

Press release: Man sentenced for assaulting Environment Agency officer

A Northumberland man has been ordered to pay almost £4,000 after assaulting an Environment Agency officer investigating a pollution incident and threatening to burn down his house.

John Aaron Laing, 54, of East Learmouth Farm in Cornhill-on-Tweed had pleaded not guilty to assault, threatening and abusive behaviour and obstructing an Environment Agency officer in the execution of his duty.

He was found guilty of all offences following a trial which concluded at Berwick Magistrates' Court on Tuesday 2 October.

He was fined £1,246 for assault and threatening behaviour, ordered to pay £250 compensation to the Environment Agency officer he assaulted, and £2,400 costs. He was also given a 12-month conditional discharge for obstruction.

Prosecuting for the Environment Agency, Chris Bunting told the court that on Saturday 6 January this year two Environment Agency officers attended a suspected pollution incident at Cornhill-on-Tweed.

After taking water samples they then drove to New Heaton Farm, owned by Laing, to further investigate and requested a staff member to stop land spreading activities while they were making enquiries, which was agreed.

The two Environment Agency officers then started to take samples from a surface water ditch on the land. One of them went back to the car to collect some equipment, and at this point Laing arrived on site.

He walked up to and into the Environment Agency officer, was very hostile and threatening, continuously bumping into his chest. The officer explained they were investigating a pollution incident. Laing demanded to know who had reported him and the officer replied that he didn't know.

Threats to burn down house

Laing then said he would "finish" the officer, find out where he lived, burn his house down and kill his family. He kept walking into the officer as they walked towards the road, and raising his hand as if he was going to punch him, and kept inviting the officer to strike him first.

The officer said he was calling the police, and then received a phone call from another Environment Agency officer who overheard Laing's threatening behaviour. Laing then left the area and the officers left the farm.

During a police interview, Laing agreed he had spoken to the officer, disputed there was any pollution problem and asked the officer to leave only for health and safety reasons because of cattle on the farm. Laing accepted he had been stern but said the officer started pointing and trying to provoke

him.

Laing added there was no violence or threatening behaviour and that the officer hadn't shown him any identification, denying all the allegations put to him. He said he had mentioned the officer's house but with reference to how he would like it if he turned up uninvited and walked over his garden.

During the trial, Laing repeated these claims and said that the officer had made up his account. However, the court rejected Laing's version of events, stating that it contained significant contradictions.

Behaviour 'will not be tolerated'

Paul Whitehill, Enforcement Team leader for the Environment Agency in the North East, said:

Our officers are doing an important job to protect the environment and investigate anything which impacts on the quality of our rivers and they shouldn't have to put up with any kind of abusive or threatening behaviour during the course of their work.

The officers were taking water quality samples after reports that a watercourse was impacted by slurry pollution and this is all part of enquiries to establish a potential source for the pollution so it can be stopped and prevented in future.

The safety of our officers is paramount and we will always take action against people who assault them or are threatening and abusive. Hopefully this sends out a message to others that it will not be tolerated.