# Water companies face criticism over pollution incidents and rising bills



Water companies in England reported a total of 2,487 pollution incidents in 2024, which is notably more than double the target set by the Environment Agency, as indicated in the annual Water Quality Report from the campaign group Surfers Against Sewage (SAS). This figure represents the highest number of pollution incidents recorded in the past decade.

According to SAS, the Environment Agency had established a target for firms to achieve a 40% reduction in pollution incidents; however, instead of a decline, incidents saw a 30% increase. The significant escalation in pollution cases has raised concerns among the public, with a recent survey suggesting that 27% of adults in England have contemplated withholding water bill payments due to dissatisfaction with their water providers' management of pollution.

The survey also highlighted a lack of confidence in the water companies, as only 33% of respondents felt assured that their supplier could effectively address sewage pollution issues. In 2024, SAS reported receiving 1,853 sickness notifications through its Safer Seas & Rivers Service app, averaging five incidents per day. Of these, 331 individuals sought medical attention, with 79% of those cases being linked to sewage contamination as attributed by their doctors.

Furthermore, the Environment Agency disclosed that storm overflows, which should only release sewage under "exceptional circumstances" to prevent sewer systems from being overwhelmed, contributed to a staggering total of over 3.61 million hours of sewage discharge into England's rivers, lakes, and coastlines in 2024. While the number of individual spill incidents decreased slightly from 464,056 in 2023 to 450,398 in 2024, the total duration of these discharges has seen a slight increase.

In light of these incidents, households in England and Wales are facing substantial increases in their water bills—averaging an additional £86 this year alone. Accusations of long-standing underinvestment in water infrastructure have been directed at utility firms. Ofwat, the regulator for the water sector, has permitted an average annual increase of £31, culminating in total bills rising by £157 over the next five years, projected to reach £597 by 2030 to facilitate a £104 billion investment in the industry.

Giles Bristow, chief executive of SAS, expressed concerns over the current state of the water system, stating, “The numbers are staggering: record hours of sewage discharges, huge bill increases, thousands of people becoming ill and yet still the industry has the gall to pay out billions of billpayer money to shareholders.” Bristow called for “urgent and radical reform,” advocating for a shift in the governance of water management from a solely private ownership model to a more localized approach, which he suggests has been more effective globally.

A spokesperson for Water UK acknowledged the inadequacies of the current system and supported the establishment of the Independent Water Commission to assess regulatory practices. They affirmed that “no sewage spill is ever acceptable” and noted that water companies are investing £12 billion with the aim of significantly reducing the incidence of spills from storm overflows by 2030. This investment is part of what is termed the largest financial commitment to environmental improvements, intended to promote economic growth, enhance housing development, and ensure the security of water supplies while striving to eliminate sewage discharges into the country’s water bodies.

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

## References

* <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/environment-agency-storm-overflow-spill-data-for-2024> - This URL supports the data on storm overflows, indicating a decrease in the number of sewage spills but an increase in spill durations in 2024. It highlights the ongoing issue of sewage pollution in England.
* <https://theriverstrust.org/about-us/news/2024-sewage-spill-cso-data> - This source provides additional details on the 2024 data for storm overflow discharges, including a record total of over 3.6 million hours of sewage discharge. It reinforces concerns about pollution levels.
* <https://www.ofwat.gov.uk/regulated-companies/company-obligations/outcomes/water-company-performance-report-2023-24/> - Ofwat's report highlights the challenges in water company performance, including issues with pollution incidents and customer satisfaction. It explains how Ofwat is addressing these problems through regulations and oversight.
* <https://www.legalexpert.co.uk/personal-injury-compensation/research-statistics-water-pollution-incidents-uk/> - This article discusses serious water pollution incidents by major water companies in England, noting that most incidents are attributed to a few large firms. It supports concerns about the environmental impact of these incidents.
* <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/tougher-regulation-as-data-shows-water-companies-underperforming> - This news piece outlines the Environment Agency's plans for tougher regulation due to underperformance by water companies, including increased inspections and enforcement actions to address pollution incidents.