# Pedigree sheep farmer takes legal action over East Midlands Airport pollution claims



A pedigree livestock farmer is preparing to take legal action against East Midlands Airport, alleging that leaked pollutants have devastated his sheep flock. David Thornley, who manages a breeding operation in Leicestershire, claims that 25 out of his 100 pedigree ewes suffered miscarriages after drinking contaminated water from Diseworth Brook. The alleged pollution, resulting from a leaking pipe, reportedly stemmed from the airport as it faced charges related to breaches of its environmental permits for discharges during 2022.

In April, East Midlands International Airport Ltd admitted guilt to charges related to releasing contaminated water following the heavy use of de-icing chemicals. These chemicals, which airports apply to ensure safe operations in winter, have been linked to severe ecological disruptions, including fostering the growth of harmful “sewage fungus” that suffocates aquatic life. However, the airport denies any direct connection between its activities and the bacterial pollution reported by Thornley.

Thornley stated that historically, losing 2-3% of pregnancies is typical in his line of work; however, in early 2022, he discovered that 25% of his ewes were no longer pregnant, prompting his investigation. Upon inspecting Diseworth Brook, he encountered a foul smell and discovered brownish sludge, which he attributes to sewage fungus. His concerns were substantiated when an independent lab revealed unsafe bacterial levels in water samples taken from the brook.

In response to these claims, the Environment Agency acted swiftly. Upon notification from Thornley, they dispatched personnel to conduct an assessment, confirming a “small leak” from the airport. The agency asserts that the pollutants found in Thornley’s sample were connected to sewage rather than de-icing chemicals, which the airport contends it does not discharge into surface waters. Yet, despite the admissions of guilt regarding permit breaches, the airport maintains that the specific pollutants linked to Thornley’s claims do not correlate with their de-icing products.

The repercussions of such pollution extend beyond the livestock industry. Members of the Derby Railway Angling Club have long observed detrimental changes in the River Trent, where the proliferation of sewage fungus has threatened rare fish populations. Former Environment Agency inspector Gary Cyster expressed frustration that the agency did not pursue additional charges against the airport, as evidence exists suggesting earlier discharges contributed to harmful conditions in the river.

Compounding these environmental concerns is the airport’s ongoing expansion, which poses further risks to local watercourses. Cyster urges for a modern treatment solution to mitigate these issues in light of the airport's increasing activities. He maintains that existing regulatory frameworks need to evolve — with recommendations for setting finite biological oxygen demand (BOD) limits for effluent discharges, a standard not currently applied to East Midlands Airport.

The airport claims to prioritise its environmental responsibilities and has indicated a willingness to cooperate with the Environment Agency. They have monitored their water drainage systems and have expressed concern for Thornley’s predicament, while also framing his accusations as inconsequential to the ongoing legal issues. However, Thornley is resolute, seeking compensation of £50,000 for the loss of his livestock. He also expresses a profound sense of betrayal by an institution he once trusted to maintain local ecological health. Despite the challenges, he has pledged to keep his livestock separated from the brook during the winter months to prevent further incidents, underscoring a deteriorating relationship with the airport over trust and accountability.

As the legal proceedings unfold, the case highlights acute tensions between agricultural livelihoods and expanding airport operations, raising critical questions about environmental stewardship, regulatory oversight, and the need for enhanced protective measures for local ecosystems in the face of development pressures.

