

# Public Declaration for Rivers and Seas

Our rivers and seas are open sewers.

## We care deeply about our rivers and seas.

We are fighting for an urgent end to sewage pollution in UK rivers and seas to protect the ecology so that they are fit for wildlife and people.

We have always, on sunny days, packed our picnics and taken our families to paddle, play and swim in our rivers and seas. It is no longer safe for people to enjoy our country's waterways, our rivers and seas are being destroyed by pollution. We have a right to a safe and clean environment.

We have acted in good faith:

- As consumers we have paid, believing we were paying for our sewage to be properly treated.
- As taxpayers we have paid, trusting that our regulators were protecting our waterways.

In response to the sewage pollution of all of our rivers, and many of our seashores, the public has stood up for water, organising into hundreds of local campaign groups, testing our local water quality, applying for bathing status, engaging our local politicians and representatives, petitioning parliament and the water companies, lobbying, persuading and protesting.

This is our public declaration of our requirements.



# Our Declaration

Our rivers and seas should be protected for nature, for ourselves and for future generations.

This is our declaration:

- Stop pollution for profit.
- Make our waters healthy and safe again.
- Action now not targets sometime.
- Regulation that protects the victims, not the polluters.
- Now it's time for the polluters to pay.

Water companies must comply with, and regulators must regulate according to the 1991 Water Industry Act and the 1994 Urban Waste Water Treatment Regulations which require all sewage to be treated, and for storm overflows (which discharge raw sewage) to only operate in truly exceptional circumstances.

## We Believe

1. Clean water is a right as well as a commodity.
2. Rivers and the seas should be fit for wildlife and people.
3. Pollution should not be profitable.
4. The public should not pay twice - we already pay for our sewage to be treated.

## This Inspires Us

The passion from the public who pay their bills and their taxes to keep waterways clean.

The local communities who are tirelessly campaigning to stop sewage pollution in their local rivers and seas.

The thousands of people making and signing petitions: Make reducing sewage pollution a legal requirement (155,606 people signed in 2023); Ban raw sewage discharges (111,428 in 2021); End sewage pollution (44,689 in 2021); Stop dumping sewage into rivers (77,500) along with many local petitions e.g. To United Utilities to stop dumping raw sewage 33,290; Brighton and Hove to Southern Water 'Stop the dump' 1,648, River Usk 1,612, River Avon at Bristol 5,257, Save Windermere 260,000. Renationalise the Water Industry, currently 208,000.

The thousands of people who wrote to their MP to stop them voting for sewage pollution in the 2021 Environment Bill.

The 2 local communities who secured Bathing Status for their Rivers in 2021, the 6 who applied in 2022 and the 24 (so far) who are applying this year, and the 50+ who are planning to apply next year.

The hundreds of self-funded communities that are testing and monitoring the quality of the water using citizen science, including 120 angling clubs covering 85 rivers across 38 catchments; communities along the whole stretch of the Wharfe; 22 sites on the River Yeam; the river Kent from Staveley to Sedgwick; The Big Windermere Survey; 23 rivers with volunteers testing in Smart River Hubs.<sup>1</sup>

The beautiful rivers and seas and their wildlife and plants, that balance our environment, and sustain our lives.

# This Outrages Us

That children and adults get sick as a result of swimming in our rivers and seas.

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# 14%

That all of our rivers are polluted, with only 14% meeting the criteria for good ecological status and none meeting the criteria for achieving good chemical status.<sup>2</sup>

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# 372,544

That water companies poured raw sewage into rivers and seas 372,544 times last year, for 2.6m hours.<sup>4</sup>

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# 75%

That the target date for 75% of English rivers to be rated as good is now 2063 - that's 40 years away.<sup>3</sup> Previously, the target was 100% by 2015!

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# 20%

That water companies have accrued £54 billion debt since privatisation and that we pay on average 20% of our bill towards servicing water company debt and rewarding shareholders.<sup>5</sup>

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# £72 Billion

That since privatisation, water companies have taken £72 billion in dividends and paid seven figure Director salaries whilst failing to maintain our water infrastructure and polluting our rivers with sewage.

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# Invest

That the water company debt has not been used to invest in sewage infrastructure but to service financial interests of shareholders.

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That water company profits are at the expense of other people's livelihoods, for instance coastal communities suffering economically thanks to the effect of sewage pollution on the holiday industry; the decimation of the shellfish industry from sewage pollution.

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That our regulators and government have allowed this to happen, not enforcing the law.

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That politicians have watered down existing law to allow pollution in the 2021 Environment Bill.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://wildfish.org/project/smart-rivers/#:~:text=SmartRivers%20is%20a%20scientifically%20robust,evidence%20to%20protect%20wild%20fish.>

<sup>2</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1113920/defra-annual-report-2021-2022.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1113920/defra-annual-report-2021-2022.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> The Environment Agency expects only 6% of rivers, lakes and coastal waters will be in a good ecological state by 2063

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/nov/06/ministers-have-no-idea-how-many-beaches-in-england-shut-due-to-sewage>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/cma-issues-final-decision-on-water-price-controls>

# What We Expect Now

We want our government to act on the following:

## 1. Water Companies

- Comply with the 1991 legislation and treat our sewage and discharge raw sewage only in exceptional circumstances. Reduce storm Overflows by 90% by 2027.
- No more debt and loan servicing; no more dividends (international and national, including bonuses to directors) until companies are properly maintaining the infrastructure. Water company profits must be diverted to improve the water system and end unlawful sewage discharges.
- Invest in innovative solutions that improve not damage our environment, that recognise and mitigate against the impact of climate change, and be open and transparent about investment plans to secure clean water in our rivers and seas.

## 2. Regulation

- Enforcement of existing legislation and permits by independent regulators that have the skills and capacity to do the job. Enforcement means stopping breaches of existing permits and regulations with penalties and incentives which change behaviour - including fines that hurt and custodial sentences for criminal activity.
- Regulators investigating not ignoring public reporting, and local communities promptly informed of the outcome of their investigations.
- Regulator taking responsibility for water quality and compliance monitoring (not self-monitoring by water companies).
- Where water companies are not compliant they should be put into special administration to protect public services.
- Recognise and support citizen science water quality testing, acting on the results and reporting back to the citizens' community.

## 3. Ownership

- We need to take the profit out of pollution. Water companies need to be incentivised and regulated to provide the infrastructure to protect our rivers and ocean from sewage. This will definitely involve tough regulation, and may require a new modern not for profit ownership model for Britain's water system.

## 4. Who Pays

- The cost of bringing our water industry into the 21st century must be borne fairly. Water Companies have stated that they have sufficient returns to meet statutory obligations in every periodic price review since 1991 and have made vast profits. Their failure to meet these obligations (essentially falling to build sewage capacity) must be taken into account in paying for future infrastructure.

## 5. The Public

Protect our seas and rivers

- Be active consumers of water services.
- Be active citizens holding our regulators and representatives to account.
- Monitor our waterways.
- Publicise our concern for our seas and rivers.

# Who We Are

We are campaigners who believe in keeping our waterways clean for the benefit of nature, ourselves and future generations.

We do not take money from government, regulators, water companies and associated commercial enterprises. We are local people who are not compromised by any association with the UK water system.

- Ilkley Clean River
  - River Action
  - SOS Whitstable
  - Windrush Against Sewage Pollution
  - WildFish
  - with
  - Boston Spa, Wetherby & Villages Green Group
  - Clean River Kent Campaign
  - Hayling Sewage Watch
  - Nidd Action Group
  - Oxford Rivers Project
  - Save Windermere
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