92% of people in the UK say water companies must ensure sewage sludge on UK farmland is not contaminated.

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A new YouGov/River Action poll reveals that three-fifths (61%) of UK respondents do not know that farmers commonly use sewage sludge from water companies, and 50% believe this practice carries risks for health and food quality.

The findings will be revealed as a petition calling for an end to the spreading of contaminated sewage sludge, signed by more than 62,800 people, is handed over outside **DEFRA's headquarters** on Marsham Street, London, at **10:05am on 16 December**.

The petition will be **delivered to the Minister for Water and Flooding**, Emma Hardy, by River Action and Greenpeace, urging immediate government action.

Water companies are selling this toxic sludge to farmers, putting rivers and human health at risk and leaving farmers concerned about the impact on their soil and water. The government must act immediately to stop contaminated sewage sludge being spread on farmland and support farmers in producing safe food while protecting our rivers.

Treated sewage sludge is sold as a cheap fertiliser, but water companies are **not required to remove PFAS “forever chemicals,” microplastics, or other modern contaminants**, because legislation governing sludge treatment was drafted in the 1980s — long before these pollutants existed. The sludge is now spread widely across farmland, draining into rivers already under severe pressure.

Key public findings from the YouGov survey

92% say water companies should either have a great deal of responsibility (79%) or a fair amount of responsibility (13%) when it comes to ensuring that sewage sludge that will be used on UK farmland is not contaminated.
89% say the government should have a great deal (59%) or a fair amount of responsibility (30%) when it comes to ensuring that sewage sludge that will be used on UK farmland is not contaminated
88% support requiring water companies to report publicly on levels of contamination in treated sewage sludge
87% support Increasing regulation on monitoring of treated sewage sludge for contaminants
87% support requiring water companies to conduct further treatment to remove contaminants including forever chemicals and microplastics from sewage sludge
85% support setting legal limits on levels of contaminants in treated sewage sludge spread on UK farmland
47% support banning the spread of treated sewage sludge on UK farmland
62% see a risk from using treated sewage sludge on farmland to water health, around 50% see risks to food quality and personal health
39% think water companies should find a different way of disposing of treated sewage sludge, even if this means water bills are more expensive

Findings from River Action’s farmers survey*

Alongside the national polling, **River Action surveyed 105 farmers across the UK** to understand how sewage sludge contamination is affecting those who buy and use it on their land.

Although the sample is very modest relative to the size of the UK farming sector, the results show a striking level of awareness: 83% of respondents recognised the risk of contamination in biosolids..

Concern is widespread. Seventy-two per cent said they were worried about the impact of contaminated biosolids on water health, with almost 40% describing themselves as very or extremely worried.

A similar picture emerges for soil health, with 69% of farmers worried about the application of contaminated biosolids with 41% describing themselves as very or extremely worried.

The findings point to clear demand for stronger safeguards. Farmers expressed strong support for:

Better treatment to remove contaminants (76%)
Public reporting on contamination levels (58%)
Legal limits set on contaminants (56%)
Tighter regulation on monitoring contaminants (53%)

CEO of the Nature Friendly Farming Network Martin Lines said, *"These findings show just how worried farmers are about the contamination of sewage sludge. And who can blame them? They're already under huge pressure from supply chains chasing ever-higher profit margins, while water companies are offering cut-price or even free sludge that turns out to be contaminated.*

"Farmers should not be the ones carrying the blame for a problem they didn't create. This is a mess for the water companies and government to fix, not the people producing our food. Farmers want to do the right thing for their soil, their customers and their rivers, but they need a system that doesn't set them up to fail."

Farmer John Hall from County Durham said, *"Water companies expect farmers to pay for the privilege of taking their waste, insisting that sewage sludge is a 'valuable fertiliser'. In any other sector, waste producers cover the cost of safe disposal. But when the ban on dumping sludge at sea came in, water authorities and the Environment Agency simply assumed farmers would pick up the tab and take this supposedly valuable product off their hands."*

A southern Scotland farmer, who wishes to remain anonymous, told River Action, *"Having used biosolids in the past, I became increasingly concerned that a natural by-product was becoming laced with household chemicals and industrial wastes, often described as forever chemicals because they break down so slowly in the soil.*

"The ongoing accumulation of these substances will damage soil life, be absorbed by food crops,

and eventually enter the wider water environment. These materials are more harmful than other inputs applied to the soil."

River Action's Head of Campaigns Amy Fairman said, *"Farmers do not want to be dumping contaminated sludge on their land. Water companies are selling sludge laced with forever chemicals and microplastics, and the public is rightly concerned. Human health and our rivers are at risk, and the government must act immediately."*

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall added, *"People are rightly worried about forever chemicals, microplastics, and other contaminants entering our rivers, soil, and food. Much of it is coming from "toxic sludge" which, astonishingly, is being given to farmers to spread on their land without telling them what's in it. Urgent action is clearly needed from both water companies and the government to stop this pollution, support our farmers and food producers, and protect the environment."*

River Action's Agricultural Water Pollution Strategy

River Action will launch its **Agricultural Water Pollution Strategy on 17 December** at the Palace of Westminster. The strategy was developed with farmers, food producers, supermarkets, and major fast-food chains to create practical solutions for sustainable farming while restoring river health.

Seven-point plan for clean rivers and fair farming:

Enforce the law properly – Create a single compliance framework requiring the Environment Agency to act when voluntary approaches fail.
Resource the regulators – Ringfence fines to fund training, farmer support, and monitoring tools like satellite imaging and citizen science data.
Fix failing slurry infrastructure – Redirect agricultural subsidy funds to urgently upgrade unsafe or outdated storage systems.
Mandate sustainable nutrient management plans – Prevent over-concentration of intensive livestock farms, improve manure handling, and expand circular-economy manure trading schemes.
Establish regional water authorities – Create catchment-based bodies with powers to coordinate nutrient reduction and implement Water Protection Zones.
Smarter planning and data use – Integrate environmental, farm, and planning data to streamline compliance and remove barriers to essential farm upgrades.

Modernise sludge regulation – Bring sewage sludge under Environmental Permitting Regulations, with legal limits for forever chemicals, microplastics, and other contaminants.

Notes to Editors

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. The total sample size was 2,150 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 2-3 December 2025. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults.
The complete YouGov poll dataset is included in full so you can see the numbers behind the headline findings.
River Action undertook its own survey of the farming community between 19th November – 10th December. The survey was carried out online and received 105 responses. The finding can be found here.
Media can download images of contaminated sewage sludge here. If used, please credit: ***Fighting Dirty***
Members of the media are invited to attend the launch of River Action's Agricultural Water Pollution Strategy, Hosted by Alistair Carmichael on **17 December** at 1pm in Dining Room A, Palace of Westminster. Keynote address will be given by Minister Hardy. Register interest at: **media@riveractionuk.com**