

Webinar: Why do laboratories get it wrong?

News story

Michael Walker will talk in detail about the process involved in the resolution of technical disputes in the UK official food control system after an introduction by Julian Braybrook



During this first webinar in June 2020, which will take place instead of the Government Chemist conference, [now postponed until June 2021](#), [Dr Michael Walker](#), Head of the Office of the Government Chemist and Referee Analyst, will discuss common issues leading to appeals for referee analysis.

The webinar will start with an introduction by [Dr Julian Braybrook](#) on the role of the Government Chemist. Dr Michael Walker will describe the technical appeal safeguard and the control system in the often complex cases where appeal has been invoked. Michael will reflect on lessons on why labs can produce discordant results in many areas including food allergens, contaminants, choking hazards, food additives, veterinary and pesticides residues and GMOs.

The webinar will take place live on 24 June at 15.00 (UK time) and there will be opportunity for questions.

Registration is free, [register here](#) to get your event link.

For more information about the work the Government Chemist does contact:

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Fish rescued as Shropshire rivers dry up

Yesterday, officers were out on the Teme at Lower Stange and on the River Redlake at Bucknell, rescuing more than 60 brown trout and one salmon. Officers were also out on the Teme last week rescuing trout and salmon. All of the fish caught have been moved downstream to deeper waters.

It is an area prone to drying up when there has been little rain. Fish have been moved downstream and once the water comes back they will steadily flow back up and repopulate again. With May being the driest since records began, it is no surprise that Environment Agency specialists had to move fish downstream.

This section of the River Redlake at Bucknall has completely dried out

Dave Carrington, fisheries officer with the Environment Agency said:

In recent years we've had to regularly rescue fish on these rivers as they've been left stranded when the river dries up after a dry spell. We will continue to monitor these rivers as sections of them are likely to continue to dry up and will carry out further fish rescues if needed.

Fisheries technical specialist with the Environment Agency, Chris Bainger, also commented on the low numbers of juvenile salmon found during these rescues:

This may be an indication of the effects of recent flooding. The lack of juveniles is a real concern, as salmon stocks are already at a critically low level in the Severn catchment. If the juveniles are not present this indicates either a failure of adult spawning or the obliteration of the redds (nests) last winter, that will impact on the numbers of returning adults in 4 and 5 years' time.

With the long dry spell continuing, figures show that in the Severn Basin, in February, rainfall was nearly 3 times the average, while in May it was only 11 per cent of the average for the month. With demand for clean water currently outstripping supply, consumers are being asked to use water wisely, for example, by not using sprinklers or hoses to water gardens, and to take showers rather than baths.

The work was all carried out adhering to current guidelines on social distancing.

Warm weather can often lead to algal blooms or water that is too warm which make it difficult for fish to breathe. They are often seen gasping for air; if anyone sees fish in distress, please contact the Environment Agency 24/7 on 0800 80 70 60.

Notes to editors

The role of the Environment Agency during a dry spell is to monitor and protect the environment, whilst balancing the needs of people, industry and agriculture.

During dry spells it's not unusual for some rivers and lakes in fast responding catchments to deplete quickly, during even short periods of low rainfall, and they tend to recover quickly when the rain returns.

There are currently no water use restrictions in place for local water company customers. And groundwater resources are normal for the time or year.

Like most years, we're releasing water from the Shropshire Groundwater Scheme and Clywedog Reservoir into the River Severn. The River Severn forms part of a large water supply system for the West Midlands. Around 6 million people rely upon the river for their drinking water as well as providing water for local businesses.

We're closely monitoring all rivers across the area, as is usual in warm dry weather, there are already abstraction restrictions in place. Further restrictions will be issued when necessary. These are issued when the river is too low to sustain the number of abstractions and protect the environment.

[Trustee of Aylesbury poverty relief charity disqualified after stealing over £200,000](#)

Buckinghamshire based charity, GTC ([charity 1160421](#)), has been removed from the register of charities, and its sole trustee has been disqualified from charity trusteeship. The Charity Commission [reports today](#) on its statutory inquiry into GTC, which found that around £240,000 was stolen by the trustee.

The regulator [launched its probe](#) into GTC in December 2018 over concerns about the charity's governance and financial management. The charity's purpose was to relieve poverty in the UK, mainly in the area around Aylesbury.

Investigators used legal powers to obtain bank records and established that around £240,000 (the majority of which had been mistakenly paid to the

charity by a third party) was transferred from the charity's bank account to the trustee's private bank account. The funds had then been used to purchase a property which was held in the name of a private company of which the same individual was the sole director and the sole shareholder. The funds have now been repaid to the third party.

The inquiry also found poor governance at the charity which was operating in breach of its governing document. It had just one trustee in the years leading up to the inquiry meaning there were no other trustees to oversee and assist in decision-making processes or to appropriately manage conflicts of interest.

