The Government has prepared three public consultations each of which has a role in shaping the future of diffuse water pollution policy for agriculture in England.

Diffuse pollution can be defined as pollution which originates from a number of different sources within a catchment, where individual contributions to pollution are minimal but, collectively, have a significant and adverse effect on water quality. Recent studies have shown that agricultural activities contribute on average 60% of diffuse nitrate, 25% diffuse phosphorus, up to 75% of sediment and 25-50% of bacterial pollution entering river systems.

The Government attaches great importance to tackling diffuse water pollution. Improved water quality will help ensure clean drinking water, safe bathing water, healthy fisheries, thriving biodiversity, reduced flood risk and an improved living environment. Good water quality also encourages recreation and tourism, which benefits rural businesses.

In these three consultations, you are asked to comment on the content and layout of an updated Code of Good Agricultural Practice, revisions to the Action Programme that tackles diffuse nitrate pollution, and your preferred policy option for tackling other agricultural pollutants at local level.

1. Codes of Good Agricultural Practice (CoGAPs)

The Government introduced voluntary Codes of Good Agricultural Practice for water, soil and air in the early 1990’s, which outline practical steps for preventing environmental pollution from farming activities. These codes represent general guidance on best practice and they are now being updated to take account of advance in knowledge and understanding. They are also being combined into one over-arching document, which should enhance the code’s usability by showing how water, soil and air pollution problems are related.

Questions

1) Do you agree with the consolidation of the Air, Soil and Water Codes into one overarching Code? Has anything been lost by this consolidation?

2) Do you agree that the layout of integrated advice – i.e. by farming activity rather than by resource (air, soil and water) – is more helpful to land managers?

3) You are also invited to comment on the detail of the Code, including the structure, scope, and content.
Although the Codes of Good Agricultural Practice have raised awareness and encouraged positive changes in agricultural practices, there are some parts of the country where specific additional action is required to achieve diffuse pollution targets set by the European Union (EU). The other two consultations are intended for such areas.

2. Nitrates Action Programme

The EU Nitrates Directive requires farmers within Nitrate Vulnerable Zones (NVZs) to follow an Action Programme of measures aimed at controlling when, where, how, and in what amount, nitrogen can be applied to land. This process is reviewed every 4 years.

We have reviewed efforts undertaken to date under this Directive to tackle pollution and consider that the evidence points to a need to take further action.

- Our review of the current NVZs has shown that nitrate pollution has increased in some areas and therefore coverage needs to be increased from 55% to 70% of England.
- Our review of the effectiveness of the current Action Programme has highlighted that it has not had a significant impact on nitrate pollution at the national scale and therefore reinforced and additional measures are proposed.

The key changes proposed to the Action Programme include:

- Establishing a lower whole farm manure N loading limit of 170 kg/ha of total N from livestock manures per calendar year, averaged across the farmed area.
- Extending the length of the closed spreading periods for organic manures with high available N, and applying it to all soil types.
- Increasing the manure storage capacity requirement, for manure with high available N, to 26 weeks for pigs and poultry, and 22 weeks for cattle.
- Requiring farms to limit applications of nitrogen to crop requirement and assume a level of efficiency of nitrogen supply from any manure applications.
- Requiring farmers to undertake a risk assessment and prohibiting the application of nitrogen fertiliser to areas identified as posing a high risk of causing water pollution.
- Prohibiting the use of high trajectory, high pressure application techniques for spreading organic manure, and requiring incorporation of organic manure applied to bare soil or stubble in certain situations.
- Requiring farmers to establish cover crops before spring sown crops.

Questions

1) Given that the coverage of England is approaching 100%, and in light of wider efforts to improve water quality, we are seeking views on whether to continue with the targeted NVZ approach or follow the alternative option of applying the Action Programme across the whole of England. Which is your preferred approach? Why? The Department would welcome comments on the respective advantages and disadvantages of the two options.

2) We are considering under what circumstances de-designation of NVZs would be possible in the future. We would welcome your views on this issue.

3) We would welcome comments on the proposed Action Programme measures.
3. Diffuse Sources of Water Pollution

More recently, the EU’s Water Framework Directive (WFD) has introduced new requirements to tackle other diffuse pollutants such as phosphorus by 2015. For agriculture, the Government aims to achieve this target through a catchment sensitive farming (CSF) approach.

The Diffuse Sources consultation looks at how far current and planned action will go toward tackling diffuse phosphorus pollution from agriculture by the 2015 target and proposes three options (‘policy packages’) to tackle the problem where further action is likely to be needed. The three options are:

- Water Protection Zones (regulation only)
- Water Protection Zones + Scheme (regulation + support)
- Water Protection Zones + Scheme + Advice (regulation + increased support)

All options feature the introduction of Water Protection Zones where necessary to prohibit polluting activities and/or require best practice measures in order to tackle specified diffuse agricultural pollutants. Two of the options also feature an additional supportive element – either advice on best practice, which is based on an extension of the current England Catchment Sensitive Farming Delivery Initiative nationwide, or the inclusion of more water quality-related options in the Entry Level and Higher Level Environmental Stewardship schemes.

Questions

1) Do you agree with the three policy packages we have chosen for this consultation? If so, which of the three policy packages do you think should taken forward to tackle diffuse water pollution from agriculture?

2) If we take forward WPZs, should we consider merging WPZs with NVZs? What are the advantages and disadvantages?

How do you get involved?

The three consultation documents can be found at www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/consult/naturalenvironment or you can request a hard copy using the e-mail or addresses below.

The deadline for responses is 13th November 2007 for the CoGAP and Diffuse Sources consultations, and 13 December 2007 for the Nitrates Consultation

CoGAPs Consultation
Area 5B, 9 Millbank
c/o Nobel House, 17 Smith Square, SW1P 3JR London
020 7238 6732
cogap_revision.consultation@defra.gsi.gov.uk

Nitrates Consultation
Zone A, 2nd Floor,
Ergon House, Horseferry Road, London, SW1P 2AL
0207 238 5494
nitratesconsultation@defra.gsi.gov.uk

Diffuse Sources Consultation
Zone A, 2nd Floor,
Ergon House, Horseferry Road, London, SW1P 2AL
0207 238 5669
diffusesourcesconsultation@defra.gsi.gov.uk