

Largest ever enforcement workforce protecting waterways from pollution

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Environment Agency water enforcement team increases by almost fivefold since 2023.

The Environment Agency has assembled its largest ever team of investigators, enforcement officers and lawyers tackling water pollution, significantly strengthening its enforcement capability as part of a drive to build a tougher regulatory culture.

The regulator has increased its water enforcement workforce almost fivefold – from 41 roles in 2023 to 195 by March 2026, with a further increase planned later in 2026. Water company environmental performance has continued to decline in recent years, and this has driven the need for stronger, more visible enforcement action.

This expanded team means the regulator can deliver swifter, tougher action against environmental harm - deterring illegal activity, and focusing efforts on achieving a cleaner water environment.

Enforcement officers investigate water companies for breaches of environmental law. A typical day might see them visiting facilities to inspect equipment, collecting water and soil samples for chemical analysis, and providing evidence to courts and legal teams to support prosecutions.

The EA has already delivered significant results, with over 10,000 planned water company inspections for the 2025/26 financial year complete, resulting in over 3000 individual improvement actions for water companies, including repairing sewage works and upgrading infrastructure. Water enforcement last year resulted in over £6.9 million in enforcement undertakings being paid by water companies after breaking environmental law and redirected into cleaning up our waterways.

This suite of enforcement activity and record levels of inspections has already led to improved performance from water companies with a 4% decrease in permit breaches this year following persistent underperformance across the sector.

This expansion is being backed by the largest budget for water enforcement and compliance ever - with a record £153 million this financial year to enable this increase. This includes funding through the introduction of a strengthened “polluter pays” approach, with water companies now covering the costs of enforcement, including investigations.

The Environment Agency’s Director for Water, Helen Wakeham, said:

With more specialists and enforcement teams on the ground, the Environment Agency has more resources than ever to protect our waterways from pollution.

Our teams will use a wide range of actions to hold water companies to account — from formal notices to civil penalties and prosecution.

Enforcement is only one tool in our compliance toolbox. Our goal is to identify and address the root causes of pollution and work with water companies to prevent it from occurring in the first place.

Water Minister Emma Hardy said:

These extra officers and inspectors, hired under this government, are already out on the ground carrying out thousands of checks on water companies, helping to protect our rivers, lakes and seas and restore public confidence in the system.

This workforce will be integral in holding water companies to account, and delivering strengthened enforcement powers including new, automatic and tougher penalties for water companies.

This increase in workforce forms part of the EA's transformation of its enforcement approach, with increased funding enabling additional dedicated water industry teams, stronger powers through the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, and a clear strategy to tackle the root causes of environmental harm.

The Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 has already brought in new powers to tackle poor performance, including cost recovery for enforcement and prison sanctions for obstruction. Further provisions to the act will follow, including new civil penalties such as automatic penalties, statutory Pollution Incident Reduction Plans and accelerated monitoring of all sewage overflows.

As part of our commitment to transparency, we are also publishing all of our Water Industry Compliance Assessment Report (CAR) forms online, giving the public greater visibility of how compliance is assessed and enforcement decisions are informed.

This builds on the government's recent launch of the Water White Paper, a once-in-a-generation plan to overhaul the water system, delivering tougher oversight and stronger accountability for water companies.

Notes to Editors:

- The three highest enforcement undertakings were given to:
 - Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust (£600,000)
 - Severn Rivers Trust (£550,000)
 - Mersey Rivers Trust (£517,000).

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/largest-ever-enforcement-workforce-protecting-waterways-from-pollution>