

# Coronavirus: Environment Agency update

We are aware communities, businesses and the environment rely on our services. This includes the advice and guidance we offer, our regulatory work which continues to protect the environment, people and wildlife from harm, managing the risks of flooding and coastal erosion, and other roles.

We will continue to review the situation in light of further advice from the government and will update you accordingly. In the meantime, we remind you to check the government's guidance at [www.gov.uk/coronavirus](http://www.gov.uk/coronavirus).

## **Our staff**

We remain fully operational, with the majority of our staff working from home. Our remaining frontline teams will be active, where necessary, on the ground tackling priority issues such as flood risk and pollution. All staff, wherever they are working, are following PHE guidance to reduce their risk of either transmitting or contracting coronavirus.

Maintaining, operating and repairing our assets is essential to ensure they work when required. Our work will continue where it remains safe to do so and activities comply with PHE advice.

We are also ensuring our contractors are aware of site and people restrictions and are following the correct procedures.

## **Offices**

The Environment Agency closed most of its offices in March 2020. We continue to reopen our offices at a reduced capacity, in line with our health and safety plans.

To check the status of your local office contact [enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk)

## **Our flood defence work**

Our flood defence work continues in line with PHE guidance and where it is safe. We are ready to respond to flooding. During coronavirus we continue to maintain and operate our flood and coastal defences to ensure they protect people and property from flooding. We're also maintaining our assets that support public water supply, industry, infrastructure, food production and the environment.

Where work continues, we have ensured that everyone involved has been trained on social distancing and will not put anyone at risk. If the work cannot be done safely, the work will stop.

We are also still carrying out inspections and repairs to flood defences damaged by spring storms. We are prioritising our work that has the most impact in terms of protecting lives and livelihoods, including prioritising

the most at-risk communities so they can remain resilient. If repairs to major infrastructure assets are disrupted by the impact of coronavirus, we will where possible put in place temporary mitigation for the risk, pending a full repair.

All our work is impacted by the controls we and government have put in place. This is likely to mean that completion dates for new projects will slip and other key activities may take place at less regular intervals. We are keeping communities informed of any delays and the action that we are taking to minimise them.

## **Flood warning service**

Continuing to protect lives and livelihoods through our flood warning service remains fundamental to our work as the nation continues to deal with the effects of coronavirus. In order to protect our flood warning service during this difficult time, we have made some minor changes to the service.

In order to safeguard this essential service we will be focussing on the most important warnings, where flooding is expected or where there is a risk to life. We will continue to issue our lowest level of flood warnings – flood alerts – where there is a need to take action but will temporarily stop issuing them where they indicate that there is a very low likelihood of flooding taking place. Our teams will continue to work around the clock to ensure that people have the early warning and safety advice they need to stay safe.

## **Our regulatory role**

Our frontline staff have returned to near normal regulatory work, such as compliance and enforcement.

Physical inspections remain a key part of regulation, but we also gather intelligence remotely, analyse data and assess performance. Used together, these activities provide us with a comprehensive picture from which we can assess regulatory compliance.

We have clearly set out our [approach to regulation and enforcement](#) during the coronavirus outbreak, and have published a series of temporary [regulatory position statements \(RPSs\)](#).

RPSs are nationally-applicable public statements that, provided certain circumstances and conditions are met, allow specified activity to be carried out without complying with a particular regulatory requirement. RPSs allow a degree of flexibility while still ensuring regulatory standards are maintained to protect people and the environment. They include clear conditions regarding standards that must be adhered to.

We have recently reviewed the ongoing need for the remaining COVID-19 RPSs. Some have been extended or replaced with new RPSs and some have now expired. Anyone using a COVID-19 RPS is responsible for [checking their status](#).

We will continue to review the need for RPSs over the autumn and winter and

will consider reinstating previously expired RPSs should the need arise.

Across the country, our teams continue to undertake investigations into environmental offending and prepare legal cases. We will consider the appropriate regulatory response to any unavoidable non-compliance in accordance with our [policies and guidance on regulation and enforcement](#).

Coronavirus is not an excuse to operate illegally. We make clear in our approach to regulation and enforcement during the coronavirus that we expect operators to take all reasonable steps to comply with regulatory requirements using contingency plans to help them comply.

We're also continuing to work with the police to share intelligence about criminal activity and take action against those breaking the law.

We absolutely recognise the added financial strain coronavirus is putting on businesses and have written to all our customers to invite them to contact us to discuss payment options if they experience difficulties.

### **Applying for a permit**

Permitting remains a business critical activity. We have robust plans in place which will enable us to respond to any capacity or workload issues emerging from either the pandemic or the UK's exit from the EU. For example, we have retained access to additional permitting capacity should it be required.

Overall Permitting Service performance has continued to improve and stabilise since September and the amount of work in our queues is now at typical levels for our service.

Our priority is to sustain our improved performance and implement improvements to our processes that result in quicker determinations of permits in 2021.

### **Bathing water sampling**

The Environment Agency has resumed sampling at designated bathing waters in July following government advice on easing lockdown restrictions.

Routine bathing water sampling was suspended before the start of the 2020 bathing season as the Environment Agency followed government guidelines to reduce the spread of coronavirus.

Throughout lockdown, regulatory work has continued to maintain the quality of bathing waters, which remains of a high standard in England.

