

Water companies pour raw sewage into English waterways and onto beaches

Paul Bond**28 August 2022**

Raw sewage is being pumped onto Britain's beaches with rainwater overspill.

Britain has experienced its hottest, driest summer for 50 years with farmers warned of serious impact to potato and carrot crops, while even drought-resistant crops like maize are suffering. Drought was declared in several areas, with water restrictions like hosepipe bans being imposed.

When the weather broke last week, parts of the country saw flashfloods on parched earth under the sheer volume of rainfall. On August 17, Shanklin, on the Isle of Wight, experienced 47.8mm of rain, most of it in a sustained downpour.

The deluge could not overcome the drought after such a sustained dry period. Instead, nearly 40 beach pollution warnings were issued in 48 hours as sewage poured onto beaches in water overflows.

The Environment Agency (EA) warned people not to swim at 17 bathing sites in southwest England because of bacteria levels. The charity Surfers Against Sewage (SAS), which operates a live interactive map of coastal water quality, highlighted sewage spills or pollution at 37 sites across the south coast and 50 nationally. Some 90 beaches have been affected so far. Affected beaches in the North include Skegness in Lincolnshire and Robin Hood's Bay, North Yorkshire, where warnings not to swim were issued.

The Surfers Against Sewage map and footage shared on social media give a better view of the situation than statements from the water companies. When footage of raw sewage pumping out at Bexhill, East Sussex was tweeted, Southern Water was still advising there had been no local discharges. Southern Water then downplayed the seriousness, saying, "The release is 95-97 percent rainwater and should not be described as raw sewage," and "Storm releases were made to protect homes, schools and businesses from flooding."

The EA licences using storm overflows in extreme conditions to relieve pressure on the system, but this has increasingly become standard practice. Terms of the EA's permits are frequently breached. Last year saw 62 serious pollution incidents, the highest since 2013.

In 2020 there were more than 400,000 raw sewage discharges in England, for more than 3.1 million hours—a 37 percent increase on 2019. Sewage discharge has risen 2,553 percent between 2016 and 2021, according to EA figures.

This is likely an underestimate. In 2021, a quarter of sewage discharges in all waterways, not just bathing designated areas, went unreported because sewage monitors were not working or not installed. In Devon and Cornwall, this included one in eight monitors at designated bathing locations.

EA figures showed 1,717 storm overflows without a monitor installed at all, and 1,802 providing information for less than 90 percent of the time, with possible high discharge during those periods.

This pollution has a catastrophic impact. Only 14 percent of British rivers are considered ecologically healthy. In the mid-1980s, around 20,000 salmon were caught annually in English and Welsh rivers. That has now halved.

In 2020, there were 153 reports of sickness from people using affected sites. Noroviruses can enter shellfish when sewage enters their growing areas. Last year untreated waste was dumped into shellfish-inhabited waters 29,000 times. Three French MEPs have called on the European Commission to take "political and legal" measures against British pollution of shared shellfish waters. The three members of President Emmanuel Macron's En Marche party also warned that sewage leaks risk bathing waters on the French coast as well as in the south.

The EA has been systematically defunded, particularly regarding surveillance of sewage dumping. Between 2010

and 2020 its environmental protection grant was cut from £120 million to £40 million. Nearly a quarter of this cut was implemented as part of Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) “efficiency” plans under Liz Truss in 2014-16. Truss oversaw overall cutting of EA funding by £235 million. A favourite for promotion in any possible Truss cabinet, should she become prime minister, is Lord David Frost, who recently declared there was “no evidence” for a “climate emergency.”

In the first half of this year, the EA failed to attend 12 of the 28 most serious reported pollution incidents.

England and Wales’s water and wastewater services were privatised by Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government in 1989, creating 10 regional private companies. Privatisation was proposed in 1984, and again two years later, but faced huge popular hostility. It was shelved prior to the 1987 election for fear of generating opposition. When the Tories were returned to power, however, privatisation was rushed through.

The result was a social, environmental and economic catastrophe for millions, while the companies and their shareholders cashed in. A University of Greenwich study in 2017 estimated that consumers in England were paying £2.3 billion per year more for their bills than if water had remained a state provision. The water companies have become sought-after acquisitions by private equity firms. Between 1991 and 2019, the parent companies paid out some £57 billion in dividends, an average of more than £2 billion a year.

The government wrote off all debts on privatisation and speculation has fuelled profits. Yet, by 2019, the companies had still amassed £48 billion in debt—less than they have paid to shareholders.

The government has continued to protect them as this smash and grab raid takes place. Last year an amendment was tabled to the Environment Bill that would have legally forced the companies “to take all reasonable steps to ensure untreated sewage is not discharged from storm overflows.”

The government opposed even this measure. Tory MPs argued that the uncosted amendment would require infrastructure changes costing hundreds of billions—an indictment of the deteriorated state of the water system following privatisation due to the lack of basic infrastructure investment. The usual weasel words about higher water bills were offered up.

The amendment was rejected 265-202 and triggered a public backlash. The government responded by announcing a plan to cut the number, frequency and

length of overflow discharges. On August 11, a week before Britain’s waterways and beaches were once again drowning in excrement, it was announced that the “strategy” was delayed and would appear “in due course.”

DEFRA responded to the French MEPs’ complaints with the lying claim that the Environment Act “has made our laws even stronger on water quality.” The *Independent* this week reported that *all* wastewater companies in England and Wales failed to meet their targets for tackling pollution or sewage floods in the last reporting year.

Fines have occasionally been imposed, like the record £20 million penalty on Thames Water for pumping 1.9 billion litres of untreated sewage into the Thames in 2017. But these are simply transferred to customers. It remains business as usual for the companies, who are once again being investigated for failure to manage treatment works and comply with permits.

The companies are supposedly monitored by regulatory body Ofwat. Ofwat’s 2013-17 head, Cathryn Ross, is now a director at Thames Water. Thames Water is losing around 600 million litres of water a day through pipe leakage. Its CEO, Sarah Bentley, receives £1.6 million in salary and bonuses.

The EA was forced to admit, “Over the years the public have seen water company executives and investors rewarded handsomely while the environment pays the price. The water companies are behaving like this for a simple reason: because they can.”

This latest crisis poses ever more sharply the need for a socialist policy for water supply and sanitation, as part of an international strategy for addressing the climate emergency. Such a policy would involve taking the water companies into public ownership to be run based on rational international planning and coordination, so that everyone has access to this most basic human necessity.



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