

Press release: South West Water fined after repeat sewage spill at Devon beach

More should have been done by South West Water to prevent history repeating itself when raw sewage spilled onto a popular beach, a court ruled.

Ordering the water firm to pay more than £60,000, a district judge said South West Water did not heed the Environment Agency's warnings and guidance after a similar incident in 2012.

Sewage spilled from a manhole on South Sands Beach on 13 April 2017 – Easter Bank Holiday. A sand dam had been built around the manhole by children playing nearby.

A spokesperson for the Environment Agency said:

Water companies must carry out regular inspections and maintenance of their sewerage infrastructure and respond urgently to leaks, especially at beaches.

On this occasion raw sewage leaked directly onto one of Devon's most popular beaches over a busy Bank Holiday. There was a very real risk of sewage harming children nearby and contaminating the bathing water.

The Environment Agency tests water quality at every official bathing water to ensure it is maintained and improved and we are committed to working with water companies, councils and local communities to keep our beaches clean, reduce pollution and protect the environment.

The court heard the manhole and sewer pipes at South Sands are covered at high tide. This makes access and maintenance difficult. The blockage was blamed on sand entering the sewer network from homes, possibly from washing down wetsuits and beachwear. Sand was also the cause of an 8-day blockage in August 2012.

Lacking the correct equipment, a South West Water technician called in a specialist firm to flush out the blockage. However, when the specialist arrived high tide was imminent and the work was delayed until the next morning. The manhole seeped a liquid which contained 'extremely high' levels of e-coli bacteria for about 32 hours.

South Hams District Council decided warning signs were not needed. But District Judge Jo Matson said that South West Water could have done more to deter people from the area than just putting up cones and tape.

The water company took samples of seawater at South Sands on 13 April and claimed there was no environmental impact to the beach or bathing water. However, the samples were taken when the tide was out, nowhere near the manhole, and so not conclusive.

South West Water has since replaced seals and covers on a number of manholes in the area. But the manhole where sewage seeped onto the beach was not sealed until a year later in April 2018. The court questioned why the manhole had not been sealed after the first incident in 2012.

Appearing before Exeter magistrates, South West Water was fined £44,000 and ordered to pay £18,883.06 costs and £170 victim surcharge after pleading guilty, at an earlier hearing, to causing a water discharge activity, namely the discharge of poisonous, noxious or polluting matter, namely untreated sewage to coastal waters contrary to Regulations 12 (1), 38 (1) (a) and 39 (1) of the Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) Regulations 2016.