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THIS JUST IN

Simon Cooper writes a press release for the Environment Agency



THE ENVIRONMENT AGENCY (EA) ARE fond of the upbeat press release. You know the sort: "Great news, we've taken more money than ever in licence fees"; aka the tax on anglers. Or "we prosecuted more licence-evaders"; read for that dozens of paramilitary-style "revenue inspectors" checking thousands of licences for just a few transgressors. Or "we took to court a bloke for illegal crayfish snagging in the River Derwent"; shame they didn't have time to chase up the many sewage pollution incidents in Derbyshire.

Unfair? I guess a little, exaggerating for emphasis, but here is my press release on recent EA performance*:

In 2009/2010, the EA's budget (from central Government) was £170m. In 2020/21, it was £94m.

Income from industries, businesses, water companies and waste firms was £330m in 2020/2021.

In the period from 2011 to 2016, the EA's Protection budget fell by 62%; staff numbers were cut by 25%; prosecutions fell by 80%; pollution incidents logged fell by 29%; water quality samples fell by 28%.

Between 2013 and 2018, monitoring water quality in freshwater has halved from 10,797 sites to 4,656.

In 2021, EA staff were sent to observe only 8,000 out of 116,000 potential pollution incidents. As from 2022, staff have been told that level 3 and 4 pollution (the least serious) incidents are no longer to be registered.

Farmers can expect a visit from an EA officer once every 263 years. By way of example, in 2019 there were two inspections of farms in the Wylfe chalkstream valley in Wiltshire; there were none in 2020.

When you read the top line of all this, it's impossible to feel anything other than some sympathy for the EA. Direct funding has been cut. But on the other hand, all those fees from industry have more than made up the shortfall. So why's it gone so badly wrong for us river folk?

Firstly, I believe fisheries are a long way down the EA totem. As I have written here before, the EA have statutory responsibility for everything from atomic waste to fly-tipping. Secondly, following the extreme flooding of the Noughties (how quickly we forget), vast amounts of cash and manpower were diverted from everyday EA stuff to keeping our towns dry. Thirdly, until recently few have given a s**t about all the s**t going into our rivers. And finally, climate change has become the convenient cul de sac in which to park all issues from abstraction to water quality. It's a horrible downward spiral — no money, and no political incentive to do the right thing as the EA have become unable to fulfil their core duty to keep our rivers clean.

The answer? It's not complicated. To use Tony Blair's mantra. Test. Test. Test. And then Prosecute. Prosecute. Prosecute. Our rivers will only ever be as clean as the water we allow to flow into them. Whether you're a factory, home or sewage-works owner, you should live in fear of the EA inspector knocking at your door.

As a nation, we seem willing to accept energy bills that include 28% for green levies. Surely the time has come for something similar for water and sewage bills? For, let's face it, there is little point in saving the planet to end up living beside rivers that have become little more than officially sanctioned sewers.

*I am indebted to my friend Patrick Heaton-Armstrong for compiling this data from official EA documents, reports by Salmon & Trout Conservation, Freedom of Information disclosures and other sources. ■

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