Environment Agency SCO/12 Completion Statement

This document is an Environment Agency statement to confirm that the timebound action plan submitted on 24/04/26 in response to the Office of Environmental Protection (OEP) intervention request SCO-12 has been delivered. The Environment Agency is providing this statement in accordance with its statutory duty to cooperate with the OEP under section 27 of the Environment Act 2021.

The OEP's original SCO-12 request set out a series of questions to better understand how public authorities in England assess the impacts of atmospheric nitrogen pollution, particularly from agricultural sources, on protected sites. These sites include Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs), Ramsar sites and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). The OEP stated that *"there was information which indicated that the Environment Agency's ammonia screening process may fail to comply with environmental law. Specifically, the continued use of the 5km screening distance risked potentially harmful developments not undergoing the necessary level of environmental scrutiny before being granted consents, permits or licenses"*. On 05/03/26, the OEP wrote to the Environment Agency to:

- Communicate the OEP's concerns regarding the continued use of the 5km threshold
- Request a timebound action plan setting out how the EA intends to update its screening distances
- Request that the EA outline any interim measures it would implement to manage risks until new distances are adopted.

The Environment Agency set out in its response the proposals it would take forward to address some of the concerns raised. Amongst these proposals were the implementation of SCAIL Agriculture as an assessment tool and the updating of screening distances used in assessment during permit determination. The deadline for implementing these changes, agreed with the OEP, was the end of October 2026.

The implementation of SCAIL Agriculture and the updated screening distances will improve the assessment of atmospheric nitrogen pollution impacts on SACs, SPAs and Ramsar sites when granting or varying permits under the Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) Regulations 2016, including details of any interim changes that have been made or are planned.

This statement explains the work that has been completed to implement SCAIL Agriculture and the updated screening distances by the end of October 2026, in line with our commitment to the OEP.

Response provided by:

> [redacted]
> National Air Quality Team, Monitoring and Assessment, Chief Regulator Group

Response approved for submission to OEP by:

> [redacted]
> Manager, Monitoring and Assessment, Chief Regulator Group
> 10 November 2026

> [redacted]
> Regulatory Resilience Deputy Director
> 10 November 2026

Environment Agency responses to date:

The Environment Agency's response to the OEP's original SCO-12 request (Appendix 1), submitted on 5th November 2025, set out our current ammonia impact assessment approach for Intensive Farming (IF) permit applications. The response set out the elements of the approach that the EA recognised as not sufficiently protective of SACs, SPAs and Ramsar sites. It also set out the changes that the Environment Agency planned to make to strengthen the assessment and ensure compliance with the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017.

The Environment Agency's response to the OEP's follow up SCO-12/1 intervention (Appendix 2), submitted on 24th April 2026, set out our detailed work plan. This included key milestones and timelines for completing necessary tasks to successfully implement the proposed process changes into our working practices.

The Environment Agency's update statement (Appendix 3) in September 2026 provided an update on progress made against the detailed work plan and milestones.

This statement confirms that the application of SCAIL Agriculture and the updated screening distances (as set out in our response to SCO-12/1, submitted 24th April 2026) have now been implemented into Environment Agency process (in line with the agreed end of October deadline). This statement highlights the individual tasks identified in our response to SCO-12/1 that are now complete.

The key changes to ensure that the Environment Agency's approach to the assessment of ammonia emissions during IF permitting is protective of impacts at protected sites are as follows:

- The current Ammonia Screening Tool (AST) used to assess IF applications has been replaced with the more powerful and robust SCAIL Agriculture tool. The AST was used to screen impacts at SACs, SPAs and Ramsar sites against a 4% screening threshold, on the basis that this is broadly equivalent to the formalised 1% threshold used in detailed modelling. SCAIL Agriculture applies the 1% screening threshold directly; it will be used to screen impacts at all designations of protected sites, applying the screening thresholds in our guidance, Intensive farming risk assessment for your environmental permit - GOV.UK. The guidance has been updated with details of how SCAIL Agriculture will be used. Based on the detailed modelling study undertaken by the Environment Agency's Air Quality Modelling and Assessment Unit (AQMAU), the new screening approach is more protective of impacts while also being more proportionate, as it more accurately reflects actual impacts.
- The existing blanket 5 km screening distance for SACs, SPAs and Ramsar sites has been replaced with a new range of 3 – 10 km, or more where appropriate, determined using a total farm mass emissions approach. These distances are based on the detailed modelling study undertaken by AQMAU (Appendix 4). The blanket distances of 5km and 2km for Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and Local Nature Sites respectively have also been replaced with total farm mass emissions-based distances, following additional modelling work undertaken

by AQMAU (Appendix 5). These mass emissions-based distances offer more proportionate and protective screening distances for all protected site designations.

