



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

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Dear Julie,

Thank you for your letter of 8 March to the Secretary of State about your motion in support of the "Save Our Rivers" campaign. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area.

The volume of sewage discharged by water companies is unacceptable and I will ensure improving water quality remains a Government priority. No Government has done more to tackle the issue of storm overflow discharges.

The Government recognises the importance of protecting the nation's natural environment and we are investing accordingly. Defra and its agencies received an additional £4.3 billion in the latest Spending Review (SR) in October 2021, so we can do more to protect our environment for future generations. At SR21 we increased the Environment Agency's (EA) enforcement budget for water quality to allow the EA to undertake 4,000 more farm inspections and 500 sewage treatment works inspections a year.

We have also boosted funding for the EA with £2.2 million per year specifically for water company enforcement activity so that robust action is taken against illegal breaches of storm overflow permits. Additional funding for the EA for water company enforcement activity is specifically related to environmental offending, which will be used to inform investigations and enforcement activity. This includes new funding for additional inspections over the spending review period going forward by 2023-24. Farm inspections will be targeted in the areas of greatest risk, including the catchments of protected sites.

In August 2022 the Government launched [the most ambitious plan to reduce sewage discharges from storm overflows in water company history](#). Our new strict targets will see the toughest ever crack down on sewage spills and will require water companies to deliver the largest infrastructure programme in water company history - £56 billion capital investment over 25 years. If it is possible to go further and faster while balancing the cost to consumers, we will not hesitate to do so and have made this clear to the water industry. The Government will review the targets in 2027, so that we stay as ambitious as possible, while balancing the impact on bills.

We have increased the number of storm overflows monitored across the network from 10% in 2015 to almost 90% now monitored, and we will reach 100% cover by end of this year. Through powers in the landmark Environment Act, we will also place duties directly on water companies to monitor the water quality impact up and downstream of all their assets. We take robust enforcement action against illegal breaches of storm overflow permits. Since 2015, the Environment Agency have concluded 58 prosecutions against water and sewerage companies securing fines of over £142 million.

Thank you once again for taking the time to contact us about this important issue.



REBECCA POW MP