

Press release: Water companies need to do more to protect the environment, report shows

Although there has been a gradual improving trend in environmental performance over recent years, the industry is not doing enough to reduce serious pollution incidents and comply with permits. Last year saw a rise in the most serious pollution incidents, with 'Category 1' incidents at 11. Previous reductions in serious (Category 1 and 2) incidents have also plateaued continuing at around one incident per week.

[The Water and Sewerage Companies' Environmental Performance Report](#) rates how well the big nine water and sewage companies (operating mainly or wholly in England) managed their impact on the environment in 2017. This is done across a wide range of measures – including pollution, managing sewage and complying with permits – and also compares individual company performance.

For the third year running, United Utilities and Wessex Water were the top performing water companies, and now Severn Trent Water has joined them. These companies received the top 4 star rating.

While the majority of companies delivered a 'good' or 'leading' performance, there are some poorer performers – the report reveals an urgent need by South West Water and Northumbrian Water to improve their performance which has seen them rated lowest this year. South West Water are the worst performer on pollution incidents and Northumbrian Water on permit compliance.

This comes in the face of record fines for the sector – in total more than £21million were issued as a result of 16 successful prosecutions by the Environment Agency. This has been driven by changes in Sentencing Guidelines. Earlier in the year, Emma Howard Boyd, Chair of the Environment Agency, called for fines for the most serious pollution incidents to be proportionate to the turnover of water companies.

Despite some good performances, the report demands far greater progress in 2018 and subsequent years. The Environment Agency has recently set out a more ambitious programme of environmental improvements which water companies will have to make between 2020 and 2025 – totalling £5billion of investment.

Toby Willison, Executive Director of Operations for the Environment Agency, said:

The leading companies in this report show that reducing their environmental impact can be done, so we look to companies to share good practice and improve quickly. But one serious pollution incident is one too many. We will always work closely with companies who want to do the right thing but we will take action

against those who don't.

Over the last 30 years there has been a significant improvement in water quality and this has happened not only thanks to the industry's massive investment but also the Environment Agency's strong regulatory role

The environment will benefit from a further £5billion of investment from the water sector by 2025. We expect to see a clear and continued focus on environmental performance in the next round of water company business plans to be submitted in the autumn.

The report concludes with a reminder about the pressures on water quality and supply – with a growing population and climate pressures on the water environment, and increased public and legal expectation, water companies need to further rise to the challenge and improve promptly. The Environment Agency will work with and regulate the companies to help achieve a better environment.