

Taskforce sets goal to end pollution from storm overflows

A joint industry-government group established last year to tackle river pollution has today (22 January) agreed a new objective to prevent damage from storm overflows.

The Storm Overflows Taskforce – made up of Defra, the Environment Agency, Ofwat, Consumer Council for Water, Blueprint for Water and Water UK – has agreed to set a long term goal to eliminate harm from storm overflows. Following recommendations from the Taskforce, water companies will also increase transparency around when and how storm overflows are used. Storm overflows were designed to be used during extreme weather to prevent sewers becoming overloaded with a combination of sewage and rainwater, releasing diluted wastewater into rivers rather than letting it back up into people's homes. However climate change has led to increased rainfall and water infrastructure has not kept pace with development growth over decades.

Water companies have agreed to make real-time data on sewage discharges available at bathing sites all year round, meaning surfers, swimmers and other water users can check the latest information – especially after heavy rainfall. Water companies will also accelerate work to install monitoring devices to create a complete picture of their activity by 2023.

In addition, the Taskforce has agreed with water companies that they will publish annual monitoring data on their websites about their use of storm overflows so that progress in reducing their use can be tracked. The Environment Agency will compile this data into an annual report that is easily accessible to the public.

The Taskforce update comes as the Government confirms it is also working with Philip Dunne MP on our shared ambitions to tackle sewage pollution in our rivers.

The Sewage (Inland Waters) Bill, introduced by Mr Dunne to Parliament last year, has raised awareness of a number of issues associated with storm overflows. The Government has committed to continuing to work with Mr Dunne on the best way to make progress in reducing the harm caused by sewage spilling into our rivers.

Since 2010, 884 storm overflows have been improved to reduce their environmental impact and frequency of operation, with a further 798 improvements planned for the period 2020 – 2025.

Philip Dunne, MP for Ludlow, said:

“I have been shocked to discover the extent of sewage routinely spilled in our rivers. Poor water quality has a very damaging impact on aquatic species which depend on clean rivers, and risks healthy enjoyment of our rivers by

the public.

“I am really pleased this Government has recognised that this has got to change. I am delighted the Minister has responded so quickly to Covid restrictions interrupting progress of my Private Members Bill by agreeing to work with me to develop measures to improve water quality across England.”

The Storm Overflows Taskforce was set up in August 2020 to bring together water companies, regulators and environmental NGOs to accelerate progress in this area, building on work already underway to improve our rivers and waterways.

Its work covers a series of short, medium and long-term actions focused on the goal to eliminate harm from storm overflows – a generational endeavour that will involve significant change and take time to achieve.

Environment Minister Rebecca Pow said:

“Making sure we have clean rivers is an absolute priority and I have been clear that I want to cut down on the water sector’s reliance on storm overflows.

“The Storm Overflows Taskforce, established last year, is working urgently on options to tackle this issue, which demonstrates a collective commitment for change in this critical area.

“Our ambitious Environment Bill already sets out how we will tackle various sources of water pollution. I look forward to working with Philip Dunne and others on how we can accelerate progress in this area.”

The Environment Bill will place a statutory requirement on water companies to produce drainage and sewerage management plans to help deliver more of the actions needed to address the risks sewerage assets may pose to the environment.

It is the responsibility of water companies to ensure serious water pollution incidents do not occur, and they have committed to a significant programme of improvements to the monitoring and management of storm overflows over the next five years at a cost of around £1.1 billion.

As a result of the work of the Taskforce, water companies have identified opportunities to increase the number of overflows they will improve over the next five years.

Work will continue to consider how the guidance given by the Secretary of State to the regulator Ofwat can best reflect the importance of water quality in water companies’ activities.

Emma Howard Boyd, chair of the Environment Agency, said:

“Publishing easily accessible data is an important step to reversing the overuse of storm overflows, but disclosure is only ever the beginning. People want to see progress.

“Water quality in England’s 240,631 kilometres of river is everyone’s responsibility but water companies have a pivotal role in helping the whole country make the necessary big changes. We look forward to working with them, as well as government and MPs, to turn today’s ambition into action.”

John Russell, Senior Director at Ofwat said:

“The work of the Storm Overflows Taskforce will play a crucial role in protecting precious parts of our ecosystem.

“We are committed to working with Government, regulators and the water industry to meet this challenge and ensure that we leave our rivers in a healthier condition for current and future generations.”

Emma Clancy, Chief Executive of CCW, said:

“Increasing transparency around the use of storm overflows is a welcome step but consumers will expect it to result in urgent action where pollution is jeopardising the health of our inland waters and the nature and people that enjoy or depend on them.”

“Radical change to a complex sewer system will take time to deliver but water companies should now be looking to prioritise improvements in rivers and streams where the damage caused by the over dependence on storm overflows is already acute.”

Christine McGourty, Water UK Chief Executive, said:

“Water companies are passionate about protecting and enhancing our nation’s rivers, and over the next five years we will invest £1.1bn in improving storm overflows as part of our £5bn environment programme. Storm Christoph demonstrates how important overflows are in ensuring that sewers don’t flood at times of very heavy rainfall. Today’s announcement will help ensure that we can continue protecting people’s homes and businesses whatever the weather.

“We look forward to continuing the close collaboration with Government and other partners to help enhance the health of rivers even further, for the benefit of our customers, communities and the environment.”