The latest classifications for all designated bathing waters in England can be found [on our water quality website](#).

Our daily pollution risk forecasting service, which is the best way for bathers to get the latest information on water quality, has been providing updates throughout lockdown. This year the system has been upgraded to

provide even more accurate forecasts of when a temporary reduction in water quality is likely. For information on pollution risk forecasts and warnings [visit our website](#).

## **Angling and our fisheries**

In line with government guidance, the Environment Agency had to pause a number of non-critical field based fisheries activities such as improving habitats for fish, facilities for anglers and restocking. Following the further easing of lockdown restrictions, we have restarted this field based fisheries work, including fisheries enforcement, to help protect and maintain fisheries and the environment.

We continue to prioritise our response to reported incidents of harm to the environment, subject to local conditions. Illegal fishing, pollution and incidents that harm the environment should be reported to our 24-hour hotline on 0800 80 70 60.

## **Our waterways**

All navigation on our waterways should be limited to essential travel only. Travel on waterways and overnight stays are only permitted where the boat is your permanent residence or it is necessary for work, education or similar reasons. Those who live aboard their boats should limit their travel to access essential services and facilities. You should stay local where possible.

We will continue to support this national effort through these challenging times and will, as always, make protecting the safety of our customers and staff our top priority. Our staff will continue to work, managing and maintaining our waterways within the safe ways of working we have implemented over the past year. This may include some asset closures for maintenance. Our level of service may also be affected due to some staff who are vulnerable and need to shield. This means some tasks may not be carried out, including assisted passage at some locks, however wherever possible we will maintain essential services and facilities for those boaters who live aboard and who have to make essential journeys.

As in previous lockdowns, some activities using unpowered boats are permitted as part of your daily exercise, limited to once a day and within the [Government guidance for exercise](#). Please check Government guidance and any specific guidance from national governing bodies, such as British Canoeing or British Rowing.

## **Water safety**

As the government eases restrictions on movement caused by the coronavirus outbreak, the public has been warned to keep safe around rivers and canals. For advice about the dangers of wild swimming, follow guidance from police, [Public Health England](#), the [Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents](#), and the [Royal National Lifeboat Institution](#). Their messages are clear: vigilance can save lives, and water-related accidents can be avoided by knowing how to

stay safe.

The Environment Agency, which manages many locks, weirs and bridges across England, wants people to remember the hazards under the water in rivers while spending time with friends and family. People should not to jump or dive into water and stay away from weirs, locks and pipes. There can be unseen hazards in the water, cold-water shock can affect even strong swimmers on warm days and social distancing must be continued to protect the public, staff and boaters. Keep a look out for boat traffic. Boaters, especially on larger vessels, can find it very hard to spot swimmers.

### **Restarting your private sewage treatment plant**

We have provided guidance to a range of industry bodies covering hospitality businesses including pubs, restaurants, hotels, camping and caravan sites and theme parks confirming the need for private sewage treatment plants to be made ready to be used again following a period of shutdown or low flows.

It comes as many pubs and other hospitality businesses re-open.

Sewage treatment plants use living microorganisms in biological treatment processes to remove pollutants from sewage effluent before it is discharged into the environment. The sudden restart of a sewage treatment plant or an increase of flows into it following a relaxation of COVID-19 business shutdown rules will very likely result in the discharge of poor quality effluent unless steps are taken by operators of sewage treatment plants to prepare them for increased flows beforehand.

Environmental impacts must be minimised when operators restart their sewage treatment plants. Those who discharge poor quality effluent risk being in breach of their environmental permits or the General Binding Rules if their discharges cause pollution of surface water or groundwater.

Operators need to take steps to ensure that their treatment plant is able to operate effectively as flows into it increase after their businesses reopen.

Those unaccustomed to restarting, should seek technical advice and support from:

- whoever normally maintains their sewage treatment plant
- the manufacturer or supplier of their treatment plant
- a competent sewage treatment plant maintenance engineer

As well as ensuring that their sewage treatment plant is ready to receive increased flows, operators must also check that any pre-treatment equipment such as fats, oils and grease (FOG) traps are ready to be used again. Operators should also avoid sending excessive amounts of chemicals and cleaning products to their sewage treatment plant as they can inhibit and harm biological treatment processes. They should also ensure any contaminated drainage from washing and cleaning does not drain to surface water sewers, water courses or groundwater or cause pollution.

Operators of premises served by their own sewage treatment plant wanting to

dispose of waste beer should find other means of disposal. They should seek further guidance from the British Beer and Pub Association and refer to the waste hierarchy which is available on GOV.UK.

## **Billing**

The Environment Agency recognises that some customers will be particularly affected by the measures to restrict the impact of the virus. We will consider requests for payment plans if customers experience difficulties paying bills on time. Income from fees and charges ensures the Environment Agency can continue to provide an appropriate level of regulation and services for our customers to ensure the environment and people are protected.

## **Customer contacts**

During this pandemic the Environment Agency continues to protect people and the environment, working alongside our partners. Please report any pollution incidents on 0800 80 70 60 and stay #floodaware.

## **General enquiries**

National Customer Contact Centre

Email: [enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk)

Telephone: 03708 506 506

P0 Box 544 Rotherham S60 1BY United Kingdom