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**Guidance on the use of groundwater standards**

December 2024

# Background

New groundwater standards have been set out in Directions published by the Scottish Government. The groundwater standards and our associated update guidance comes into force on 1 February 2025. The directions provide new standards to assess:

* The input of hazardous substances into groundwater
* Groundwater pollution
* The qualitative status of Scotland’s groundwater bodies.

In addition, SEPA has issued revised guidance:

* WAT-PS-10 Assigning Groundwater Assessment Criteria for Pollutant Inputs
* Land Contamination and Impacts on the Water Environment

These documents refine the approach that should be taken in relation to assessing the inputs of pollutants into groundwater, and in relation to water environment impacts in relation to historical land contamination and. This is to align with the new standards set out in Directions and the change in approach to land contamination.

This policy sets out:

* how SEPA will apply the standards and the new approach; and
* our expectations for their use by local authorities and industry.

# Policy approach

## Sites that are currently being assessed or are about to be assessed

We understand that risk assessments for activities impacting on groundwater may have just been completed or are in progress using the previous standards and methodology. To take account of this, risk assessments undertaken using old or new standards and methodology will be accepted until 1 July 2025.

# Sites that are currently being assessed or are about to be assessed

Many regulated sites or areas of land contamination will have been assessed, remediated and have conditions in place with regards to the old groundwater standards and methodology.

We will only require these sites to be assessed against the new standards and methodology when a technical change is being made that requires a revised risk assessment to be submitted. For example, an authorised site is being extended or an area of land contamination is being re-developed.

Risk assessment and mitigation for these sites will take account of what is practical, reasonable and best for the environment as a whole.

In some cases, large-scale remediation plans have been agreed for many neighbouring sites over a number of years. Any prior agreements can be taken into account when deciding on whether additional or revised assessment is required.

For sites wishing to surrender their licence or permit under The Environmental Protection Act 1990 or The Pollution Prevention and Control (Scotland) Regulations we understand that the new standards may make it harder for existing sites to meet the surrender criteria. For sites applying for surrender we may take into account whether:

* Ongoing management of the site is no longer required.
* Reasonable action has been taken to address any inputs of pollutants into groundwater.
* The groundwater quality is now improving over time.
* The site is not causing the exceedance of an environment standard for a surface water, wetland or other current abstraction, and does not pose a risk to groundwater body status.

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