

Press release: £500,000 penalty for sewage discharge at Sutton Park

Severn Trent Water Limited was sentenced at Birmingham Crown Court on 22 March 2019, for the incident which occurred in November 2013. In addition to the fine, the company was ordered to pay prosecution costs of £50,693 and a victim surcharge of £120.

The incident occurred due to a blockage in the company's sewer system within Sutton Park.

On 12 November 2013 at around 4pm, the Sutton Park Visitor Centre received a report of a sewage smell and that a sewer was discharging waste into the Longmoor Valley. Due to poor light, the location of the incident was not identified until the following morning when a park ranger found a large amount of sewage flowing from a manhole cover and spreading across the surrounding area.

Officers from Natural England attended and mapped the extent of the damage. They found that the sewage had spread across an area of 1.15 hectares (an area slightly greater than the size of an international rugby pitch). Sewage had also entered a nearby ditch and travelled 700 metres into the Longmoor Brook to the Longmoor Pool within the Park.

Severn Trent Water Ltd liaised with Natural England, the Environment Agency, Birmingham City Council and Historic England to produce a plan to remediate the site. Soil and plants had to be scraped up across the affected area to stop the spread of sewage contamination. Around 0.65 hectares of rare and sensitive plants were destroyed. Representatives from Natural England expressed concern with the progress and efficiency of the clean-up operation, which concluded in May 2014.

In passing sentence, His Honour Judge Drew QC recognised that Sutton Park is an environmentally sensitive area, and a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest. The judge noted that the clean-up operation had been slow and poorly managed, but that the company had ultimately taken all necessary steps to remediate the site and that it had made a long term commitment to restoring the affected area.

In mitigation, the court noted the company's overall environmental record and set of values, that the company had accepted responsibility for the incident, and that it was not a commercially motivated offence.

The Environment Agency has recognised an improvement in Severn Trent Water Limited's overall environmental compliance since the incident. The organisation were identified as an industry leading company in the Environment Agency's Environmental Performance Assessment in 2017.

Emma Johnson, Natural England's Area Manager for the West Midlands, said:

There's a lot of love for Sutton Park. It is used and enjoyed by many, it's a prime site for wildlife and is part of the history of the West Midlands. The sewage spill incident caused by Severn Trent Water and the impact it had is amongst the worst damage to a SSSI that Natural England have witnessed.

It's particularly disappointing as water companies should have technology and processes in place to prevent this type of spill from happening. Natural England have supported and worked closely with the Environment Agency and I hope that the outcome of this prosecution helps highlight the importance of protected sites and the need to look out for them.

Looking forward, I am hopeful that ourselves and the Environment Agency can work with Severn Trent Water to rectify the issues and restore the site to a healthy state, and prevent future spills.

Marc Lidderth, Area Environment Manager for the Environment Agency said:

This case demonstrates how partners work together to share information and advice to protect the environment. It also highlights the importance of reporting environmental damage or pollution quickly, and members of the public can do this by calling the Environment Agency Incident Hotline on 0800 807660.