

Environment Agency

Our response to Pollution Incidents

Including details of the incident reported by George Monbiot

The Environment Agency receive most reports of pollution incidents, via our 24hr Incident hotline (0800 80 70 60), into our Incident Communication Service team. Details of these incidents including the; type of pollutant, the location and impact to the environment are recorded on our National Incident Recording System (NIRS) database and then passed out to one of the 16 Area Offices for assessment and action.

Once received in an Area office, an Environment Officer will undertake an initial assessment of the incident based upon the information the caller has supplied. Where possible, if contact details have been supplied, the Environment Officer will contact the caller to gather additional information. At this stage a number of factors are taken into account; the sensitivity of the location, the type of pollutant, when the incident was seen in relation to when it was reported, the pollution history of the location and the actual impact that has been witnessed by the reporter.

The Environment Officer will then classify the incident as either:

- Category 1: Major impact
- Category 2: Significant impact
- Category 3: Minor impact
- Category 4: No impact

Our level of response depends on this classification:

- Category 1: Try to attend within 2 hours
- Category 2: Try to attend within 2 hours
- Category 3: Attend only if the incident has the potential to escalate to category 1 or 2; if the site is considered sensitive e.g. possible impact to bathing water; failing Water Framework Directive waterbodies, or there is a known pollution history at a site.
- Category 4: No attendance

We appreciate all incident calls from members of the public; they are a valuable source of information for us. Nationally, the Environment Agency dealt with over 20,000 incidents last year. We appreciate that what may be classified as a minor incident can have a significant impact on those living nearby. However we have to use our limited resources to the best effect for the wider environment and public benefit. All of our incident reports, even those not attended are retained on our NIRS system. Should evidence of

greater environmental impact, repeat occurrence or new information come to light, we can link the reports together and escalate our response if required.

The Pollution incident reported by George Monbiot

The incident was seen by George Monbiot on Saturday 26th September 2015, it was reported to the Environment Agency (via our hotline) on Monday 28th September.

The local Environment Officer assessed the incident as category 3, but with the potential to escalate to a category 2 if the incident persisted. The incident was attended. We met with the farmer, inspected the watercourse showing him the sewage fungus that had grown in the tributary of the River Culm as photographed in George Monbiot's article. We also collected samples as evidence of the discharge and its impact on the receiving water. We inspected the farm infrastructure to try and identify the pollution source. The cause was identified and the farmer agreed to immediately take steps to stop the pollution.

We returned the following week to ensure the incident had stopped and we agreed some long term infrastructure improvements that would permanently prevent a reoccurrence of this incident. During this inspection the watercourse was checked again and the fungus had now almost completely disappeared.

The Environment Officers who visited the site reported that it was evident from the inspection that there has been a great deal of attention to stock welfare and investment in farm infrastructure; in the form of a new barn with a slatted floor, under floor slurry storage with a capacity for seven months storage - three months more than is required by the Silage, Slurry and Agricultural Fuel Oil regulations (SSAFO). This incident was avoidable but there was no evidence of intent and we did not find it indicative of a poorly managed farm.

There is an Environment Agency routine water quality monitoring point at Bridgehouse Bridge just over 100m downstream of this incident. The results from this sample point over the last year do not show any issues with the water quality. This also indicates this incident was not a long term chronic issue.

When we consider our enforcement response to a pollution incident we take into account a number of factors. In this case we considered; the environmental impact of the incident, the level of the farmers' co-operation in dealing with us, the immediate steps taken to stop the pollution and improve the site to prevent future incidents and the fact there was no pollution history at this farm.

Our enforcement response to this incident was a formal warning. We also recovered the costs for our time investigating this incident from the farmer.

This type of incident with this level of impact is not unusual in agricultural catchments. We deal with many similar incidents across Devon & Cornwall each year.

Stuart Hunter
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Devon North Land & Water Team

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