

Detailed guide: Rules for farmers and land managers to prevent water pollution

You must take steps to prevent manure, fertiliser and soil getting into watercourses – known as diffuse water pollution (pollution).

These rules apply to farming or horticultural practices, such as:

- using and storing organic manure (manure) or manufactured fertiliser (fertiliser)
- planting and harvesting
- soil management – for example, ploughing or planting cover crops
- managing livestock on your land

Organic manures are made from one or more animal, plant or human sources. A cover crop is any crop with leaf cover that stops rain falling directly onto the soil.

These rules also apply if you:

- are in a [Nitrate Vulnerable Zone](#)
- receive funding from the [Basic Payment Scheme](#), [Countryside Stewardship](#) or [Environment Stewardship](#)

Assess pollution risks

You must take into account the risks of runoff and soil erosion from these factors:

- the angle of slopes, in particular if the angle is greater than 12 degrees
- amount of ground cover
- distance to inland freshwaters, coastal waters, wetlands, springs, wells or boreholes
- soil type and condition
- presence and condition of land drains

You must identify the risks that apply to your land and your activities.

Before you use manure or fertiliser

You must plan each application of manure or fertiliser on your land.

Applying includes:

- spreading on the surface of the land
- injecting into the soil

- mixing manure or fertiliser with the surface layers of soil

For all farming and horticultural land you must plan:

- how much fertiliser or manure to use, so you don't use more than your crop or soil needs
- by [assessing the pollution risks](#)
- by taking into account the weather conditions and forecasts at the time you want to apply manure or fertiliser on your land

You can use the [Nutrient Management Guide RB209](#) to work out the nutrients your soil or crop needs.

Soil tests for cultivated agricultural land

If you're applying manure or fertiliser to cultivated agricultural land, you must also plan by using the results of soil tests.

Cultivated agricultural land is both or one of the following:

- land you've ploughed, sowed or harvested at least once in the last year
- land where you've applied organic manure or fertiliser at least once in the last 3 years

The results of soil tests must show the pH and levels of:

- nitrogen – you can use [the soil nitrogen supply assessment method \(sns\)](#) instead of a soil test
- phosphorus
- potassium
- magnesium

Soil test results must be no more than 5 years old at the time of application.

Applying fertiliser

You must not use fertiliser:

- on waterlogged, flooded or snow covered soil
- when the soil has been frozen for more than 12 hours in the past 24 hours
- within 2 metres(m) of inland freshwaters, coastal waters, a spring, well or borehole
- where [risk factors](#) mean there's a significant risk of pollution

Using manure

You must not use manure:

- on waterlogged, flooded or snow covered soil
- when the soil has been frozen for more than 12 hours in the past 24

hours

- within 50m of a spring, well or borehole
- within 10m of inland freshwaters or coastal waters unless you're using [precision equipment](#) or you're managing [land for specific environmental benefits](#)
- where [risk factors](#) mean there's a significant risk of pollution

6m exception for precision equipment

You can apply manure no closer than 6m from inland freshwaters or coastal waters if you use:

- a trailing hose or shoe band spreader
- a shallow injector (no deeper than 10cm)
- a dribble bar applicator

Exception for environmental benefits

There's an exception for land you manage for breeding wader birds or as a species-rich semi-natural grassland.

On this land, you can apply livestock manure (not slurry or poultry) within 10m of inland freshwaters and coastal waters if:

- the land is in an Environmental or Countryside Stewardship scheme or it's a [site of special scientific interest \(SSSI\)](#)
- you don't apply manure onto the surface of water
- you only apply the manure from 1 June to 31 October
- you apply no more than 12.5 tonnes per hectare per year

Reduce pollution risks

You must take reasonable precautions to reduce the risk of pollution when you apply manure or fertiliser.

Examples include:

- checking your spreading equipment is calibrated and doesn't leak
- working manure or fertiliser into the soil within 12 hours or as soon as possible after applying it
- checking the organic matter content and moisture level in your soil – you can use the [Nutrient Management Guide RB209](#) or other resources to help you do this

Storing manure

You must take into account [risk factors for runoff](#) when deciding where to store manure on your land.

You must not store it:

- within 10m of inland freshwaters or coastal waters
- within 50m of a spring, well or borehole

Prevent erosion: manage livestock and soil

You must take reasonable precautions to prevent soil loss caused by horticultural and farming activities. Soil loss can lead to erosion and allow pollutants to get into watercourses.

Find out [how inspectors check](#) you're complying with the rules.

Planting, harvesting and soil management

You must take reasonable precautions to reduce the risk of pollution when you carry out activities such as:

- creating farm tracks or gateways
- establishing seedbeds, polytunnels or tramlines
- cleaning out ditches
- installing drainage or irrigation
- irrigating crops
- spraying crops with pesticides, herbicides or fungicides

Examples include:

- planting crops in early autumn and in dry conditions
- planting headland rows and beds across the base of sloping land
- undersowing or sowing a cover crop to stabilise soil after harvest
- breaking up compacted soil
- establishing grass buffer strips in valleys, along contours, slopes, field edges and gateways

Manage livestock

You must make sure you prevent livestock compacting soil by trampling it (poaching) within 5m of an inland freshwater or coastal water.

You must not place livestock feeders:

- within 10m from inland freshwaters or coastal waters
- within 50m of a spring, well or borehole
- where [risk factors](#) mean there's a significant risk of pollution

You must take reasonable precautions to prevent pollution from managing livestock.

Examples include:

- moving livestock to prevent poaching and bankside erosion – find out [how inspectors check](#) you're complying with the rules
- putting up fences to keep animals away from watercourses
- wintering livestock on well-drained, level fields

Enforcement and inspections

The Environment Agency is responsible for enforcing these rules. It will do this through its farm inspections work. This may include checking:

- you're meeting the distance restrictions in the rules
- for soil erosion affecting a single area of more than 1 hectare
- for poaching on a stretch of land (at least 2m wide and 20m long) next to an inland freshwater or coastal water
- for signs of fertiliser use in restricted areas – including excessive growth of vegetation on the margins of restricted areas
- fertiliser records, including records you keep on calibrating fertiliser equipment
- soil test results
- for evidence of pollution or if there's a significant risk it could happen
- the types of crops you're planting

How enforcement will work

If the Environment Agency finds you're breaching the rules, it will help you by:

- identifying the changes you need to make
- agreeing a timescale with you to make changes

To check you've made changes, the Environment Agency may:

- give you a follow-up visit
- ask for evidence, such as photographic evidence of a change

If there's already pollution or a high risk of pollution, the Environment Agency may take enforcement action. This may include prosecution.

This guide relates to The Reduction and Prevention of Agricultural Diffuse Pollution (England) Regulations 2018 which came into force on 2 April 2018.

Get advice

Contact the [Environment Agency](#)