The Commission was also concerned by delays, gaps and a lack of clarity in the charity's annual accounts submitted to the regulator, some of which were not compliant with the charity accounting framework. The individual also failed to comply with a direction under the Charities Act which required him to attend a meeting and provide information to the Commission.

The inquiry concluded that these failings amounted to misconduct and/or mismanagement in the administration of the charity.

The regulator used its powers to share information with other agencies, and on 31 October 2019, the trustee, Mr Ahtiq Raja, was found guilty of theft at Northampton Crown Court and was later sentenced to a 24-month community order. As a result of his conviction, he is now automatically disqualified from acting as a trustee or from holding a senior management role in any charity in England and Wales.

The charity no longer operates and was removed from the register of charities on 9 April 2020.

Amy Spiller, Head of Investigation Teams at the Charity Commission said:

Charity represents the best of human characteristics – that's why the behaviour of charities matter. This charity was set up to improve the lives of people suffering financial hardship, but sadly this individual betrayed those good intentions.

Our investigation uncovered appalling behaviour by someone who was in a position of trust, and it is right that they have been held to account for their actions. This case also exposed what can go wrong when there is a lack of oversight and poor governance within a charity.

The full report is available on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk).

Ends.

Note to editors:

The Charity Commission's purpose is to ensure charity can thrive and inspire trust so that people can improve lives and strengthen society. It is the independent, non-ministerial government department that registers and regulates charities in England and Wales.

Highways England starts search to find archaeological specialists for A303 upgrade near Stonehenge

Following the selection of three bidders for the main works procurement, today marks the start of a four-month process to select a world class team of archaeological experts to undertake work, should planning consent be granted.

Highways England Project Director Derek Parody said:

The World Heritage Site around Stonehenge is a heritage site of national and international importance. We want to ensure that archaeological remains are preserved and recorded, in advance of scheme construction, by commissioning appropriate archaeological expertise.

Throughout this project we have been working closely with the country's heritage bodies and a Scientific Committee of eminent archaeological experts to ensure the scheme will conserve and enhance the World Heritage Site, and this will continue throughout the archaeological investigations and the construction process.

The procurement process in no way pre-empts the granting of a Development Consent Order and while we await the Secretary of State's decision, we need to progress the procurement to ensure the project is in the best position it can be in to proceed at pace thereafter.

Highways England's proposed £1.7 billion upgrade of the A303 between Amesbury and Berwick Down includes:

- 8 miles of free-flowing, high-quality dual carriageway
- a twin-bore tunnel 2 miles long underneath the World Heritage Site, closely following the existing A303 route, avoiding important archaeological sites, and avoiding intrusion on the view of the setting sun from the stones during the winter solstice

- a new bypass to the north of the village of Winterbourne Stoke, with a viaduct over the River Till valley
- new junctions with the A345 and A360 either side of the World Heritage Site

The scheme will unlock congestion along this vital A303 route, conserve and enhance the Outstanding Universal Value of the World Heritage Site and benefit the local and regional economy by providing skills and job opportunities for businesses large and small.

The process launched today relates to a £35 million contract. It will involve documentation, site works, processing, laboratory work, reporting and dissemination, as well as archaeological evaluation and recording.

In the meantime, Highways England, the company responsible for the country's major A roads and motorways, is progressing the procurement process for the main works contract and is participating in dialogue with the three bidders over a six-month period before they submit their final tenders. The preferred bidder is expected to be announced in 2021.

Following a six-month Development Consent Order Examination last year, the Planning Inspectorate sent its report and recommendation to the Secretary of State for Transport and this will be published once a decision has been made.

The Transport Secretary recently announced a new deadline of 17 July for DCO decisions on Highways England's A303 Stonehenge, A303 Sparkford to Ilchester and A63 Castle Street projects.

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.

[Coronavirus: Environment Agency update](#)

We are aware communities, businesses and the environment rely on our services. This includes the advice and guidance we offer, our regulatory work which continues to protect the environment, people and wildlife from harm, managing the risks of flooding and coastal erosion, and other roles.

We will continue to review the situation in light of further advice from the government and will update you accordingly. In the meantime, we remind you to

check the government's guidance at www.gov.uk/coronavirus.

Our staff

We remain fully operational, with the majority of our staff working from home. Our remaining frontline teams will be active, where necessary, on the ground tackling priority issues such as flood risk and pollution. All staff, wherever they are working, are following PHE guidance to reduce their risk of either transmitting or contracting coronavirus.

Maintaining, operating and repairing our assets is essential to ensure they work when required. Our work will continue where it remains safe to do so and activities comply with PHE advice.

