

Huge sewage pollution in Scotland linked to Thames Water's cost-cutting

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A pump failure at the Seafield sewage treatment plant near Edinburgh on Friday has sent millions of gallons of untreated human excrement into the Forth river estuary. It was 40 hours before the public was notified.

The failure is linked to a ruthless cost-cutting exercise and asset-stripping operation mounted by Thames Water's new owners, Australia's Macquaries Bank. In January, the company announced its intention to sell most of its subsidiaries, including its Scottish operations—the Almond Valley, Seafield and Esk private finance initiative (PFI), Glen Water, Scottish Water Solutions, Loch Katrine and Thames Water Nevis.

Thames Water was unable to shut down the Seafield plant because there is no alternative means of treating the sewage from more than 800,000 people in the region.

Peter Farrer, general manager for Scottish Water, which is supposed to supervise Thames Water, said, "There has been a catastrophic failure of one of the large pumps at Seafield which pumps waste water into the treatment works. We have had teams of engineers working around the clock to try and rectify this problem."

Farrer said it was not possible to stop the pollution because the plant was actually designed to pump into the river when emergencies occur.

A Thames Water spokesperson said, "We were unable to repair the pump on site. The breakdown meant the sewage could not be directed to the treatment facility. We had to allow an emergency outflow into the Forth—if we had not done that it would have been directed on to land."

The spokesperson claimed that "we have screening so no solids would have been able to get into the Forth," but later added, "I can't rule out the possibility of

excrement in a semi-solid state being washed up, but we've had no reports from Sepa [Scottish Environment Protection Agency] about environmental pollution of that nature."

A Sepa spokesperson said the agency had introduced special measures to "minimise the risk of pollution" and put up notices on beaches in the area telling residents and visitors to avoid contact with the water.

Gordon Greenhill, head of community safety at Edinburgh City Council, warned, "Any raw sewage has human pathogens in it which has the capacity to make people ill."

Rob Kirkwood, the chairman of Leith Links Residents' Association, which has campaigned for years about the smell from the plant, said, "It has an infrastructure that is basically Third World technology."

Simon Arbuthnot told the BBC, "I live beside the Firth of Forth and work beside Seafield sewage plant. The plant is a disgrace and has been the subject of many complaints for years. The surrounding area stinks, blamed as usual on old equipment. The council has repeatedly ignored calls for the plant to be updated and this major spillage comes as no surprise to many locals who have known for some time that it is substandard and should have been closed years ago."

Scotland's First Minister Jack McConnell has called for an investigation into the spill, saying, "It is essential that Scottish Water and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, where they have a role, get on top of this situation and take the action that is required to secure the coastal area that is affected."

He called for an "immediate investigation into the mechanical failure that has apparently caused this spillage and what action needs to be taken as soon as possible to ensure that such a mechanical failure does

not occur again.”

It was the Scottish Executive that authorised the formation of Scottish Water in April 2002 following a merger of the three former water authorities—East, West and North of Scotland—on the basis of “a new public sector model in the UK water industry and Scottish Water [that] aims to be as efficient and effective as water companies in the private sector.” Scottish Water boasts that it has cut its operating costs by £366 million in 2002-2006.

Following its formation, Scottish Water then outsourced the operation of five sewage treatment plants around Edinburgh to Thames Water under the Seafield private finance initiative. At the time, Thames Water said the deal represented “A completely new partnership model in the outsourcing market place.”

Late last year, Thames Water was sold to Macquarie for £8 billion. In the run-up to the sale, the company announced that a quarter of its 4,000 workforce would be made redundant.

Press reports suggest morale in Thames Water and its subsidiaries is at rock bottom. One manager told the *Independent* that many managers are “working to rule” following an edict by Thames Water’s new chief executive David Owens that they would not receive a pay rise or a bonus this year, their company car scheme is to be stopped, and there is an absolute ban on recruitment. The manager said, “The way Thames is behaving will not exactly motivate managers to meet the targets. The car park empties at four o’clock every day now. People are effectively working to rule. They see the pay freeze as just an excuse to take money out of people’s pockets to pay to the new shareholders instead.”

Thames Water has the worst leakage rate of any water company, and the regulator Ofwat has threatened to fine the company if its performance does not improve this year. In 2005, the company increased water charges to its customers by 21 percent at the same time as its former chief executive received a total of £2.66 million for the year and the total remuneration of the four executive directors soared by 62 percent to £1.26 million.

Thames Water received the biggest fines for pollution in England and Wales last year after prosecution by the Environment Agency. During 2005, the company was fined £128,000, including £110,000 for incidents in

2003 when 20,000 fish were killed by sewage pollution.



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