River Action's open letter to Thames Water

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Dear Chris Weston,

WITHOUT PREJUDICE

We are writing to contest the public claims made by Thames Water that River Action is being alarmist in publishing E.coli test samples taken from the river at Henley-on-Thames on the Henley Royal Regatta course, and to ask Thames Water to urgently improve wastewater treatment to protect the health and livelihoods of Henley residents, businesses, visitors and athletes.

We are facing a freshwater emergency and companies like yours are failing to address it with the urgency that is required. This sense of urgency is shared by reputable organisations like the BBC, Financial Times and The Times and by communities across your catchment.

Dismissing River Action's comments as alarmist diminishes the work of citizen scientists, such as the Henley and Marlow River Action Group, who devote significant time and costs to conducting testing to monitor the quality of the River Thames, and who have had regular meetings with your colleagues.

We understand you believe there to be a discrepancy between ours and your datasets. Our data is scientifically evidenced and is being used to inform the public of the health risks posed by the ongoing pollution caused by Thames Water:

> River Action's data is collected using a Fluidon World Health Organization verified E.Coli analyser – the same equipment used for the Olympics in France. Our results are available to the public and you can find our datasets here and here.
> Thames Water's own data shows the definite presence of E.coli and other bacteria in the final effluent from Henley Sewage Treatment Works. This was further confirmed to us in meetings with your colleagues (e.g. on the 20th June) and their confirmation there is no tertiary or quaternary treatment of final effluent, meaning bacteria and viruses are released into the Thames everyday, not just in storm overflow events. Please see the annex for further detail on our findings.
> The Centre for Ecology and Hydrology considers both datasets to be correct. The Thames Water samples were taken further from the source of pollution and therefore are more dilute; ours were at the point source and therefore higher.
> Thames Water's press statement suggested other sources of pollution (such as agriculture) could be responsible and that the water quality. This was misleading to the public and failed to take the responsibility and duty of care demonstrated by your colleagues in meetings with us. The combination of Thames Water and River Action results clearly show E.coli levels increase to unsafe levels along the Regatta course as the river passes Henley STW outflows.

Both the Henley Royal Regatta and the famous Oxbridge boat race have been marred by pollution and illness. Earlier this year, the Oxford's men's team cited high levels of E.coli in the river causing illness in their team which they say played a part in their defeat. Our data was released ahead of the Regatta to avoid any further illness and iconic international events being marred by pollution stories. However, despite being aware of our results this year, Thames Water told the organisers and competitors of the Regatta that the quality of the water was mostly good.

We the signatories of this letter representing the NGO and sporting communities, call on you urgently to:

> **Properly invest in infrastructure improvements,** specifically at Henley Sewage Treatment Works and Wargrave Sewage Treatment Works by implementing tertiary/quaternary treatment to remove harmful bacteria and viruses.
> **Take responsibility for Thames Water's role in the degradation of the River Thames**

catchment. We are the first to recognise that agriculture is a prominent polluter, but in the case of Henley, your claims that farming could be a cause are not founded given the lack of any meaningful concentrations of intensive agriculture in the locality, and clear evidence of sewage-related bacteria in the river.

Correct the record on water quality. On June 25th your spokesperson told Kirsten O'Brien on BBC Radio Berkshire that most samples met the threshold for 'good' status, apart from two days in May and June after rain where elevated readings were taken after rain. However, this omits any testing at Fawley meadows – at the very centre of the Henley racecourse – where the effluent from the Henley Sewage Treatment Works enters the river and where the actual Henley Regatta takes place. This is where our research found alarmingly high levels of E.coli bacteria. Your organisation was made aware of these findings before the event and did not show a duty of care to visitors and competitors.

We believe that rather than resisting the public's demands for accountability, honesty and transparency, Thames Water should take a valuable step towards rebuilding trust by acknowledging your role in the demise of the river, and what you plan to do to resolve it. We would welcome the opportunity to help the community achieve this, and urge you to take responsibility and show the necessary leadership.

Please provide an urgent response to our requests. We would happily meet to discuss the actions you plan to take to address this unacceptable situation.

Yours sincerely,

James Wallace – River Action CEO

Charles Watson – River Action Founder and Chair

Co-signed by:

Angling Trust

British Rowing

Councillor Rory Hunt – Mayor of Henley on Thames

Feargal Sharkey

Steve Backshall

Dave Wallace – Henley and Marlow River Action Group

Freddie Van Mierlo – Liberal Democrat MP for Henley & Thame

Greener Henley

Henley Mermaids

River and Rowing Museum

Great Britain Outrigger

Lord John Randall

Royal Yachting Association

Surfers Against Sewage

Swim England

Annex.

Test results

On each of 12 occasions between 27th June and 9th July – before, during and after the Regatta – our results (select Fawley Meadows) showed very high levels of E.coli in the river water at Fawley Meadows, where the final effluent empties from Thames Water Henley Sewage Treatment Works into the River Thames via a series of streams/ditches.
With results ranging from 1680CFU to 8001CFU (per 100ml), we have demonstrated that every day we tested was much higher than the Environment Agency standard for poor water quality at 900CFU, regardless of whether it rained.
When combined with Thames Water's lower test results upstream at Marsh Lock and downstream at Hambledon Lock, this proves beyond reasonable doubt that the STW discharges E.coli and other bacteria in its final effluent.
Thames Water's staff have stated in meetings with River Action, and others including the Mayor of Henley and Town Councillors, that Henley STW does not have tertiary/quaternary treatment and so discharges bacteria in final effluent as a norm each day.
This has been confirmed through sight of your data showing final effluent with high levels of E.coli issued from Henley STW outflow into the streams/ditches that lead into the River Thames along the Regatta course. This is the reason why levels of E.coli increase after Marsh lock as the river passes the Henley STW, and with further distance and dilution why Hambledon Lock measures are lower downstream.
Your staff recognised that your permit does not require you to have tertiary/quaternary treatment, however your organisational press statements ignore this key fact and imply

other sources of pollution are likely.

ENDS

For media interviews call Ian at River Action on 07377 547 362 or email media@riveractionuk.com