

Press release: Man sentenced for North East fish kill incident

Graham Simpson, 61, from Ellingham in Northumberland, appeared at Berwick Magistrates' Court on Tuesday 8 January, where he pleaded guilty to two separate offences of polluting a tributary of Long Nanny Burn.

He was fined £2,261 and ordered to pay costs and a victim surcharge amounting to £3,922.

Prosecuting for the Environment Agency, Matthew Treece told the court that on 18 May 2017 Graham Simpson reported a spill of around 3,000 litres of liquid fertiliser from an overturned tractor mounted sprayer at Home Farm, Ellingham.

Environment Agency officers attended and found the fertiliser had gone into a tributary of the Long Nanny through two highway drains. Simpson had covered the drains with soil to try to stop the fertiliser entering.

However, water quality samples along Long Nanny found high levels of ammonia. Officers also saw thousands of dead fish, with the official mortality count at 2,110 caused by the increased levels of ammonia in the water.

Stream affected for four days

The elevated levels of ammonia lasted 24 hours over a length of almost 10km from the source at Ellingham to the confluence with the North Sea, and affected the watercourse for four days. Dye tracing confirmed the source of the pollution.

In interview Mr Simpson said he had hit the steps of one of the farm buildings which overturned the sprayer and spilled the fertiliser, which travelled down the road and into the drains. He believed a malfunctioning rear axle may have caused the issue, but the sprayer was not adequately checked before he started the work. He took immediate action to block the highway drains with soil and apply sawdust to the road surface to absorb the spill.

In a second incident, on 29 September the same year, the Environment Agency received an anonymous report of a fuel spill in the same area, again affecting the tributary of the Long Nanny. Investigations revealed kerosene was polluting the stream.

In interview Simpson said he was transporting a fuel storage container with kerosene heating fuel oil inside, to top up his home heating system. The tank was unsecured on top of a pallet which was on a fork lift truck, and when he turned a corner the tank slipped off the pallet in to the ground causing the spill. He had put down absorbent straw pellets to reduce the impact of the spill but the oil had already entered the stream. He was remorseful about

both incidents. He now carries drain mats which are designed to temporarily seal drains.

Serious pollution incident

Laura Mollon, Water Quality Lead for the Environment Agency in the North East, led the investigation. She said:

The first incident was a serious pollution incident which affected 10km of stream and killed thousands of fish, including more than 60 critically endangered eels.

The watercourse had not even started recovering when the second incident happened, which again polluted the stream, this time with oil.

This shows why it's so important that landowners and farmers check their equipment thoroughly before starting any work on their land and take great care when transporting and spraying substances.

Pollution incidents such as this, caused by negligent or reckless breaches of environmental permits, have a serious negative impact on our environment and are something we work hard to prevent.