# River activists criticise government reforms to bathing water policies



River activists are expressing significant dissatisfaction following the announcement of government reforms to bathing water designation policies, which aim to introduce a feasibility test for waterways seeking this status. The news emerged on Wednesday, triggering outrage from campaigners who argue that the changes may effectively exclude many rivers from receiving the protections associated with bathing water status.

The new regulations stipulate that any waterway must undergo a feasibility assessment before being designated for bathing. If a river is deemed too polluted to improve to a minimum “sufficient” water quality standard, it will not receive this designation. Campaigners have pointed out that no stretch of river in England is currently classified as being in good overall health. Existing designated rivers typically demonstrate poor water quality, largely due to pollution from sewage and agricultural runoff—a situation that requires significant investment and time to rectify, according to water companies.

Becky Malby from the Ilkley Clean River Group, which has led efforts to secure bathing water designation for the River Wharfe, articulated her shock at the new restrictions. She remarked, “We are shocked at the move to only designate waters that have the potential to meet sufficient water quality. Bathing status is awarded where people use rivers to protect them." Malby further explained that this new limitation means that many rivers in England, frequented by recreational users, would lack consistent information on water quality. Furthermore, those rivers would not be subject to bathing status requirements focusing on reducing raw sewage discharges to ten episodes per year.

The River Wharfe received its bathing water designation in 2020 despite being initially classified as poor quality. Malby indicated that it has taken five years and significant financial investment from Yorkshire Water to improve the river’s status to what is now expected to be sufficient or good.

Chris Coode, chief executive of the environmental charity Thames21, echoed Malby’s concerns, stating that while the year-round testing of bathing water sites represents progress, the introduction of the feasibility test would likely hinder the chances of other inland rivers achieving the necessary designation. “This change would significantly reduce the chances of inland river sites achieving designation, diverting monitoring and investments to already clean sites,” Coode noted.

The environmental advocacy group Surfers Against Sewage also condemned the new feasibility criterion, with campaign director Dani Jordan describing it as a “snub” to communities eager for government action to address pollution at their local bathing areas. She remarked that the proposed measure effectively denies protection to areas that require it the most for safe recreational use.

In response to the backlash, a government source clarified that the reforms aim to ensure that only those sites where improvement to sufficient water quality is feasible will be fully designated. The source highlighted that protecting public health remains a priority in these discussions.

The recent changes affect bodies of water across England and Wales and introduce several other updates, including an expansion of the definition of “bathers” to include a broader range of water sport participants, an extension of the bathing water season to encompass the entire year (previously running from May to September), and the establishment of multiple testing points at designated bathing water sites.

Water Minister Emma Hardy commented on the situation, stating, “Bathing water sites are the pride of local communities across the country. But safety and cleanliness is paramount, and we must go further and faster to open up our waterways for families to enjoy.”

Applications for bathing water status, which had been paused pending consultation on these reforms, are set to reopen in May.

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

## References

* <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2025-0054/CDP-2025-0054.pdf> - This document provides information on the current review and proposed changes to bathing water regulations in the UK, including the introduction of a feasibility test for water quality improvements.
* <https://theriverstrust.org/about-us/news/changing-the-bathing-water-rules-our-response> - The Rivers Trust welcomes many of the proposed changes to bathing water rules but expresses concerns about the need for transparency and broader pollutant testing, aligning with concerns about river water quality.
* <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/92-of-english-bathing-waters-meet-water-quality-standards> - This news release highlights the current state of bathing water quality in England, noting that while coastal waters generally meet standards, inland sites often struggle with pollution, which is relevant to the challenges faced by rivers seeking designation.
* <https://www.noahwire.com> - This source provides the original context for the article, detailing reactions from river activists and environmental groups to the new bathing water designation policies.
* <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/bathing-water-quality> - This webpage offers guidance on bathing water quality standards and regulations in the UK, which are crucial for understanding the context of the proposed reforms.