



ENV-CoW ENVIRONMENTAL ASSURANCE BULLETIN

BEFORE THE PUMP STARTS

Temporary excavation dewatering in England

October 2026 | England

A practical pre-start briefing for site managers, temporary works teams, environmental advisers, Environmental Clerks of Works and client representatives.

Opening

An excavation fills overnight. The programme needs the trench back. A pump is available, and the nearest ditch looks like the quickest route. The critical decision comes before anyone unrolls the hose: what is in the water, where will it go, and on what basis can the team discharge it?

Water that looks clear at the sump can collect silt as a pump runs. A ditch may connect to a sensitive watercourse. A surface water drain may reach that watercourse faster than the team expects. The pump also raises two different regulatory questions: the discharge of water at the end of the hose and, where groundwater is being taken, the abstraction at the excavation. One answer does not settle the other. (see Environment Agency permit guidance).

The practical aim is simple: make the route, permissions and operating controls clear enough that the person starting the pump can explain them, and the person checking the work can verify them.

First establish what water you have

Excavation water is not a single category. It may be rainwater collected in an otherwise clean excavation, groundwater entering through the base, runoff from a haul road, or water affected by concrete, fuel or contaminated ground. Those differences determine what the team can do next.

The Environment Agency's RPS 261 concerns short-term discharge of uncontaminated water, wholly or mainly rainwater, from an excavation to surface water. Its description of clean water also includes infiltrated groundwater collected in a temporary excavation on an uncontaminated site. It does not cover water from surface working areas such as haul roads, water with chemical dosing agents, concrete wash water, or discharge from contaminated sites. A settlement tank is a useful control for appropriate water, but the presence of a tank does not turn an excluded discharge into one that qualifies for RPS 261.

Before deciding on treatment equipment, the team needs a defensible account of the water's origin. Review land and construction history, the work taking place in and around the excavation, and the route by which runoff could enter it. Inspect during the conditions in which pumping will actually occur. If that account is uncertain, sample or seek specialist advice as appropriate to the risk; do not use visual clarity alone as proof of eligibility.

Then trace the complete route

The discharge point is the receiving environment, not simply the end of the hose. Trace the hose or pipe, any chamber or drain it enters, and the final outfall. The Environment Agency advises businesses to keep a drainage plan showing drain types, flow direction and destination because drainage can move pollutants off site quickly. (see Pollution prevention guidance).

For RPS 261, the receiving water and its sensitivity matter. The position excludes discharge within, or less than 500 metres upstream of, specified protected habitat sites, including Sites of Special Scientific Interest, conservation sites and local wildlife sites. It also bars discharge that causes erosion, scouring, flooding or pollution. The flow rate must not exceed 10% of the receiving water's Q95 dry-weather flow. Those are conditions to establish before relying on the position, not numbers to guess at the pump. The full RPS 261 conditions also explain how to check protected sites and when to seek Environment Agency advice.

Where an outfall is proposed near a main river or flood defence, check whether the works themselves require a flood risk activity permission. A water discharge decision does not grant permission for the physical works. (see Environment Agency permit guidance).

Identify the regulatory route before the programme commits

RPS 261 is a regulatory position statement, not a statutory exemption or a permit. The Environment Agency says it will not normally take enforcement action for a qualifying activity that meets every condition and does not cause or risk pollution or harm. Its scope is narrow: discharge to surface water only, for no more than three consecutive months. Pausing the discharge does not restart that clock. If the project cannot meet a condition, the Agency says a water discharge activity permit is needed. If conditions cease to be met during use, the activity must stop and the Agency must be told immediately. (see RPS 261).

Groundwater abstraction needs its own decision. The Environment Agency's RPS 368 concerns certain small-scale groundwater abstractions for construction dewatering. It is another conditional enforcement position, not an abstraction licence. Among its conditions are a hydrogeological impact assessment and notification to the Environment Agency before abstraction begins. It does not remove the need to assess a discharge permit, flood risk activity permit or other permission. The project must check the whole position; a short duration or modest pump alone does not establish eligibility.

The useful planning question is therefore not, "Do we have a dewatering permit?" It is, "Which distinct activities are we carrying out, and what permission or current regulatory position covers each one?" Record the answer, its evidence and the person who checked it.

Build controls around the actual failure paths

First, reduce the water reaching the excavation where practicable. The Environment Agency recommends measures such as covering an excavation or using cut-off ditches. Keep clean runoff separate from water exposed to the working area. Collect contaminated excavation water in a controlled system for suitable treatment, recycling or lawful disposal. (see Pollution prevention guidance).

