

BANK ON IT

Following increasing participation from water utility companies across the UK, Water Direct's Nationwide Bottled Water Bank continues to go from strength to strength

Since it began operations in 1996, Water Direct has become the UK's leading alternative and emergency drinking water supplier to many water utility companies and their customers. This can be in response to a mains water supply becoming interrupted or contaminated. Water Direct also supplies large volumes of water to construction companies, the emergency services, festival organisers and commercial users around the country.

One of the company's main focuses is its successful Nationwide Bottled Water Bank - a stockpile of emergency bottled water, which holds approximately 800,000 litres of water ready for deployment. Keith Silcock, managing director, elaborates on the system: "The Bank means that in the event of an emergency we can supply substantial volumes of bottled water at short notice. A lot of planning and preparation work has gone into the Bank, which essentially has existed for the last 12 years, to ensure an efficient working system. Water companies are increasingly using bottled water as the first response to an emergency incident due to the speed and effectiveness of deployment. It is very easy to transport quickly so that customers have something drinkable, which doesn't need boiling and is convenient to be taken into customers' homes. This takes some of the pressure off the water companies when they are focussing on restoring the piped supply."

However this water is not just any bottled product. Water Direct is the only supplier of bottled water, which can be demonstrated to conform to the Water Supply (Water Quality) Regulations 2000, as amended, at the point of compliance. Keith describes the importance of this quality assurance: "There are specific requirements within the water supply regulations concerning the quality of the public water supply and these apply regardless of what form the water is supplied in. This includes alternative and emergency sources such as bottled water, which must be demonstrated to be compliant when the water first emerges from the bottle. Over the last few years there has been a lot of discussion within the bottled water industry about whether their water can and should be used in public water supply emergencies. It's not a question of whether the quality of these products is in any way inferior; it's that the quality must be demonstrated to conform to public supply regulations. The point of compliance can be a considerable time after production, so regular sampling and monitoring is essential for emergency stocks. Our bottled water stocks undergo extensive monitoring providing us with ample data to demonstrate conformity. This gives our water utility customers the assurance that all the water we provide meets the required standards, when it emerges from the bottle."

Other benefits of the Bottled Water Bank set-up is that it fed from a number of major commercial producers, which means that in the event of an emergency, Water Direct can gain access to large volumes of water over sustained periods of time. By not being reliant on one producer Water Direct can continue to operate in the event of any particular source of supply having a lack of available stock. "The normal emergency response time is within four hours of receiving the call, so our water is stored in various locations around the country. This means that 24 hours a day, seven days a week we can supply that first response within the designated time bracket and sustain that response virtually indefinitely. Naturally this can be a challenge logistically but we have very good partnerships not only with our clients and bottled water producers, but also the storage and haulage contractors. This kind of relationship is very important because emergencies are entirely unpredictable so you never know when they will happen or how big they will be," highlights Keith.

The Bank works on the basis that clients deposit a certain volume of water into the system, which is then matched with a 100 per cent overdraft facility. Keith explains: "If a member puts in 1,000 or 100,000 litres of water stock then we will provide them with a guaranteed 1,000 or 100,000 litre overdraft to match. This saves our members money, as they only have to buy half the volume that their planning determines and we will make up the rest. This amount is then available to them every day during an emergency. This makes our service highly competitive against other potential providers. Bank membership goes beyond water utilities to include public institutions and commercial users. The greater the number of Bank members the more overdraft we can supply, which we reinforce with our own reserves."

New members are joining the Bank all the time and members include one third of the UK water utilities. One of the key benefits of membership is the entire service provided by Water Direct, which extends far beyond the bottled water product. "One of the major challenges is that many companies make their purchases through a procurement department, which just sees us as another bottled water purveyor. We don't sell bottled water; we provide an entire service that includes water in bottles, but it is water that carries a unique quality assurance. One recent member had decided to purchase direct from a bottled water producer but fairly quickly realised that they weren't receiving the service they needed, which is when they negotiated a contract with us. In terms of quality assurance and volume capacity within a complete package Water Direct is unique in the UK."

Looking ahead Keith outlines his vision for Water Direct in the coming years: "The current shift in emergency supply preferences is going back to bottled water and within that industry we have the unique position of being able to supply a quality assured product in the large volumes required. Bottled water is deployed from the Bank every day, ensuring a good turnover of stock. Over the last 12 months we've had two incidents where we have supplied in excess of 100,000 litres per day, with greater volumes ready

to follow. In the future ideally every water company in the country will be a member of the Bank and be benefiting from our quality of service.”