

United Utilities guilty plea to action that led to fish deaths

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Following an Environment Agency investigation, United Utilities pleaded guilty to introducing thousands of fish into Bessy Brook, near Bolton, without a permit.

United Utilities Water Limited pleaded guilty to the offence of failing to obtain a permit to release fish into inland waters. Consequently, it has been fined £60,000, plus a £2,000 victim surcharge and £24,098.06 in costs for the offence.

The sentence marks a regulatory milestone as the first time a water company has been sentenced under The Keeping and Introduction of Fish (England and River Esk Catchment Area) Regulations 2015.

Reservoir fish let loose during valve test

While conducting a scour valve test on High Rid Reservoir, United Utilities released over 30,000 fish. This stranded them in the too small and unsuitable environment of Bessy Brook, with fatal consequences for over 16,000 fish. The water company quickly brought in a contractor to rescue the fish and about 18,000 fish were returned to High Rid Reservoir.

Scour valves are essential components in pressurised water systems like reservoirs, and it is important they are maintained and tested regularly. However, the high-speed discharge killed or injured many of the fish, with some bodies found embedded in bridge walls approximately two feet above the water's surface. Others had missing scales and protruding organs.

Reports of dead fish

Environment Agency officers attended Bessy Brook on 13 December 2024, after receiving reports of dead fish in the area. Photographic and video evidence as well as water samples were taken and used to establish there were no pollutants in Bessy Brook. United Utilities Water Limited said it believed a large school of roach may have entered the scour pipework in response to threat from birds looking to feed

The court heard in mitigation the steps that United Utilities Water Limited had taken to prevent this from happening again and confirmed that a subsequent scour valve test had been successfully completed. They also explained a voluntary donation of £500,000 had been given to Groundwork Greater Manchester for proposed work to Middle Brook Restoration.

However, the Environment Agency said the water company did not have a permit to introduce fish in such numbers to the downstream watercourse. The introduction of 34,000 fish met the criteria for 'Category 2' harm, meaning there was a 'significant adverse impact on animal health'.

Robust enforcement action

Andy Brown, the Environment Agency's water industry regulation manager for the North West, said:

With this regulatory first, we are letting water companies know they must abide by all legislative requirements.

The Environment Agency expects full compliance from water companies and are committed to taking robust enforcement action when we see breaches like this.

United Utilities Water Limited has now paid the price for failing to obtain all relevant permits, while our hard-working officers will continue to do all they can to prevent future harm to the environment.

Water Minister Emma Hardy said:

This incident by United Utilities is shocking and should never have happened in the first place. The company has to be held responsible for its actions and this £60,000 fine does exactly that.

Our reforms will create a new stronger regulator for the industry, with powers to do MOT-style checks on water assets, preventing failures like these from happening.

This sentencing comes as the Environment Agency continues to hold water companies to account to protect people, wildlife and Britain's precious ecosystems. The environmental regulator has completed 10,000 water company inspections this year, resulting in thousands of improvement actions and upgrades to infrastructure.

If members of the public see dead fish, signs of fish in distress or evidence of water pollution they should report it to the Environment Agency's incident hotline immediately on 0800 807060.

Background

- Since 2015 the Environment Agency has concluded 69 prosecutions against water and sewerage companies securing fines of over £153 million.
- 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. 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.
- The Environment Agency has already delivered significant results, with over 8,000 of the 10,000 planned water company inspections for the 2025/26 financial year now complete, resulting in over 4,700 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.

Charge

On 12 December 2024 United Utilities Water Ltd introduced fish, namely roach, into inland waters, namely Bessy Brook, from the High Rid Reservoir, Horwich, Greater Manchester, otherwise than under and in accordance with the terms of a permit this being an offence pursuant to Regulation

4(a) of the Keeping and Introduction of Fish (England and River Esk Catchment Area) Regulations 2015.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/united-utilities-guilty-plea-to-action-that-led-to-fish-deaths>