



Clean rivers for people and wildlife

Resolution Shortlist Briefing Notes



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Water quality in our rivers is shameful. Legally, designated bathing waters must be regularly monitored for pollution. The NFWI urges its members, the wider public, local authorities and Government to make, support and promote applications for official designated bathing sites on appropriate stretches of rivers in their area. This will be as instrumental to the clean up of rivers as it has been for water quality improvement at coastal beaches.

Proposer's position

The proposer wants the WI to work with local and national authorities as well as the public to make parts of any river into officially designated Bathing Waters as a way of improving water quality.

The scale of the problem

Sewage is spilled into rivers as storm overflow. This is a mechanism to prevent capacity issues in sewage treatment systems, which can happen with high rainfall.

Intensive livestock and poultry farming also contributes to river pollution in some areas through farm waste making its way into the water, raising nutrient levels.

In January 2022 the Environmental Audit Committee found that in England “A ‘chemical cocktail’ of sewage, agricultural waste, and plastic is polluting the waters of many of the country’s rivers” and called for “far more assertive regulation and enforcement from Ofwat and the Environment Agency”.

Ofwat regulates the water sector in England and Wales. The Environment Agency works in England to protect and improve the environment, and focuses on water quality and resources as well as conservation and ecology.

In March 2022, the Climate Change, Environment, and Infrastructure Committee in the Senedd found similar conditions in Wales.

The Environment Agency said that “the two main polluters, the water and farming sectors, are not yet doing enough to protect and enhance the environment.”

The report suggested water companies in England should designate a stretch of each river to gain status as a bathing water by 2025 as a way to drive the clean-up of rivers.

In 2018, DEFRA introduced Farming Rules for Water to prevent manure entering water courses. The government is due to set out a comprehensive approach to improving water quality in an update of the 25 Year Environment Plan in January 2023.

In August 2022, the Government published a plan to tackle storm overflow. It requires water companies to improve storm overflows discharging into or near every designated bathing water; and improve 75% of overflows discharging to high priority nature sites, by 2035. By 2050, this will apply to all remaining storm overflows covered. The plan was criticised for being weak and insufficiently ambitious, as well as likely to increase water bills for consumers. The River Trust said the plan “reflects far too little, too late”.

In October 2022, the Government proposed to significantly increase civil penalties for water companies causing pollution in England.

The Welsh Government has previously said it will invest £40m over the next three years to tackle river pollution.

The current situation

The UK has over 600 designated Bathing Waters – sites that are popular for swimming and paddling and have been designated under the Bathing Water Regulations 2013.

The Regulations were put in place thanks to the EU Bathing Waters Directive that was first introduced in 1976. UK designated Bathing Waters are mostly coastal, with 16 lakes and two rivers.

Water Quality standards have been set for Bathing Waters based on World Health Organisation research into the incidence of stomach upsets in people bathing in waters with different levels of bacteria. Water is tested for two types of bacteria, E. coli and intestinal enterococci. These bacteria usually get into water from sewage and animal manure. Tests are carried out regularly, by government environmental agencies between May and September in England and Wales.

Bathing Waters are categorised as ‘excellent’, ‘good’, ‘sufficient’ or ‘poor’ on the basis of bacteria levels. Sites are rated annually, and on a short term basis in response to temporary pollution. By law, the local council must display information about water quality and pollution sources during the bathing season. If there is a temporary pollution incident they must explain the nature of the problem and how long it’s likely to last.

Designated Bathing Waters are the only places in the UK where bacteria levels in open water are monitored and the data published.

The Outdoor Swimming Society state that bathing water designations have been ‘hugely important’ in helping to clean up popular swimming spots particularly as a result of detailed monitoring and targets being set for improvements.

There is increased public interest in applying for designated bathing water status for stretches of rivers used for bathing. The Environment Agency has welcomed this interest but stressed that funding would be needed to enable proper water monitoring.

Gaining bathing water status requires joint working from swimming groups, community groups and local authorities, as well as data gathering, for example counting the number of bathers using a stretch of river over the summer.

In September 2022, Surfers Against Sewage launched a campaign to support community groups to apply for bathing water status for their local bathing areas. They are also calling for water quality testing regime, better legislation and more funding to regulators.

Points to consider

- The WI holds past mandates on the issue of water pollution and river quality, so this resolution could bring a new angle to this past work.
- Many organisations are already campaigning on this issue and the Government has taken action in the past months. This is an issue that has received significant and sustained media attention over the last two years.
- The focus of the resolution is narrow. Would a campaign on this topic benefit from a wider focus to improve river water quality?

How could the WI work on this issue if it was passed?

A full campaign would be developed by the NFWI if the resolution is passed, taking into account developments since then. To help inform your discussions, here are some ways the WI could consider working on this issue.

At local and regional levels, WIs and federations can work with local authorities and communities to support or start new applications for bathing waters in suitable areas.

WIs could learn more about the issue and hold educational events to raise awareness in their local areas.

Nationally, the NFWI could form partnerships with expert organisations to raise awareness and promote education on a national scale. The NFWI could support existing campaigns to promote bathing status in rivers.

Further information

Surfers against Sewage

sas.org.uk/water-quality/

The Rivers Trust

theriverstrust.org

House of Lords Library - Sewage pollution in England's waters

lordslibrary.parliament.uk/sewage-pollution-in-englands-waters/

Video content

BBC News: No English river is free from pollution, report finds

[youtube.com/watch?v=ppsTQml-rJk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ppsTQml-rJk)

Public Affairs Department Contacts

If you have any questions about the resolutions or the resolutions process then please get in touch with the NFWI Public Affairs department.

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