

North East charity gets boost as water company pays for pollution

Northumbrian Water has agreed to pay £165,000 to Tyne Rivers Trust after causing an unauthorised discharge from its Horsley Water Treatment Works, which led to a pollution incident at Kitty's Burn, near Newcastle, in 2018.

Northumbrian Water submitted an Enforcement Undertaking to the Environment Agency, which has now been accepted.

An Enforcement Undertaking is a voluntary offer made by companies and individuals to make amends for their offending.

'Address and restore' harm caused

Area Environment Manager, Rachael Caldwell, said:

All businesses, including water companies, have a responsibility to ensure their activities do not present a risk of harm to people and the environment.

When companies fail to meet their environmental obligations, it's a serious matter and we will take appropriate action, which may include civil sanctions.

Enforcement Undertakings allow companies who fail to comply with legal requirements, or pollute the environment, to positively address and restore any harm caused and prevent repeat incidents.

This payment to Tyne Rivers Trust will help protect and enhance nature in the local area.

Drainage was connected to wrong sewer

Northumbria Water had temporarily contracted a machine to separate liquids at the Horsley site to help the works cope with a period of increased demand, but staff used old drainage plans and mistakenly connected it to a surface water drain rather than a foul sewer.

As a result, the liquid from the process – called centrate, produced when sludge is dewatered – was discharged into a drain which led to Kitty Burn, and which then flowed about 1.3km into the River Tyne.

The Environment Agency attended on 2 November 2018 and enquiries revealed the discharge had been happening sporadically for around eight weeks, with almost eight million litres of centrate discharged. Sampling indicated there had been minimal impact on the ecology of the river.

The Enforcement Undertaking offer from Northumbrian Water details how it has introduced standard operating procedures to ensure that all sites have colour-coded drain covers and on-site signage, that all drains are to be identified and checked against a current site drainage plan, and it has invested in new machinery.

Enforcement Undertakings are one of a number of enforcement options available to the Environment Agency.

Since 2015, the Environment Agency has secured water company court fines of over £137million. Most recently, Northumbrian Water was fined £240,000 at Newcastle Crown Court for polluting Coundon Burn in March 2017; and in October 2021 they were fined £540,000 at Durham Crown Court for polluting a watercourse that runs through Heads Hope Dene in Castle Eden in May 2017.