**Reference Map**

1. Paragraph 1: [[1]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5yld5p1j1lo), [[2]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-leicestershire-68309215)
2. Paragraph 2: [[3]](https://www.airportwatch.org.uk/2024/02/east-midlands-airport-face-criminal-charges-for-river-trent-pollution/)
3. Paragraph 3: [[1]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5yld5p1j1lo), [[7]](https://fishlegal.net/2022/05/11/angling-club-anger-over-environment-agency-indifference/)
4. Paragraph 4: [[2]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-leicestershire-68309215), [[4]](https://pubs.acs.org/doi/full/10.1021/acs.est.3c03417)
5. Paragraph 5: [[3]](https://www.airportwatch.org.uk/2024/02/east-midlands-airport-face-criminal-charges-for-river-trent-pollution/), [[7]](https://fishlegal.net/2022/05/11/angling-club-anger-over-environment-agency-indifference/)
6. Paragraph 6: [[2]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-leicestershire-68309215), [[5]](https://www.usgs.gov/news/state-news-release/popular-ice-control-products-used-airports-can-increase-phosphorus-nearby)
7. Paragraph 7: [[6]](https://www.army.mil/article/162331/de_icing_impacts_local_water_quality)
8. Paragraph 8: [[1]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5yld5p1j1lo), [[4]](https://pubs.acs.org/doi/full/10.1021/acs.est.3c03417)
9. Paragraph 9: [[1]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5yld5p1j1lo), [[3]](https://www.airportwatch.org.uk/2024/02/east-midlands-airport-face-criminal-charges-for-river-trent-pollution/)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5yld5p1j1lo> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-leicestershire-68309215> - East Midlands Airport is facing multiple criminal charges from the Environment Agency for allegedly polluting the River Trent and Diseworth Brook with de-icing chemicals used on aircraft and runways. The charges relate to permit breaches and discharges of contaminated site drainage that took place in 2021 and 2022. The airport has a permit to release wastewater but is accused of causing sewage fungus outbreaks, leading to a trial scheduled for May 2025.
3. <https://www.airportwatch.org.uk/2024/02/east-midlands-airport-face-criminal-charges-for-river-trent-pollution/> - East Midlands Airport Ltd is facing multiple criminal charges from the Environment Agency for pollution entering the river system surrounding the airport. The prosecution follows a campaign by the Derby Railway Angling Club, highlighting chronic pollution of the Diseworth Brook and River Trent linked to de-icer discharges. The charges relate to permit breaches and discharges of contaminated site drainage that took place in 2021 and 2022.
4. <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/full/10.1021/acs.est.3c03417> - A study published in Environmental Science & Technology examines the contribution of airport de-icing products to phosphorus loading in receiving waters. The research found that airport ice control products were present in 84% of water samples collected downstream during deicing events, with phosphorus concentrations exceeding aquatic life benchmarks in 70% of samples. This suggests that airport de-icing products could represent a previously unrecognized source of phosphorus to adjacent waterways.
5. <https://www.usgs.gov/news/state-news-release/popular-ice-control-products-used-airports-can-increase-phosphorus-nearby> - A U.S. Geological Survey study found that nine of eleven ice control product formulations used at airports contained phosphorus. During deicing periods, 84% of samples collected downstream of the airport had phosphorus likely traced to ice control products, with 70% exceeding aquatic life guidelines. This indicates that airport de-icing products can increase phosphorus levels in nearby waterways, potentially harming aquatic ecosystems.
6. <https://www.army.mil/article/162331/de_icing_impacts_local_water_quality> - The U.S. Army discusses the environmental impact of de-icing materials used on roads and sidewalks, noting that runoff can pollute water bodies with chemicals, minerals, and sediments. De-icing agents like sodium chloride, calcium chloride, and magnesium chloride can add harmful levels of chloride and metals to water, negatively affecting aquatic life. Acetates can increase organic content, depleting oxygen needed by aquatic organisms.
7. <https://fishlegal.net/2022/05/11/angling-club-anger-over-environment-agency-indifference/> - The Derby Railway Angling Club has been reporting pollution of the River Trent in Leicestershire to the Environment Agency for over a decade, citing evidence of aircraft de-icing chemicals entering the river from nearby East Midlands Airport. Despite frequent reports, the angling club has been dissatisfied with the Agency's response. The pollution has led to the growth of sewage fungus on the riverbed, smothering aquatic life and indicating gross pollution.