We are also ensuring our contractors are aware of site and people restrictions and are following the correct procedures.

Offices

The Environment Agency closed most of its offices in March 2020. We continue to reopen our offices at a reduced capacity, in line with our health and safety plans.

To check the status of your local office contact enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk

Our flood defence work

Our flood defence work continues in line with PHE guidance and where it is safe. We are ready to respond to flooding. During coronavirus we continue to maintain and operate our flood and coastal defences to ensure they protect people and property from flooding. We're also maintaining our assets that support public water supply, industry, infrastructure, food production and the environment.

Where work continues, we have ensured that everyone involved has been trained on social distancing and will not put anyone at risk. If the work cannot be done safely, the work will stop.

We are also still carrying out inspections and repairs to flood defences damaged by spring storms. We are prioritising our work that has the most impact in terms of protecting lives and livelihoods, including prioritising the most at-risk communities so they can remain resilient. If repairs to major infrastructure assets are disrupted by the impact of coronavirus, we will where possible put in place temporary mitigation for the risk, pending a full repair.

All our work is impacted by the controls we and government have put in place. This is likely to mean that completion dates for new projects will slip and other key activities may take place at less regular intervals. We are keeping communities informed of any delays and the action that we are taking to minimise them.

Flood warning service

Continuing to protect lives and livelihoods through our flood warning service remains fundamental to our work as the nation continues to deal with the effects of coronavirus. In order to protect our flood warning service during this difficult time, we have made some minor changes to the service.

In order to safeguard this essential service we will be focussing on the most important warnings, where flooding is expected or where there is a risk to life. We will continue to issue our lowest level of flood warnings – flood alerts – where there is a need to take action but will temporarily stop issuing them where they indicate that there is a very low likelihood of flooding taking place. Our teams will continue to work around the clock to ensure that people have the early warning and safety advice they need to stay safe.

Our regulatory role

Our frontline staff have returned to near normal regulatory work, such as compliance and enforcement.

Physical inspections remain a key part of regulation, but we also gather intelligence remotely, analyse data and assess performance. Used together, these activities provide us with a comprehensive picture from which we can assess regulatory compliance.

We have clearly set out our [approach to regulation and enforcement](#) during the coronavirus outbreak, and have published a series of temporary [regulatory position statements \(RPSs\)](#).

RPSs are nationally-applicable public statements that, provided certain circumstances and conditions are met, allow specified activity to be carried out without complying with a particular regulatory requirement. RPSs allow a degree of flexibility while still ensuring regulatory standards are maintained to protect people and the environment. They include clear conditions regarding standards that must be adhered to.

We have recently reviewed the ongoing need for the remaining COVID-19 RPSs. Some have been extended or replaced with new RPSs and some have now expired. Anyone using a COVID-19 RPS is responsible for [checking their status](#).

We will continue to review the need for RPSs over the autumn and winter and will consider reinstating previously expired RPSs should the need arise.

Across the country, our teams continue to undertake investigations into environmental offending and prepare legal cases. We will consider the appropriate regulatory response to any unavoidable non-compliance in accordance with our [policies and guidance on regulation and enforcement](#).

Coronavirus is not an excuse to operate illegally. We make clear in our approach to regulation and enforcement during the coronavirus that we expect operators to take all reasonable steps to comply with regulatory requirements using contingency plans to help them comply.

We're also continuing to work with the police to share intelligence about criminal activity and take action against those breaking the law.

We absolutely recognise the added financial strain coronavirus is putting on businesses and have written to all our customers to invite them to contact us to discuss payment options if they experience difficulties.

Applying for a permit

Permitting remains a business critical activity. We have robust plans in place which will enable us to respond to any capacity or workload issues emerging from either the pandemic or the UK's exit from the EU. For example, we have retained access to additional permitting capacity should it be required.

Overall Permitting Service performance has continued to improve and stabilise since September and the amount of work in our queues is now at typical levels for our service.

Our priority is to sustain our improved performance and implement improvements to our processes that result in quicker determinations of permits in 2021.

Bathing water sampling

The Environment Agency has resumed sampling at designated bathing waters in July following government advice on easing lockdown restrictions.

Routine bathing water sampling was suspended before the start of the 2020 bathing season as the Environment Agency followed government guidelines to reduce the spread of coronavirus.

Throughout lockdown, regulatory work has continued to maintain the quality of bathing waters, which remains of a high standard in England.

The latest classifications for all designated bathing waters in England can be found [on our water quality website](#).

Our daily pollution risk forecasting service, which is the best way for bathers to get the latest information on water quality, has been providing updates throughout lockdown. This year the system has been upgraded to provide even more accurate forecasts of when a temporary reduction in water quality is likely. For information on pollution risk forecasts and warnings [visit our website](#).

