

UK Government announces £23 Million boost for Cleaner Rivers and Thriving Wildlife

May 9, 2024



The UK Government has announced a significant investment of £11.5 million to revitalise local water infrastructure in England. This funding injection, delivered through the Water Environment Improvement Fund (WEIF), will be further amplified by contributions from organisations like the National Lottery and local wildlife trusts, bringing the total potential investment to £23 million.

This initiative targets 180 local projects across the country, focusing on critical areas like river restoration, flood protection, and strategic tree planting. Examples include:

- The Limestone Becks River Restoration project in Lincolnshire, aiming to enhance habitats for diverse wildlife.
- Phase II of The York Urban Becks project, designed to create a more natural river course and bolster local biodiversity.
- The Woods for Devon project, establishing new woodlands to improve water quality, support wildlife, and promote carbon capture.

This investment is projected to improve and protect an additional 300 kilometers of English rivers, alongside the creation and restoration of roughly 160 hectares of inland and coastal waters.

Collaborative Approach for a Healthier Environment

The WEIF program prioritises collaborative efforts. Catchment partnerships, a key component of this initiative, bring together various stakeholders like government bodies, local authorities, landowners, environmental NGOs, farmers, universities, and water companies. This collaborative approach leverages local expertise and knowledge for impactful results.

Water Minister Robbie Moore MP said:

These local catchment partnerships do excellent work and I am pleased that we are able to give this additional funding to help deliver projects where rivers need it most.

It builds on recent measures to clean up our rivers including consulting on a ban on water company bonuses, launching a new Water Restoration Fund to reinvest water company fines and penalties back into the water environment, and a fourfold increase in Environment Agency inspections.

Chair of the Environment Agency Alan Lovell said:

We welcome this uplift in funding for local projects across the country which will help us work collaboratively with a range of organisations and stakeholders to achieve our ambitions for the water environment.

It builds on the steps we are taking to improve water quality and protect the environment, including expanding our specialised workforce and increase water company inspections this year, along with our powers to levy uncapped penalties on those who pollute our waterways.

CEO of The Rivers Trust Mark Lloyd said:

Increased funding is a very important ingredient in the recipe for successfully restoring our rivers to good health and so this is welcome news.

We are increasingly seeing the private and philanthropic sectors getting involved to match this kind of funding which enables this government support to go even further, enabling us to have a greater positive impact in more places.

This announcement builds upon recent government measures aimed at improving water quality, including:

- A consultation on banning water company bonuses linked to environmental performance.
- Establishing a new Water Restoration Fund to reinvest penalties levied on water companies back into environmental restoration initiatives.

- A fourfold increase in Environment Agency inspections to ensure compliance with environmental regulations.

Environmental Leaders Welcome the Investment

The investment received positive responses from environmental leaders. Alan Lovell, Chair of the Environment Agency, highlighted the importance of collaboration in achieving environmental goals. Mark Lloyd, CEO of The Rivers Trust, emphasised the significance of private and philanthropic sector involvement in amplifying the impact of government funding.

Building on Past Success

The WEIF program has a proven track record. In 2021-22, funding facilitated the “Developing the Natural Aire” project in Yorkshire, resulting in reconnected river habitats, extensive tree planting, and increased community engagement.

This £11.5 million uplift complements the existing £3 million already allocated for local water quality improvement projects in the current financial year.

Beyond Today’s Announcement

Today’s investment signifies the government’s ongoing commitment to a healthier water environment. Additional measures include:

- A new £11 million Water Restoration Fund for environmental reinvestment.
- Requiring 100% storm overflow monitoring by water companies to identify and address sewage spills.
- Removing caps on civil penalties for water companies and broadening their scope to deter environmental pollution.
- Mandating the largest-ever water company infrastructure investment program – £60 billion over 25 years – for infrastructure upgrades and reducing sewage spills.
- Expanding protections for coastal and estuarine waters, prioritising bathing waters and sensitive ecosystems.
- A dedicated plan for the preservation and protection of the River Wye, including £35 million in funding.
- Expediting construction of critical water supply infrastructure such as reservoirs and water transfer schemes.

The government’s multi-pronged approach demonstrates a strong commitment to safeguarding England’s water resources for future generations. By collaborating with local communities and environmental organisations, this initiative paves the way for cleaner rivers, a thriving wildlife population, and a healthier environment for all.