Finding out about local water quality

Farmers, contractors and agronomists can make good use of a tool from the Environment Agency to see whether there is any local risk to water quality from their field and yard activities.

Currently, there are 114 surface water Safeguard Zones and 209 groundwater Safeguard Zones across England, she reports. “Our aim is to work in partnership at a local level on water quality, through a catchment-based approach.”

The tool, which is based on interactive maps and is known as What’s In Your Backyard (WIYBY) can be found on-line (see box below). Using a postcode search facility, it gives a picture of the state of the water bodies in a defined area and has been developed to support the delivery of the Water Framework Directive.

Clare Blackledge, senior adviser on farming and water quality at the Environment Agency, explains that WIYBY has been designed to help growers understand the risks to priority waters in their area, so that action can be targeted to where it is most needed.

These priority waters are identified by Safeguard Zones, she adds, which are a joint initiative between the Environment Agency and water companies. The zones are areas where the land use is causing pollution of drinking or bathing water, putting it at risk of deterioration and resulting in the need for further treatment.

Surface water and groundwater Safeguard Zones can be viewed together or separately and are shown as hatched areas on the maps. So far feedback from the industry has been good, reports Ms Blackledge. “If anyone is keen to help the EA with a future upgrade of this tool please email clare.blackledge@environment-agency.gov.uk. We will be starting a review project in June. We are not committed to any set format or layout, so user comments will be very helpful in deciding on future WIYBY developments.”

Finding WIYBY on the web
The official website is http://maps.environment-agency.gov.uk/wiyby
Alternatively try www.environment-agency.gov.uk/wiyby or www.wiyby.co.uk
There are also links on the VI website and www.getpelletwise.co.uk.
For Agrii agronomist, David Wild, WIYBY has made it far easier to access water protection information when talking to his farmer clients and formulating plans.

“IT contains essential information, which has been much harder to come by before, and it is a good way to open a discussion about water protection.”

He points out that most farmers have a real interest in their own area. “Being able to show them what the situation is on and around their farm makes it easy to stimulate that interest further. Once they appreciate the local picture, they have the context that’s needed to start making changes.”

If an individual catchment is made up of eighty fields, for example, an individual farmer may have five of those, remarks Mr Wild. “That’s when they see how they can make a difference. Once they’re hooked, they want to do more.”

Water safeguard zones is a subject that is now on the agenda at most of his farmer meetings, something that wasn’t there a few years ago, he acknowledges.

For Thurlow Farms Estate Ltd’s farm director, Andrew Crossley, the ability to zoom in on water protection zones, understand exactly which parts of the farm they affect and get an appreciation of the surrounding areas is very useful, especially when it comes to planning fertiliser and agrochemical applications.

“The accuracy is very good – I’m not sure where else I could get this level of detail. Paper-based systems become out-of-date very quickly.”

He likes the fact that he can switch different map layers on and off, allowing him to interrogate the system in more detail if required. “We work very closely with our local water company and share information with them, but this gives me a really good understanding of how our activities can have an impact. In the past, any information provided has all been historic.”

As a result, he has made changes to his slug control practices, reducing the amount of metaldehyde applied by using the results of trapping to develop a risk-based approach and applying an alternative active ingredient to the estate headlands.

Mr Crossley believes that WIYBY should be used by agronomists, especially those that cover large areas.

Patrick Goldsworthy, the VI Water Quality Manager, recognises that it helps growers to appreciate the current water protection situation and the importance of their activities.

“It’s a great step forward,” he says. “By bringing lots of maps together, it shows whether the environmental state of the water around your farm is of particular concern. To misquote George Orwell, keeping all water clean is important, but some water (drinking water sources) is more important than others.”

Although the information is map-based, there is specific local data, including any recent detections, he points out. “The water industry uses lots of unfamiliar jargon and it can be very confusing for farmers, but this tool helps to remove some of that.”

There is a version of the tool on the VI website.

“It’s really important that farmers and agronomists know where the risks are if we are going to avoid further product restrictions and tougher measures.”

For more information visit: www.voluntaryinitiative.org.uk

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