

Press release: Company fined after land spreading leads to pollution

A company has been fined £20,000 after polluting a stream during land spreading at a North East farm.

Whites Recycling Ltd – based at Mill Lane in South Witham, Lincolnshire – appeared at Newton Aycliffe Magistrates' Court on Thursday 19 December where it pleaded guilty to breaching its environmental permit and polluting a tributary of the River Tees.

It was fined £20,000, and ordered to pay costs and a victim surcharge amounting to £4,430.

Prosecuting on behalf of the Environment Agency, Sally Dennison told the court that the company has an environmental permit for mobile plant land spreading at Greystones Farm near Eppleby, west of Darlington.

Conditions of the land spreading deployment states the operation should comply with the 'Code for Good Agricultural Practice' which requires that weather conditions are assessed prior to spreading taking place, and also states 'the activity will be carried out without harm to the environment'.

Stream 'running black'

On 22 March 2017 a pollution incident was reported by a member of the public advising that a stream close to Greystones Farm was running black.

The following morning environment officers from the Environment Agency attended the farm and met with the farm manager. He confirmed that eight loads of digestate had been spread on the field the previous day. The field appeared to be waterlogged.

The officers investigated an unnamed tributary of the River Tees and saw that drainage outfalls from the field were discharging a black coloured liquid into the watercourse.

Whites Recycling arranged for a tanker to attend and remove the pools of digestate and rainwater that had accumulated on the field.

Rainfall data gathered by the Environment Agency showed around half of the average monthly rainfall for the area fell on 22 March 2017 and 23 March 2017 and the Met Office had also issued a severe weather warning for snow on the 22 March 2017 for the area.

Checks on the company's Environment Management System showed there was no condition to check the weather forecast prior to spreading taking place, and the field record sheet had been incorrectly filled out. It stated the nearest watercourse was 150m away when the stream is only separated from the field by a main road.

The company said the incident had resulted from a systems failure and was not committed deliberately or recklessly, and that immediate action was taken to prevent further harm by removing further liquid from the field. The company's Environment Management System has been reviewed and updated and it had also conducted training for all of its staff in the new procedures. The company apologised to the Environment Agency and the court for the breach and the resulting pollution.

Vital that companies abide by permit conditions

Environment Officers Louise Poole, from the Environment Agency's Land and Water Team in the North East, led the investigation. She said:

Permits are in place to protect the environment and our communities while also supporting businesses in their activities.

Permits have strict conditions for a reason and it is vital companies abide by those conditions. In this case, land spreading during adverse weather led to a waterlogged field and a black discharge into a nearby river, impacting on the environment. The company has since updated its procedures and improved staff training.

Run off from land into our waters has a significant negative effect on the environment. The Environment Agency works hard to protect our environment and I hope this sends out a message to others that we take incidents such as this seriously and will take the necessary action against those flouting the conditions of their permit.