



Parts of the UK are facing the most severe drought of the last 30 years. It's time for water companies and – just as importantly – consumers to take action

**I**s our green and pleasant land drying out? Nearly 13 million people are now affected by hosepipe and sprinkler bans, a southeast water supplier has imposed the UK's first drought order for more than a decade, and two more suppliers have won permission to follow suit.

'The drought is severe because we've had two successive dry winters – if you combine the rainfall for the last two winter and early spring periods you won't find any period as dry as that since the early 1930s,' says Terry Marsh of the UK's Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, which carries out research into water resources.

Winter rainfall is crucial because lower temperatures mean that very little of the water that falls is lost to evaporation. Instead, it is able to fill rivers and reservoirs and soak through to natural underground reservoirs called aquifers. Having high levels of water in aquifers is vital in southeast England, which relies on them for 70 per cent of its water. The rain we had in May was far less useful than it appeared, as a relatively high proportion of the water would have evaporated or been taken up by plants before reaching the aquifers.

With global warming disrupting weather patterns, and the Met Office warning of more droughts, further stress on our water resources is likely. In June, the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee criticised the government for allowing new homes to be built in the water-starved southeast and called for action to fix leaking pipes. But who is really to blame? Over the next four pages we look at what the water suppliers are doing to solve their problems, and what role consumers can play. The map on the right gives a snapshot of what is happening around the UK.

### Olympic-sized leaks

According to the water industry regulator Ofwat, more than 3.6bn litres of water leaked from England and Wales' ageing water mains in 2004-2005. Thames Water, United Utilities and Severn Trent leaked enough



# Running on empty

between them to fill 766 Olympic-sized swimming pools every day last year and Ofwat heavily criticised Thames in June when it announced that it had missed its target to cut leaks for 2005-2006. Ofwat said: 'Customers are paying the higher prices that Thames Water has been allowed to charge – an average increase of 24 per cent over 2005-2010 – without getting all the benefits that the company has promised to deliver. That is unacceptable.'

Most of the water lost through leaks will eventually flow back into rivers and groundwater storage so it's not lost forever. But the time taken for this to happen puts a strain on tight resources. As Andrew Marsh, from the Consumer Council for Water, points out: 'If consumers don't see suppliers mending leaks, what incentive do they have to save water?'

The water companies are acting – since 2000 they've repaired or replaced more than 300,000 supply pipes, but Ofwat

estimates it would cost around £2.5bn to reduce leakages by a further 10 per cent.

Consumers have a vital role to play, but at present our water consumption is on the rise. Fifteen years ago we each used around 139 litres a day. Now we use 150 litres.

Installing more water meters could be a solution – meters can reduce consumption by 20 per cent simply by making us more cost-conscious. If you live alone you could also save hundreds of pounds by switching to metered bills. But meters aren't suitable for all properties or households.

### Halve your water use

As well as fitting meters, we think that the water companies also have a responsibility to promote the efficient use of water on a year-round basis in order to change consumer attitudes. Our research suggests it is possible for many people to cut consumption by up to 50 per cent in their bathroom, kitchen and garden – find out how on p34.

**'If consumers don't see suppliers mending leaks, what incentive do they have to save water?'**

## THE LEAK CATCHER: PLUGGING THE HOLES IN THAMES WATER PIPES

**Richard Smith** 61, retired engineer

*Which?* member Richard Smith has taken an unusual approach to saving water. He lives in the Thames Water region, which is notorious for its leaky pipes, and is a self-appointed 'leak catcher'. He regularly walks in the Epsom area and at the same time keeps an eye out for problems.

'I report everything from a trickle to a torrent,' Richard told

us. 'Since I retired, I've enjoyed walking in the countryside. As I walk, I keep an eye out for any escaping water and then ring Thames Water when I get home.'

Richard has reported around 50 leaks in the last five years, and so far has a 100 per cent success rate getting them fixed. He said: 'I make sure I go back and check it's fixed them. I chase

