

Letter to The Times from Emma Howard Boyd, Chair of Environment Agency

PROTECTING OUR RIVERS AND STREAMS

Your latest attack on the Environment Agency (“Toothless Environment Agency lets farmers pollute rivers”, 17 August) is another misleading mix of fact and fiction.

It is true that the EA doesn't have a specific budget to enforce the new regulations to protect watercourses against diffuse pollution from agriculture. We don't have all the resources we'd like to do so: the government grant for our environmental work has been cut by more than half since 2010, and we would like to see that restored.

It is also true, as your article acknowledges, that the EA always planned not to enforce the law for the first year after it came into effect in April 2018 and to provide advice to farmers instead. We made that clear [when the scheme was launched](#): “The Environment Agency will roll out the rules through an advice led approach, working with farmers to meet the requirements before enforcement action is taken.”

We think that was the right approach. These were a set of new rules to which farmers needed time to adapt. All good regulators seek first to work with those they regulate through support and guidance, and only use enforcement when necessary. And [as I have made clear](#) we do need to work with farmers to provide advice, practical support and best practice to help them protect their land and our environment.

But it is not the case that we “let farmers pollute rivers”. We can and do take enforcement action, up to and including prosecution, against those who cause serious pollution incidents. We target persistent offenders. And we are having some success: in the last quarter (April-June 2019) the number of serious pollution incidents caused by farmers dropped to five, compared with 23 in the same period last year.

Protecting and enhancing the water in our rivers and streams is a top priority for the Environment Agency. In the same quarter that we helped secure that big drop in serious pollution from farming, we also enhanced 951km of watercourses across the country. We did that by working with farmers to reduce the impact of diffuse pollution, with the water companies to improve sewage treatment, and with the environmental NGOs like the WWF and Rivers Trust. We also removed barriers to eel and fish migration to help restore our rivers and wildlife to their natural state.

We will always strive to do the best we can for the people and places we serve. And we are always open to fair criticism. But I hope that in future reporting on the Environment Agency's work you will acknowledge our successes as well as our challenges. We'd be happy to meet and show you what we do to

create a better place.

Emma Howard Boyd

Chair, Environment Agency