Campaign Win! New DEFRA guidance a win for our rivers

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DEFRA has issued stronger guidance on Farming Rules for Water. The change means that manure can now only be spread when crops actually need it – not at times it can just run off and pollute our river. After years of campaigning and legal pressure, we welcome this significant step forward that provides stronger protection for England's rivers from agricultural pollution.

The stream of events:

June 2022 – Manure and fertiliser overuse is killing our rivers

In 2022 WWF and ClientEarth launched a legal complaint to the UK's environmental watchdog the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP). The complaint was related to DEFRA's guidance with regard to the overuse of manure and fertiliser which floods our rivers with nitrates and phosphates, fuelling algal blooms that choke ecosystems and suffocate wildlife.

May 2024 – Farming practice must change

As a result of our legal challenge against the Environment Agency (EA), the High Court ruled that farming practices must change to comply with the Farming Rules for Water – a response to the EA's failure to prevent pollution in the River Wye and other threatened waterways. As a result of this legal action, Defra committed to reviewing its guidance.

June 2025 – New Farming Rules for Water

In June 2025, DEFRA released revised statutory guidance 'Enforcing the Farming Rules for Water'. While this was a welcome step, it fell short in two key areas:

1) Autumn manure spreading: It didn't go far enough to clarify the rules around autumn manure spreading – a practice often linked to river pollution.

2) A lack of clarity around enforcement thresholds: I.e. How are the rules actually going to be enforced.

In particular, some farming commentators wrongly interpreted the guidance to mean that autumn spreading could still go ahead as usual. However, The High Court ruling in River Action's legal case demonstrated that it is unlikely to be compliant with the Farming Rules for Water unless it's in exceptional and specific circumstances. The new guidance failed to set this out.

July 2025 – Closing the loophole

To address these issues, we wrote to DEFRA to seek urgent clarification. We're pleased to say DEFRA listened. On 16 July, DEFRA issued additional new guidance to farmers called 'How to comply with the Farming Rules for Water'. This new guidance made it explicit that **manure must only be applied when it meets crop or soil need at the time of application** – a critical clarification that closes a dangerous loophole and brings guidance in line with the law.

If accompanied by robust enforcement and clear advice for farmers, this should lead to much stronger compliance and significantly reduce agricultural pollution across England's rivers. We're grateful to DEFRA for taking these vital steps forward to rescue our rivers. We'll continue pushing for the protections our rivers so urgently need.

DEFRA's welcome clarification is another important step toward protecting the UK's rivers from the devastating damage caused by diffuse agricultural pollution.
River Action now looks forward to working with DEFRA and the Environment Agency to establish clear enforcement thresholds, ensuring both farmers and regulators have certainty about when action will be taken – a key component of River Action's forthcoming Agricultural Water Pollution Strategy.
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