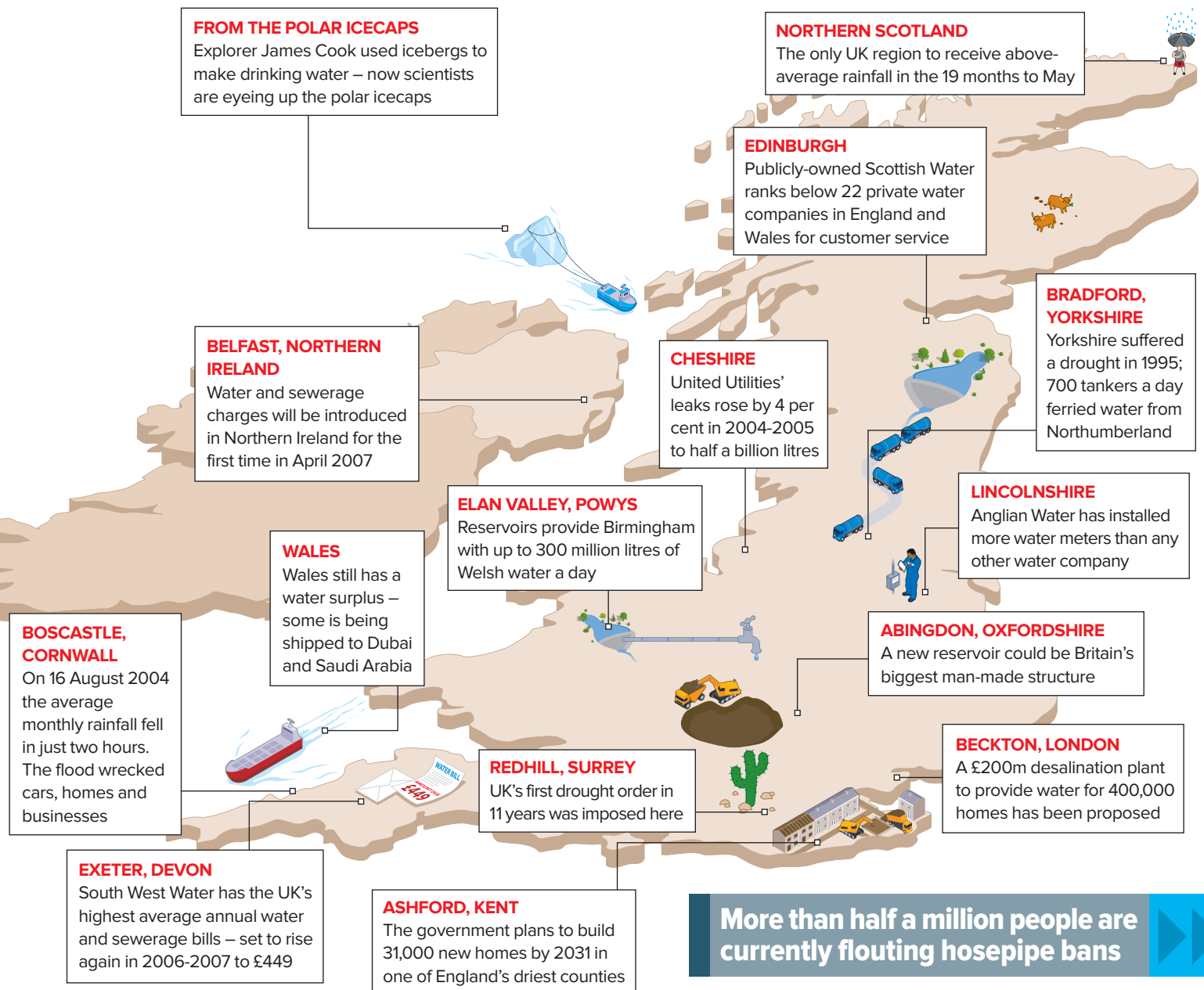
it up if it hasn't sorted them within three months but I've generally been impressed with Thames Water's reaction.'

Robin Markwell, spokesman for Thames Water, admits: 'We rely on the public to be our eyes and ears. We've got 20,000 miles of infrastructure and it's impossible for us to watch them all of the time.'

## MEMBER BENEFIT

### Expert buying tips

A water butt is a great way to save rainwater (see p35 for more). The July issue of *Gardening Which?* reveals the Best Buys – for special access to this report go to [www.which.co.uk](http://www.which.co.uk). To claim your first two free issues of the magazine, please call 0800 252 100 or visit [www.gwfreetrial.co.uk](http://www.gwfreetrial.co.uk)



**More than half a million people are currently flouting hosepipe bans**



## OUR WATER-SAVING CHALLENGE

Cutting your water consumption in half might sound like a tough task but it can be relatively simple. We're not advocating sharing bathwater with half the neighbourhood (or even your nearest and dearest) – or leaving your favourite plants to wither in the sun. All it takes is a little bit of thought.


Did you know, for example, that by fitting a free 'save-a-flush' bag in your cistern you could save a litre of water every time you flush the toilet? Or that using a watering can rather than a sprinkler can save the equivalent of two days' consumption by a family of four?

A new *Which?* survey of 1,069 people carried out for this report found that 39 per cent of adults still leave the tap running while brushing their teeth. We could save enough water to supply half a million homes if we all turned the tap off – so you really can make an impact. Give the *Which?* water challenge a go, and let us know how you get on.

**We could save enough water to supply half a million homes if we all turned the tap off while brushing our teeth**

### KEY

#### WATER-SAVING RATING

Worth doing 

Will make a bigger impact 

Will really make a difference 

#### EFFORT RATING

Easy/cheap 

Moderate 

Difficult/expensive 

All calculations based on average personal consumption

## Saving water in the kitchen

**1** Fix dripping taps – new washers cost only a few pence but will save you money if your water is metered.

**WATER SAVED** A dripping tap can waste 12 to 20 litres of water a day  
877,000 households have a dripping tap – that's 87 million litres of water lost weekly.



**2** For cold drinking water, fill a jug from the tap and put it in the fridge to chill instead of wasting water by running the tap until it turns cold each time.

