

Consumption of water resources

Water is used extensively throughout the UK economy. The bulk of the water consumed by agriculture and industry comes from direct abstractions from rivers and lakes, although a significant amount of the water provided through the public water supply (PWS) network is also used by various industries, such as the food and drinks sector and the chemicals industry.

Our water resource use account shows the use of inland and non-tidal waters in 1997/98. It excludes abstraction of tidal waters (whether freshwater or not) and in situ uses such as for hydro-electric power, but does include some other "non-consumptive" uses where the water is returned to the same part of the environment in an unchanged state, such as where the water has been used for cooling purposes only.

The account of water use includes a number of miscellaneous categories, either where it has not been possible to identify the precise sector which uses the water or where the estimates from different sources do not reconcile completely. The categories used in the account are as follows:

- 'unspecified industry' is use by manufacturing industry where the sector is unknown;
- use by the water supply sector is defined to include not only the water industry's own use but also leakage from the PWS
- 'other abstractions' relate to a number of small but miscellaneous uses such as private domestic water supply
- 'statistical discrepancies' denote the difference between the estimated total abstractions for PWS and estimated supply.

Sources and methods

The estimates are primarily based on research carried out by the Environment Agency on water consumption in England and Wales¹. For the use of the Public Water Supply (PWS) in 1997/98, the Agency asked the water companies to provide estimates of use by industrial sectors. Estimates were made for areas where no information on the breakdown of use was available. Information on direct abstractions of groundwater and non-tidal waters by sector in 1997/98 was obtained from the Agency's National Abstraction Licensing Database, using a combination of information on the purpose of the abstractions and the ratio of actual use to licensed use. Estimates for Scotland and Northern Ireland are based on Scottish Executive figures for PWS use and grossed up estimates of direct abstractions using the figures for England and Wales, but they also take into account figures given in a separate survey of water use by industry and commerce in the UK².

References

1. Environment Agency (2001). A scenario approach to water demand forecasting. Report by the National Water Demand Management Centre, August 2001.
2. Envirowise (2001). A review of water use in UK industry and commerce.