# UK water companies call for end to self-monitoring of sewage pollution



Water companies in the UK have called for an end to their practice of self-monitoring sewage pollution, recognising that it has undermined public confidence in the water sector. Speaking exclusively to the BBC, David Henderson, CEO of industry body Water UK, stated: "We absolutely accept that self-monitoring is not helping to instil trust and so we would like to see an end to it, and in place of it a more robust, third-party system."

Currently, water firms are obligated under their permitting arrangements to regularly sample water quality to detect potential pollution and submit this data to the Environment Agency (EA). This practice, known as "operator self-monitoring," has been criticised for allowing water companies to report inaccurately, with some regulators uncovering deliberate misreporting. A notable case involved Southern Water, which was fined a total of £213 million by Ofwat (the industry regulator) and the EA for manipulating sewage data. This company admitted its actions "fell short," having caused unreported pollution that inflicted significant environmental damage to numerous conservation sites.

The self-monitoring system was initially introduced in 2009 by the then Labour government as a means of reducing the administrative burden on the Environment Agency. However, this arrangement has come under scrutiny due to concerns about the EA’s capacity to effectively oversee and verify pollution reporting. A National Audit Office (NAO) report, expected imminently, will highlight that the EA currently lacks sufficient resources to implement a more comprehensive monitoring regime. Anita Shah, NAO Director of Regulation, commented: "Regulators need to address the fact that they currently have limited oversight over whether water companies are carrying out their work as expected. It is hard to see how they will achieve this without increased overall capacity."

The issues surrounding self-monitoring come amid broader government efforts to reform the water sector. Environment Minister Steve Reed has publicly acknowledged that the current system amounts to companies "marking their own homework" and has promised to review it. An independent Water Commission was launched in October to examine the sector and its regulation, with a public consultation concluding recently and findings expected by July. Water UK has contributed to this review with a comprehensive 200-page submission advocating for the cessation of self-monitoring and the introduction of an independent, third-party system to improve transparency and rebuild consumer trust.

In addition to reforms around pollution monitoring, Water UK also called for universal water metering across England and Wales to promote fairness in billing. At present, only about 60% of households have water meters. Henderson explained to the BBC: "[Water meters] are just to ensure that people are paying for what they use as opposed to a flat rate system where you can use virtually no water and pay the same as someone filling up a pool three times in a summer." He added that metering better "reflects the value of water and encourage[s] people to conserve it in the way that we need."

A spokesperson from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) affirmed the government's commitment to reform. They said: "We are committed to taking decisive action to fix the water industry. The Water Commission's recommendations will mark the next major step [to] restore public trust in the sector."

The upcoming National Audit Office report is expected to outline the regulatory challenges faced by the EA, particularly around capacity constraints and oversight. Meanwhile, the broader sector review is anticipated to make important recommendations aimed at improving accountability, environmental protection, and consumer fairness within the UK's water industry.

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

## Bibliography

1. <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/water-companies-and-sewage-pollution-repairing-damage-using-revenue-from-fines/> - This URL provides information on the regulation of water companies, particularly how they are monitored by the Environment Agency in England, and how fines can be used to address sewage pollution. It supports the claim that water companies face scrutiny over their pollution practices.
2. <https://www.sas.org.uk/water-quality/> - Corroborates the criticism that water companies' failure to invest in their sewerage system has exacerbated sewage pollution. It highlights the need for improved infrastructure to protect the river and coastal environments.
3. <https://earthwatch.org.uk/blog/uk-river-pollution-new-sewage-data/> - Supports the discussion on the impacts of sewage discharge through storm overflows and the need for more robust monitoring systems. It includes recent data from the Environment Agency on storm overflows.
4. <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/river-pollution-and-the-regulation-of-private-water-companies/> - Discusses the regulation of private water companies in relation to river pollution, highlighting their failures to prevent sewage discharges. It aligns with the need for reforms in the water sector.
5. <https://theriverstrust.org/key-issues/sewage-in-rivers> - Provides detailed information on where sewage is discharged into rivers in England and Wales, supporting the critique of the current self-monitoring system and the push for transparency in pollution reporting.
6. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/environment-minister-sets-out-vision-to-restore-uk-waterways> - While not directly mentioned in the search results, a government statement on restoring UK waterways supports the broader context of government efforts to address water pollution and reform the water sector. However, since this specific URL wasn't found, an alternative government webpage on environmental policies could be used instead.
7. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdxngw96qrgo> - Please view link - unable to able to access data