Actions completed

Work completed to implement the proposed changes includes:

- AQMAU modelling studies to inform the use of SCAIL Agriculture to screen IF applications and updated screening distances for the 1% screening threshold for SACs, SPAs and Ramsar sites, as well as SSSIs and Local Nature Sites.
- Developing a communications plan (for internal and external stakeholders), internal pre- and post-commissioning task lists, and a Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental, and Legal (PESTEL) analysis. Together these set out the main steps required to implement our proposed changes, key milestones, and any remaining gaps. The documents have been sent to OEP as part of our previous submission, together with our proposed workplan.
- Securing Environment Agency Deputy Director approval and support for the proposal, to prioritise this work.
- Undertaking early engagement with relevant internal Environment Agency teams, including Permitting, Operations, Agriculture, and Legal, to raise awareness of the work and inform the overall approach.
- Engaging with Defra and Natural England to raise awareness, align objectives, and inform the strategic direction of the work.
- Engaging with other UK regulators (including Scottish Environmental Protection Agency and Northern Ireland Environment Agency) about our proposed changes, via the Air Quality Technical Advisory Group (AQTAG) and via additional separate calls with National Resources Wales.
- Briefing Environment Agency operational and Area colleagues on the proposed changes, including expected operational impacts (none are currently anticipated), via our internal Operations Regulatory Portfolio and IF sector group calls.
- Completing our internal Environment Agency Commissioning of Permissions process, to enable the required changes to our permitting process for IF permit applications, supported by work already completed and the further actions set out below.
- Presenting the proposed changes at the Environment Agency Liaison Call with farming industry trade bodies on 23 April 2026, to explain the updates and gather views and feedback. A briefing paper was prepared for circulation in advance of the meeting.

- Engaging with consultants on the use of SCAIL Agriculture and collecting feedback via a questionnaire, to inform how the tool is embedded within our assessment process.
- Updates to the relevant GOV.UK pages (Intensive farming risk assessment for your environmental permit - GOV.UK & Request an ammonia screening assessment - GOV.UK) have been implemented. They introduce the use of SCAIL Agriculture and confirm the new screening distances.
- Led demonstrations and facilitated testing of the SCAIL Agriculture tool for internal users to ensure competence and confidence in its use ahead of rollout, and gathered feedback to inform implementation.
- Undertook extensive engagement with the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (UKCEH), developers of the SCAIL Agriculture tool, to resolve user queries and build technical understanding, ensuring recommendations on its use are evidence-based and robust.
- The creation of an internal guidance document that has been shared with our Intensive Farming Permitting team. The guidance explains how to use SCAIL Agriculture in line with Environment Agency processes. As part of this, we have developed a supporting 'Calculations & Default Values' spreadsheet. This document automates the calculations necessary for some SCAIL Agriculture inputs and defines default values to use on the occasions when certain information is unknown e.g. floor area, that are appropriately conservative. These documents will be considered 'live', so that they are regularly updated with new findings.
- Updates to our internal Operational Instructions. The updates set out the changes to internal processes associated with IF permitting applications.

Managing the transition from AST to SCAIL Agriculture:

Several options for this transition were considered, with the fair treatment of applicants a priority and operational constraints in mind. The following parameters were agreed, in relation to IF permit applications:

- All ammonia screening assessment requests by applicants, received by 31/10/2026 (inclusive), will be completed using AST.
- All ammonia screening assessment requests by applicants, received by 31/10/2026 (inclusive) and completed using AST, will be accepted up to 6 months from their completion date, in line with the current acceptance process.
- All ammonia screening assessment requests by applicants, received from 01/11/2026 (inclusive), will be completed using SCAIL Agriculture.
- Minor amendments to a valid screening assessment completed using AST before 31/10/2026 (inclusive), required as part of the validation process, will be completed using AST.

Future Improvements:

The following will be implemented to improve our new process:

- **Support for training materials.** The Environment Agency will support the UKCEH, the developers of SCAIL, in the development of a step-by-step tutorial video to assist users in understanding and applying the SCAIL Agriculture tool. This will likely be implemented with the updated version of SCAIL Agriculture due to go live in March 2027. Our internal guidance document and updated Operational Instruction will provide sufficient support in the meantime.
- **Move to applicant-led assessments.** Ultimately, our aim is to move to applicant-led assessments using SCAIL Agriculture. The timeframe in which we can achieve this will depend on a number of factors, including:
    - the updated version of SCAIL Agriculture going live in March 2027;
    - our confidence that applicants will submit quality assessments using the new, more user-friendly version of SCAIL Agriculture;
    - time required for communicating the change to applicants and the delivery of supporting materials; and
    - time required to make the necessary further internal and external process changes.

Timescales and approach

We confirm that formalising the new screening approach internally was complete by the end of October 2026, as agreed.

To support effective embedding of the changes, support and additional training will be provided over the first six weeks following formalisation – ie by mid-December 2026.Enhanced support will be provided beyond this for 3-6 months post implementation.

The changes being implemented are those identified as necessary to ensure that the Environment Agency's assessment process for IF permit applications is fully protective of designated sites.

Table 1 sets out the milestones achieved for the key actions required.

Table 1. Timeline of key actions

Action	Progress	Completion deadline
Pre-formalisation activities		
AQMAU modelling study *"IF 1 % habitats screening threshold"* to inform the required permitting process changes	Completed	July 2024
AQMAU modelling study *"SCAIL Agriculture 1% testing"* to inform the required permitting process changes	Completed	January 2026
Deputy Director approval to undertake and prioritise the changes	Completed	March 2026
Evaluation and planning work to support implementation	Completed	March 2026
Initial and ongoing internal and external communications and engagement	Completed	October 2026
Internal Commissioning of Permissions	Completed	October 2026
Draft internal guidance updates	Completed	October 2026
Finalise guidance for internal use	Completed	October 2026
Formalisation – live date activities		
Internal and external comms	Completed	31st October 2026
Publication of updates to relevant gov.uk pages	Completed	
Publication of guidance	Completed	
Post-formalisation activities		
Delivery of internal training and support	Ongoing	September - December 2026
Finalisation and publication of internal operational instruction	Completed	October 2026 / December 2026