**WATER SAVED** 10 litres a day  
Only a third of people in Britain keep drinking water in the fridge.



**3** Don't rinse dishes under a running tap. Use a bowl instead. Try also to use a bowl when washing vegetables.

**WATER SAVED** 20 litres a day  
33 per cent of people in our survey admitted to rinsing dishes under a running tap.



**4** Make sure your washing machine has a full load. Those labelled A for energy efficiency tend to be water efficient, too.

**WATER SAVED** Using a full load rather than part-filling any machine saves 5 to 10 litres  
The Best Buy Siemens WXL147A washing machine is an excellent all-round performer, and uses less water than most other models.



**5** If you own a dishwasher, fill it up before you use it and always use its eco program setting, which uses less water.

**WATER SAVED** 5 to 10 litres a cycle  
In our most recent tests (November 2005) the following Best Buys all produced good cleaning results on their eco program: Miele G1230SC and G1220SC, AEG Favorit 40660 and 40860.



## Saving water in the bathroom

**1** Fit a water-saving 'Hippo' or 'save-a-flush' device in your cistern to cut the amount of water you use each time you flush. Your water company may supply it free.

**WATER SAVED** 5 litres a day  
Fewer than one in five British households has installed a water-saving device in their toilet, our survey found.



**2** Don't leave the tap running when you brush your teeth. We could save enough water to supply 500,000 homes if the adult population of England and Wales remembered to turn the tap off each time.

**WATER SAVED** 9 litres a day  
Four in ten people admit to leaving the tap running while brushing their teeth.



**3** Take a shower instead of a bath. A bath uses around 80 litres of water – by comparison a shower uses only around 35 litres.

**WATER SAVED** 45 litres a shower  
Be careful if you have a modern power shower – some of these can actually use more water than a bath if they are turned up to maximum power.



# Saving water in the garden

**1** Don't use a sprinkler to water your garden. In one hour it can waste 1,000 litres – the equivalent of two days' water consumption by a family of four.

**WATER SAVED** Up to 1,000 litres an hour. Most suburban gardens can be adequately watered using a ten-litre watering can. One in four people use a hosepipe or sprinkler – 6 per cent are breaking a ban by doing so.



**2** Your plants will benefit more from a weekly soak than a daily sprinkle.

**WATER SAVED** Depends on the size of your garden. Watering in the evening is most beneficial as water evaporation is slower. Fruit and vegetables are the exceptions to the rule. Water them daily if they have just been planted or are about to crop. Water the soil, not the plant, for maximum benefit.



**3** Buy a water butt. *Gardening Which?* Best Buys include the Sankey Economy (£20) and Harcostar Space Sava (£27).

See 'Member benefit', p33, to find out more. **WATER SAVED** All the water a typical garden needs to stay green in summer can be collected from your house roof in a single water butt. Only a quarter of people we surveyed who have a garden said they currently bother to collect rainwater.



**4** Line the inside of terracotta pots with plastic and use mulch in borders – both will reduce evaporation. Plant drought-tolerant silvery- or narrow-leaved plants.

**WATER SAVED** Halves the amount of water required to keep your plants alive. A *Gardening Which?* trial found that water-saving gardens take 65 per cent less time to maintain than water-wasting gardens.



**5** Wash your car using a couple of bucketfuls of water, not a hosepipe connected to a tap. A hosepipe can use as much water in half an hour as an average family does in a day.

**WATER SAVED** Up to 500 litres a car wash. In our survey, one in five car owners admitted that they are still using a hosepipe to wash their car rather than a bucket.



**4** When you are in the shower, try to remember to turn it off while you are lathering soap or shampoo. It sounds fiddly, but you can get used to it quickly.

**WATER SAVED** 10 litres a shower. 22 per cent of people who took part in our survey currently make the effort to turn the shower off while they are lathering soap or shampooing. The rest keep the water running.



**5** Got an old loo that's due to be replaced? Do it now. New toilets generally use less water and are more likely to have a dual flush.

**WATER SAVED** 10 litres a day. Toilets bought before 1993 will probably have a cistern that uses 9.5 litres of water per flush. Those installed since 1993 typically use 7.5 litres of water per flush. Even more efficient toilets that use just four or two litres are also now available.



## Hosepipes



Nearly 13 million people are living with hosepipe bans. But does everyone obey them?

### Living with a hosepipe ban

You are typically barred from:

- watering with a hosepipe/sprinkler/irrigation system
- washing cars, caravans and trailers with a hosepipe.

You are still allowed to:

- use a garden watering can
- use a bucket to wash the car
- use a short length of hosepipe to fill a container
- use a hosepipe to recycle water (for example, bath water)
- fill ponds or swimming pools.

### Drought orders

Sutton & East Surrey Water has imposed a drought order. This bans watering in parks, the filling of pools and car washing.

### The ban breakers

Our survey found that over half a million people living in a ban area are still using a sprinkler or hose. If you're one of them, watch out – three in ten people told us they would confront neighbours who were wasting water. A further 7 per cent would report them to the water company. You could get a £1,000 fine if caught.

### Our survey

In April, we asked 1,069 adults living in Britain about water usage and awareness of bans. Our calculations assume an adult population of 47,593,000 (2001 census) and 24,700,000 households (GB Office for National Statistics, 2004).