Angling and our fisheries

In line with government guidance, the Environment Agency had to pause a number of non-critical field based fisheries activities such as improving habitats for fish, facilities for anglers and restocking. Following the further easing of lockdown restrictions, we have restarted this field based fisheries work, including fisheries enforcement, to help protect and maintain fisheries and the environment.

We continue to prioritise our response to reported incidents of harm to the environment, subject to local conditions. Illegal fishing, pollution and incidents that harm the environment should be reported to our 24-hour hotline on 0800 80 70 60.

Our waterways

All navigation on our waterways should be limited to essential travel only. Travel on waterways and overnight stays are only permitted where the boat is your permanent residence or it is necessary for work, education or similar reasons. Those who live aboard their boats should limit their travel to access essential services and facilities. You should stay local where possible.

We will continue to support this national effort through these challenging times and will, as always, make protecting the safety of our customers and staff our top priority. Our staff will continue to work, managing and maintaining our waterways within the safe ways of working we have implemented over the past year. This may include some asset closures for maintenance. Our level of service may also be affected due to some staff who are vulnerable and need to shield. This means some tasks may not be carried out, including assisted passage at some locks, however wherever possible we will maintain essential services and facilities for those boaters who live aboard and who have to make essential journeys.

As in previous lockdowns, some activities using unpowered boats are permitted as part of your daily exercise, limited to once a day and within the [Government guidance for exercise](#). Please check Government guidance and any specific guidance from national governing bodies, such as British Canoeing or British Rowing.

Water safety

As the government eases restrictions on movement caused by the coronavirus outbreak, the public has been warned to keep safe around rivers and canals. For advice about the dangers of wild swimming, follow guidance from police, [Public Health England](#), the [Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents](#), and the [Royal National Lifeboat Institution](#). Their messages are clear: vigilance can save lives, and water-related accidents can be avoided by knowing how to stay safe.

The Environment Agency, which manages many locks, weirs and bridges across England, wants people to remember the hazards under the water in rivers while spending time with friends and family. People should not to jump or dive into water and stay away from weirs, locks and pipes. There can be unseen hazards in the water, cold-water shock can affect even strong swimmers on warm days and social distancing must be continued to protect the public, staff and boaters. Keep a look out for boat traffic. Boaters, especially on larger vessels, can find it very hard to spot swimmers.

Restarting your private sewage treatment plant

We have provided guidance to a range of industry bodies covering hospitality businesses including pubs, restaurants, hotels, camping and caravan sites and theme parks confirming the need for private sewage treatment plants to be made ready to be used again following a period of shutdown or low flows.

It comes as many pubs and other hospitality businesses re-open.

Sewage treatment plants use living microorganisms in biological treatment processes to remove pollutants from sewage effluent before it is discharged into the environment. The sudden restart of a sewage treatment plant or an increase of flows into it following a relaxation of COVID-19 business shutdown rules will very likely result in the discharge of poor quality effluent unless steps are taken by operators of sewage treatment plants to prepare them for increased flows beforehand.

Environmental impacts must be minimised when operators restart their sewage treatment plants. Those who discharge poor quality effluent risk being in breach of their environmental permits or the General Binding Rules if their discharges cause pollution of surface water or groundwater.

Operators need to take steps to ensure that their treatment plant is able to operate effectively as flows into it increase after their businesses reopen.

Those unaccustomed to restarting, should seek technical advice and support from:

- whoever normally maintains their sewage treatment plant
- the manufacturer or supplier of their treatment plant
- a competent sewage treatment plant maintenance engineer

As well as ensuring that their sewage treatment plant is ready to receive increased flows, operators must also check that any pre-treatment equipment such as fats, oils and grease (FOG) traps are ready to be used again. Operators should also avoid sending excessive amounts of chemicals and cleaning products to their sewage treatment plant as they can inhibit and harm biological treatment processes. They should also ensure any contaminated drainage from washing and cleaning does not drain to surface water sewers, water courses or groundwater or cause pollution.

Operators of premises served by their own sewage treatment plant wanting to dispose of waste beer should find other means of disposal. They should seek further guidance from the British Beer and Pub Association and refer to the waste hierarchy which is available on GOV.UK.

Billing

The Environment Agency recognises that some customers will be particularly affected by the measures to restrict the impact of the virus. We will consider requests for payment plans if customers experience difficulties paying bills on time. Income from fees and charges ensures the Environment Agency can continue to provide an appropriate level of regulation and

services for our customers to ensure the environment and people are protected.

Customer contacts

During this pandemic the Environment Agency continues to protect people and the environment, working alongside our partners. Please report any pollution incidents on 0800 80 70 60 and stay #floodaware.

General enquiries

National Customer Contact Centre

Email: enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk

Telephone: 03708 506 506

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