

EA considering dairy and beef environmental permits to clamp down on pollution

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The Environment Agency (EA) is considering a system of environmental permits for the dairy and beef sectors to clamp down on pollution incidents.

D-J Gent, head of future farm funding at the regulator, said the move was being explored after a detailed investigation of one English catchment area found 95 per cent of dairy farms were failing to meet water protection standards, with half of those polluting rivers at the time of an EA visit.

According to Mr Gent, pollution incidents from agriculture in England are on the rise, but because most of the EA's funding for enforcement comes from grant and aid support, farmers can only expect to be visited once every 200 years.

In order to resolve the problem, the EA is looking at new ways to recover enforcement costs.

Speaking at a Westminster Food and Nutrition Forum event this week (June 23), Mr Gent said: "The pig and poultry sectors are permitted, so that generates an income stream to enable the modern regulatory approach, and for regulation and enforcement to happen as a backstop.

"A lot of the other resources we get around agricultural regulation are grant and aid, and there is consistent and ongoing downward pressure on those budgets, which makes the delivery of the duties around regulatory enforcement for other sectors – particularly dairy and beef – incredibly challenging to take forward.

"One option, I have colleagues looking at this, is whether there are opportunities for bringing some of those other parts of agriculture into a permitting scheme which would obviously resolve the problem of grant and aid.

"But we recognise it would be a permitting cost on those sectors."

Tom Lancaster, acting head of land, seas and climate policy at the RSPB, went on to say regulatory compliance was the 'elephant in the room' which Defra had so far failed to address.

"In some sectors, there is chronic non-compliance," he said.

"Permitting or another model by which there is a way of funding enforcement is something Defra will have to look at, because pollution incidents are increasing.

"And the loss of cross-compliance means the loss of one of the only means of enforcing regulation."

Article written by Abi Kay, Chief Reporter, Farmers Guardian