# Clean water in jeopardy: DEFRA cuts would sink Labour's rivers, seas and lakes commitments

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**Ahead of the Government's Spending Review**, many of the UK's most respected environmental organisations and campaigners, including the **RSPB, GMB Union, The Wildlife Trusts, Good Law Project, Keep Britain Tidy, Surfers Against Sewage, WWF-UK, Wildlife and Countryside Link, British Rowing, The Rivers Trust, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, Chris Packham, Robert Plant, Jim Murray, Liz Bonnin, Robert Macfarlane, and Imogen Grant**, have joined forces demanding the Government increase funding to DEFRA and fully resource the regulators tasked with cleaning up Britain's rivers, lakes, and seas.

In a letter sent **to Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer and Chancellor Rachel Reeves**, the group, **coordinated by River Action and in the wake of the March for Clean Water in November 2024**, warns that Labour's credibility on environmental protection is on the line. The letter follows widespread concern that any cuts to DEFRA's budget in the Spending Review will severely undermine the Government's ability to deliver on its clean water promises, made central to last

summer’s general election campaign.

While the group acknowledges the introduction of the Water Special Measures Bill and the establishment of the Independent Water Commission led by Sir Jon Cunliffe, whose interim report was published on Tuesday this week, it stresses that without urgent and sufficient funding, these efforts risk being little more than symbolic.

**The** signatory organisations **– including some of the UK’s largest environmental charities – represent millions of people across the country**. Among them are groups that mobilised the 15,000-strong March for Clean Water in November 2024 – the largest-ever peaceful protest for clean water in British history.

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**Key Facts:**

**Only 14% of rivers** in England meet good ecological status.
In 2024, **3.6 million hours** of untreated sewage was discharged into waterways across England and Wales.
Farm inspections remain so infrequent that each farm can expect to be checked **once every 25 years.**
Almost **50% of farms** inspected in the last two years were non-compliant with

environmental rules – but **only 22%** faced any form of enforcement.
The Environment Agency's funding has been **cut by 50%** over the last decade, hollowing out its ability to monitor and prosecute polluters.
Water companies have racked up **£64.4 billion in debt since privatisation** and continue to pay out dividends while infrastructure fails.

**The Coalition's Core Asks:**

**Fund the regulators** – Restore and increase budgets for DEFRA, the Environment Agency, Ofwat and Natural England so they can enforce environmental law and hold polluters to account.
**Support nature-friendly farming** – Expand and protect funding for the Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS) and Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) to enable farmers to play their part in river recovery.

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**Voices from Across the UK:**

*The Comprehensive Spending Review should be ensuring the future resilience and prosperity of the UK and* ***protecting the nature-friendly farming budget*** *is a key part of this.*

*Defra's own figures show how* ***every £1 invested in this area supports farmers in delivering over £3 in benefits****, including projects that benefit our rivers and waterways.*

**Beccy Speight**
CEO of the RSPB

***The public has had enough****. We've marched, we've spoken out, and we've demanded change. Labour promised action and now they must deliver.*

*Cutting funds to the agencies that protect our rivers is not just irresponsible,* ***it's outrageous. It undermines everything we were told would change.***

**Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall**
Broadcaster and Food Campaigner

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***We are at a tipping point.*** *To pollute a river is to poison a nation’s bloodstream. What we are witnessing is not neglect, it is a slow betrayal of nature and people alike.*

*If the Government turns away now, it turns away from a* ***generation that marched, spoke up, and demanded better.***

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**Rob Macfarlane**

Author and River Advocate