

# The Guardian

## Campaigners condemn plans for New Forest desalination plant

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Plans to build an energy-hungry desalination plant in the New Forest national park to provide drinking water for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight have been condemned by campaigners including the broadcaster Chris Packham.

Southern Water's proposal for a £600m plant at Fawley to convert saltwater from the Solent into tap water during droughts has been formally opposed by the New Forest national park authority. A separate petition against the plan has attracted several thousand signatures.

The water company has said the plant would enable it to extract less water from ecologically sensitive chalk streams such as the Test and the Itchen. Residents objecting to the plant say it is a "bizarre" and "expensive" solution for projected water shortages in southern England, with Britain's total water supply forecast to drop by 7% by 2045. The National Audit Office recently warned that water companies would need to reduce the amount they extract by 500m litres a day to protect waterways and biodiversity.

Although Thames Water opened Britain's first significant desalination plant in east London in 2010, the technology requires a lot of energy to work and is more commonly used in desert settlements in parts of Australia and Dubai.

Packham, who lives in the New Forest, said that while it was necessary to reduce abstraction from internationally significant chalk streams such as the Test, a desalination plant for drought emergencies was a baffling investment.

"Why would a water company be investing hundreds of millions to build something which they are saying they only need every 20 years?" he said. "It's too much money on something that's entirely inappropriate. We really, really don't need it. What we need is to cut down on water leakage and for everyone to use water more responsibly. [Water](#) is also too cheap – we need to pay what water really costs."

Other opponents of the plan include Julie Hope, who is standing as a Labour candidate in the local elections. "This isn't about politics, this is about protecting the environment for people in this area,"

said Hope. "It's becoming very industrialised all along the Solent now. It's not what people want and I don't think it's needed. We should not need water taken from the sea when we've got so much of it falling from the sky."

[New Forest district council](#) and the New Forest national park authority have both objected to the plan, with the national park authority criticising Southern Water's failure to consult it sooner. The company has been developing the plan since 2019.

Stuart Singleton-White, the head of campaigns at the [Angling Trust](#), said the government and water companies were "failing miserably" in their legal duty to protect internationally significant chalk streams such as the Test and Itchen.

Desalination "may have a part to play, but it is an expensive option, both in terms of cost to build and in terms of the energy needed to run the plant", he said. "We need a new relationship with water. In England we have among the highest consumption of water per head in Europe, at about 140 litres a day per person. The government and water companies have a goal of reducing this to about 110 litres a day over time. This is not ambitious enough.

"Investing the cost it would take to build and operate a desalination plant in reducing consumption, stopping leaks and storing more water would bring greater benefits."

Southern Water said it was seeking the views of customers and stakeholders on its plans at what was a pivotal moment for "reshaping how we source, treat and supply water in Hampshire". The company said it was also exploring the feasibility of recycling water and transferring it from a new reservoir at Havant Thicket, near Portsmouth, a scheme that it said had recently emerged as a potential backup to desalination.

[Toby Willison](#), Southern Water's director of environment and corporate affairs, said: "We have a responsibility to help keep rivers and taps flowing in the face of a changing climate and a growing population. This means taking less water from the Test and Itchen rivers – two of the finest chalk streams in the world – and making up the shortfall with new sources.

"Our plan includes reducing leakage, improving water efficiency and taking more water from neighbouring companies, but these alone are not enough to satisfy either the large shortfall or the time frame. Larger solutions such as desalination are required to ensure there's enough water for people and the natural world, especially during a drought when it's needed most."

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/may/05/campaigner-condemn-southern-water-plan-new-forest-desalination-plant>