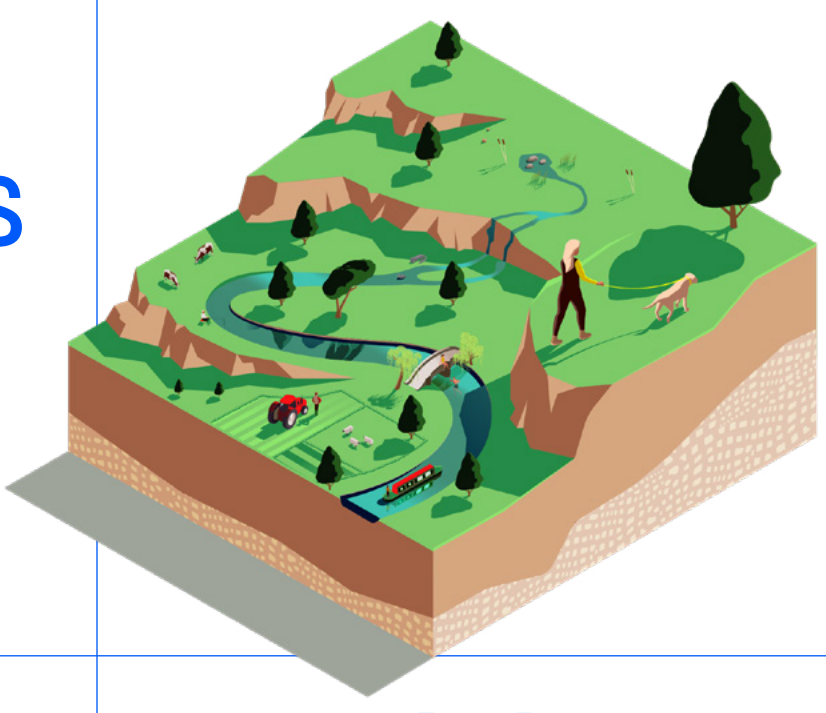
FACTSHEET

CUTTING THROUGH CONFUSION ON:

THE HEALTH OF OUR RIVERS

For much of the past 100 years our rivers have been in a state of crisis. Until the 1990s[1], sewage and other pollutants caused the numbers of invertebrates, fish and mammals to plummet. In recent decades water quality has greatly improved but the water industry and other sectors still face considerable challenges to ensure the health of our rivers meets the expectations of 21st century users.



£30 BN

investment in the environment by the water industry in the last 30 years [2]

90%

reduction in serious pollution incidents in last 30 years [3]

UP TO 70%

cuts to pollutants like ammonia, phosphorus, and organic pollutants since the 1990s [4]

SEALS & OTTERS

species that have returned to their former habitats in recent decades

EXPLAINER

UNDERSTANDING 'ECOLOGICAL STATUS'

Rivers in the UK are regularly tested by the Environment Agency and rated for water quality and pollution. The aim is to achieve 'good ecological status': a rating that suggests they are as close to their natural state as possible. However, only 14% of rivers currently achieve this, despite the Government's objective that 75% will do so by 2027. [5]

MISCONCEPTION

Water companies are solely responsible for rivers not achieving good ecological status.

REALITY

24% of reasons for rivers in England not achieving good ecological status are caused by the water industry. This compares to 36% caused by agriculture and rural management and 11% caused by urban development and transport. [6]

£5BN

CONFIRMED INVESTMENT BY WATER COMPANIES TO IMPROVE THE WATER ENVIRONMENT OVER THE NEXT FIVE YEARS. [7]

The Water Industry National Environment Programme (WINEP) contains 11,000 detailed actions that water companies are obliged to deliver in order to improve the environment. [8]

CHALLENGES

CROSS-SECTOR RESPONSIBILITY

Improving the health of our rivers requires collaboration from multiple stakeholders. But in other sectors there are few similar credible plans to those of the water industry. Without coordinated action across all sectors it's difficult to see how sustainable improvements can be made to river health.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change will create new challenges for river health. It will affect river flows, increase the concentration of pollutants and increase the growth of algae. [9]

MAKING INVESTMENT WORK

Since 2009 huge investment has failed to increase the 14% of rivers rated 'good'. Effectively targeting investment will be key to generating sustainable improvements in river health.

MEETING EXPECTATIONS

As water quality has improved, the public's expectation of what they want from our rivers has increased. More people now use rivers for swimming and other leisure activities than ever before, and they rightly want to know the water is as safe as possible. [10]

SOLUTIONS

A NEW DEAL FOR OUR RIVERS

Water UK is asking everyone – from river users to other industry sectors – to support a new approach to river health:

NATIONAL PLAN

We want to see a jointly-owned national plan developed for rivers that includes new mechanisms for accountability, legal protection and local empowerment.

NEW TOOLS

We want to see all rivers subject to timely, accurate, multi-source data on ecology, chemistry, public health and aesthetics.

EARLY CHANGES

We want to see swift action taken to tackle abstraction, storm overflows and bathing rivers.

(6) Source: The Environment Agency Catchment Data Explorer, September 2021
(7) Source: Storm Overflows Factsheet, Water UK, 2022
(8) Source: https://www.ofwat.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Wessex-Water-OBER-Final-Report-2021.pdf
(9) Source: UK Climate Risk Independent Assessment [CCRA3]
(10) Source: Watersports Participation Survey, Environment Agency Rod License Sales