

Water Minister at World Water-Tech Innovation Summit

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Water Minister Emma Hardy delivered the opening keynote speech at the World Water-Tech Innovation Summit in London

Thank you so much – it's a pleasure to be here at such an incredibly important and exciting time for the water sector.

Since day one, this government has been determined to take forward water reform – and we are delivering a once-in-a-generation change.

I am delighted that the government has recently set out its New Vision for Water through a White Paper published last month.

And this White Paper outlines how we will work together with water companies, investors, communities and the environment to transform our water system, ensuring a sustainable water system for future generations.

No single company, regulator, or government can deliver a 2050-ready water system alone. Progress depends on collaboration between utilities and start-ups, investors and innovators, engineers and environmental scientists.

Events like this summit matter because they bring those worlds together.

You've asked me to speak about 2050. But let me be clear: 2050 isn't some distant horizon. The pipes, treatment works, data platforms, and supply chains that will still be operating in 2050 are being designed and deployed today. By many of you in this room.

And I've seen some of this innovation firsthand.

I visited the Havant Thicket Reservoir – the first major new reservoir built in this country for more than three decades. Standing on that site brings home the scale of long-term investment required. It is infrastructure designed not just for today, but for generations to come. Which is why we have kickstarted the building of nine new reservoirs.

And at the Saltford Water Recycling Plant, I saw how treatment works are evolving into modern-day resource-recovery facilities. Advanced processes are turning what was once waste into a valuable resource while strengthening system resilience.

Every visit, every conversation reinforces why this work matters.

And looking around the room, I see the people who will shape the future of our water system in partnership with us. Investors. Operators. Engineers. Innovators. Each of you brings something essential to the table.

It is only by working together that we will achieve the change needed.

Water is one of our most critical systems. It underpins public health, economic growth, food

production, energy security, and of course the natural environment. But it is also one of the systems most exposed to climate change, population growth, and ageing infrastructure.

By 2050, the UK will face hotter, drier summers, wetter winters, more intense rainfall, and greater pressure on water resources. The challenge is not just to keep the system running – it is to fundamentally modernise it.

That's why our once-in-a-generation reform of the water system is so vital.

We have ensured that the sector can attract the private investment it needs to deliver a £104 billion pounds spending programme over the next five years to fix our infrastructure and create 30,000 skilled jobs across the country.

Our vision for 2050 is a digitally enabled, resilient, and adaptive water system. One that uses data, technology, and innovation to anticipate risk, optimise performance, and deliver better outcomes for people and the environment.

To get there, innovation cannot sit on the edges of the system. It has to become core to how water works.

First, we must rethink how water is used, reused, and valued.

Our Water White Paper makes clear that a system ready for the future is one where demand reduction and efficiency are fully embedded across households, industry, and agriculture.

Water reuse, recycling, and alternative supplies will play a growing role, supported by new treatment technologies, smarter regulation, and greater public confidence. Innovation here is essential – not just in engineering, but in how systems are designed, financed, and operated.

And securing future supplies cannot rely on building infrastructure alone. We must also reduce demand, improve efficiency, and make better use of the water we have – tackling leakage, accelerating water-saving technologies, and supporting smarter use.

It's about shifting towards a more circular system, where wastewater is increasingly treated as a resource, and where reuse, recovery and resilience are built in from the start through stronger regional planning.

Above all, it recognises water as a strategic national asset - essential to public health, environmental protection and economic growth. An asset that must be effectively managed for the long term.

Second, nature and technology must work together, not in competition.

Innovation is one of our most powerful tools in the fight against pollution, helping us not only to clean our environmental damage but to prevent it at source. From smarter monitoring to cleaner technologies, new approaches are reducing pollution before it even reaches our rivers and seas.

But some of the most effective solutions work with natural processes. Restoring wetlands, planting trees, reconnecting rivers to their floodplains act as natural filters – improving water quality, storing carbon, supporting wildlife, and reducing flood risk simultaneously.

By combining human ingenuity with nature-based solutions, we can tackle multiple challenges at once: cutting pollution, strengthening climate resilience, and protecting the ecosystems on which our water system ultimately depends.

By 2050, these approaches should be a standard part of water system design. Digital tools will allow us to measure impact, manage performance, and deploy solutions at scale with confidence. The future is not a choice between grey or green infrastructure, but an intelligent combination of both.

This is why the Water White Paper places regional water system planning at the heart of reform. By bringing together water companies, regulators and local stakeholders across whole catchments, these frameworks will enable coordinated decisions that deliver low-cost, higher-impact outcomes – including nature-based approaches that provide multiple benefits at once.

Looking across catchments rather than individual assets will prioritise prevention, resilience, and long-term value, ensuring both natural and engineered solutions can be deployed at the scale required for the future.

Third, the future water system must be data-driven.

By 2050, we should expect real-time visibility across the entire system, from catchments and rivers, to networks, treatment works, and customer demand.

Advanced sensors, smart meters, satellite data, and AI-enabled analytics give us the ability to predict failures before they happen, optimise flows dynamically, and target investment precisely where it delivers the greatest impact.

This is not about technology for its own sake.

It is about moving from reactive maintenance to predictive, preventative management. Reducing leakage, cutting pollution incidents, lowering costs, improving resilience.

Fourth, innovation needs the right market conditions to scale and investors need confidence.

The water sector remains a strong investment opportunity, offering long-term value and stability, and we are creating the conditions for that to flourish.

We're moving beyond short-term planning cycles that have held the sector back. Strategic guidance will now be published across 5, 10 and 25-year horizons – providing long-term predictability for water companies, investors, and supply chains.

We're enhancing competition for major projects, building on the success of Thames Tideway, so that more large projects can be competitively financed.

And we're delivering a fairer, more predictable approach to returns – one that recognises the risk investors take and creates an attractive, sustainable investment environment.

For patient capital that supports innovation at scale, this sector offers both financial returns and long-term public value.

Finally, delivering on this vision depends on partnership.

We are focused on creating the conditions for long-term thinking, smarter regulation, and faster adoption of proven solutions. We are open to new ideas, new technologies, new partnerships.

This is our chance to be part of real national renewal after years of decline. To build a regulatory system that is clear, coherent, and focused on outcomes. To attract the investment we need whilst protecting customers. To deliver infrastructure that builds resilience for decades to come. To create

new jobs and opportunities in every single part of England and Wales.

We must not lose sight of the fact that these reforms are for the customers and the environment.

By 2050, public confidence will be built through openness through real-time reporting, independent monitoring, and clear accountability. Technology enables this transparency, but leadership and culture make it meaningful.

The challenges facing water are real, but so are the opportunities.

If we get this right, the water system of 2050 will be cleaner, smarter, more resilient, and more trusted than anything we have today.

That prize is right there in front of us. And the work to build it starts now – with all of us in this room.

Thank you.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/water-minister-at-world-water-tech-innovation-summit>