Next, design the discharge as an operation that can change. Check pump capacity and the expected flow against the receptor assessment. Secure the route so it cannot be moved casually to a different drain. Place the outlet so it will not scour the bank or bed. Define where the operator will look for rising silt, oil sheen, colour change or a failing treatment unit. Give the operator a way to stop the pump immediately, and name who can authorise a restart after a change. These are practical ENV-CoW controls; the exact arrangement should reflect the site and the discharge route.

Finally, record what actually happened. RPS 261 requires records demonstrating compliance to be kept for two years after its last use. A useful site record includes the water-source assessment, receptor and drain route, protected-site and flow checks, the decision on permits and RPS eligibility, start and stop times, inspection results, any changes, and the action taken when a control failed. The record should make the decision reconstructable without relying on someone's memory. (see RPS 261).

A worksite example

The following example is fictional and contains no client or site details.

A utility trench beside a site road fills after heavy rain. The proposed hose would enter a surface water gully, which is believed to connect to a brook. The operator can see water in the trench, but the team has not checked whether road runoff has entered it, confirmed the gully's destination or assessed the brook's low flow.

The right first action is to hold pumping towards the gully. The supervisor checks the drainage plan and traces the outfall. The environmental adviser reviews the water source, downstream sensitivities and the discharge route. The team also checks whether it is taking groundwater, rather than simply removing rainwater, and whether a separate abstraction assessment is needed. It then chooses a suitable authorised route and sets the controls and monitoring for that route. If the evidence cannot support RPS 261, the team must use another lawful route rather than relabel the water as clean.

Nothing in this example depends on an unusual failure. Its lesson is that an ordinary hose connection can commit a project to a regulatory and ecological outcome before the paperwork catches up.

The ENV-CoW pre-start decision

Use these five gates at the workplace. A "not yet known" answer is a reason to resolve the question before discharge begins.

Gate	Question for the team	Evidence to have to hand
1 Source	What water is entering the excavation, and could work or runoff have contaminated it?	Work and land history, site inspection, relevant testing or specialist assessment.

Gate	Question for the team	Evidence to have to hand
2 Destination	Where does the water finally reach, and what lies downstream?	Traced drain or hose route, outfall, receptor and protected-site check.
3 Authority	Which discharge, abstraction and physical-works permissions or positions apply?	Permit or licence references, or a recorded check against every relevant RPS condition.
4 Control	How will the team prevent silt, pollution, scour and excess flow?	Installed measures, suitable pump setting, inspection points and named operator.
5 Change	What observation stops the pump, and who decides whether it can restart?	Stop triggers, escalation contact, incident route and completed operating record.

ENV-CoW's assurance test is whether those five answers survive contact with the worksite. A document that says "pump to watercourse through a settlement tank" has not yet answered them. A project team that can show the source, route, authority, controls and change decision has a usable basis for action.

For the next excavation: take ten minutes with the site supervisor and environmental lead to trace the proposed pump route and complete the five gates before the hose is connected. If pollution is observed, stop the discharge, contain it where safe, follow the project incident plan and report water pollution to the Environment Agency as appropriate. England's 24-hour incident hotline is 0800 80 70 60.

Scope and use

This bulletin provides general environmental assurance information for construction work in England. It is not legal advice, a permit decision or a site-specific technical assessment. Regulatory position statements can be amended or withdrawn. Projects must check the current Environment Agency text, all conditions and any other permissions that apply before acting.

Sources checked 14 October 2026

Environment Agency RPS 261. Temporary dewatering from excavations to surface water. Updated 23 April 2026.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/temporary-dewatering-from-excavations-to-surface-water-rps-261/temporary-dewatering-from-excavations-to-surface-water>

Environment Agency RPS 368. Small-scale abstractions for construction dewatering. Published 23 April 2026.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/small-scale-abstractions-for-construction-dewatering-rps-368/small-scale-abstractions-for-construction-dewatering-rps-368>

Environment Agency and Defra. Discharges to surface water and groundwater environmental permits. Updated 20 April 2026.

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/discharges-to-surface-water-and-groundwater-environmental-permits>

Environment Agency and Defra. Check if you need an environmental permit. Current guidance checked 14 October 2026.

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/check-if-you-need-an-environmental-permit>

Environment Agency and Defra. Pollution prevention for businesses. Current guidance checked 14 October 2026.

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/pollution-prevention-for-businesses>

Environment Agency. Report water pollution in England. Current service checked 14 October 2026.

<https://www.gov.uk/report-water-pollution>

Regulatory position statements may be amended or withdrawn. Recheck the live pages before relying on them for a project decision.