25,700 litres of water a day simply to grow it.

Some might say that farmers are obsessed with the weather – rightly so as drought or flood can wreck a year's crops just as favourable weather can lead to a bumper harvest. Some are already talking about a drought for 2012. With the food we eat coming from all corners of the planet what you pay for the contents of your shopping basket are just as likely to be influenced by a drought in Western Australia as floods in the Ukraine. On the Isle of Wight we are blessed with around 850 millimetres of rainfall per annum – certainly not the wettest part of the United Kingdom, but nowhere near as dry as parts of the South East which are often quoted as being under "severe water stress" even drawing comparison to the Sahara! As you would expect 78% of the Islands water is used for "public use". Only 3% of the abstracted water is used for crop irrigation. Food demands large amounts of water - a single egg needs 450 litres, a kilogram of wheat needs 13,500 litres and a kilogram of beef 15,400 litres. The vast majority of this water is absorbed by the soil after rainfall and irrigation is only used to "top up" vulnerable crops during the driest months of the year.

As the climate changes and the public demand for water increases so the focus on crop irrigation intensifies. You will have seen the iconic water jets irrigating potatoes, cauliflowers, sweet corn and other specialist crops. The Islands glass-house crops – one of the largest areas in the UK – use trickle irrigation to water tomatoes and other salad with maximum efficiency.

This irrigation water is either abstracted from bore holes tapping into ground water or taken from rivers and streams. It is the river and stream abstractions that have attracted most attention from bodies, such as the Environment Agency, most often linked to the effect on landscape areas subject to environmental protection. These "summer abstractions" are becoming increasingly difficult to manage, but have been successfully alleviated by farmers constructing above ground reservoirs to collect surplus water in the winter. On a recent visit to California I was reminded how barren desert can be converted to luxurious green growth by the simple introduction of water. California's Central Valley is the most productive farm land in the USA but would be nothing without water diverted over hundreds of miles from the Colorado River and beyond.

For the Island managing our water will be a challenge in the coming years with increasingly erratic rainfall and more domestic demand. For farmers it is a real worry. The food we all eat depends on that water.

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