River campaigners contest Thames Water claims River Action was ‘alarmist’ about water quality, and call on them to clean up their pollution

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Campaigners have contested the public claims by Thames Water that River Action was ‘alarmist’ when it revealed the stretch of the Thames used for the Henley Royal Regatta was unsafe.

The call comes in an open letter to the CEO of Thames Water Chris Weston signed by British Rowing, a member of the House of Lords, the Mayor of Henley and river champions Feargal Sharkey and Steve Backshall.

Rather than being alarmist, River Action believes that Thames Water is polluting all the time because they don’t remove harmful bacteria from treated water before it enters the river, which is known as tertiary or quaternary treatment.

In late June, River Action revealed alarmingly high levels of E.coli on the Thames used for the Regatta, the world’s biggest international rowing event in the calendar; and a part of the river used

for swimming events involving thousands of competitors risking their health. This followed a month of testing by the Henley and Marlow River Action Group in the lead up to the world-famous rowing competition. The testing involved a World Health Organization verified E.coli device, as used by the Olympic team in France to assess water quality on the River Seine. The UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology said the data was “probably accurate.”

But in an interview with BBC television on June 28, Thames Water said in a statement read out by a reporter, *“We need honest and balanced debate that recognises the range of factors impacting river health, rather than an alarmist approach that tries to apportion blame in a misguided way.”*

Misleading claims by Thames Water on BBC Radio Berkshire

In the lead up to the Regatta, Thames Water conducted its own water quality testing, going on to give an interview to BBC Radio Berkshire on June 25. During the interview, a Thames Water spokesperson said, “Under dry conditions, we’re seeing some pretty good water quality.”

However, what the spokesperson failed to tell the listener is that the testing did not take place on the Henley Mile used for the Regatta. It took place at Hambledon Lock and Marsh Lock, some distance away from the racecourse. River Action’s testing was conducted on the racecourse at Fawley Meadows, where the effluent from the Henley Sewage Treatment Works enters the river.

In another twist, inspecting the water quality data from Thames Water cited in the BBC Radio interview, it can be revealed that on 4 occasions they detected E.coli levels considered by the Environment Agency to be unsafe to swim – demolishing claims put forward by Thames Water that they were “seeing some pretty good water quality.”For 12 days between 27th June and 9th July River Action’s citizen scientists tested at Fawley Meadows before, during and after the Henley Royal Regatta. Every single test was above safe levels of E.coli, on average 4,396CFU which is over 4 times worse than Environment Agency limits of 900CFU. If this was a designated bathing site it would come with a health warning: Advice Against Bathing.

In the open letter, the signatories ask Thames Water to:

> **Correct the record on water quality** so that river users are aware that Thames Water testing in Henley did not take place on the Regatta racecourse, but at sites some distance from it
> **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**, and acknowledge that farming in Henley could be a cause given the lack of any meaningful concentrations of intensive agriculture in the locality, and clear evidence of sewage-related bacteria in the river.

CEO of River Action James Wallace said, “Our testing was rigorous, robust, used WHO verified technology, was independently approved, and published on several websites. For Thames Water to call us alarmist is a joke. We should all be alarmed and concerned that their creaking wastewater treatment plant at Henley is causing a risk to the health of the river and river users. They should focus on getting their business in order rather than trying to discredit citizen scientists for calling out dangerously high levels of E.coli on the Thames.”

The Mayor of Henley Rory Hunt, said, “I was shocked when in a recent meeting with river stakeholders Thames Water’s representative stated that the river had never been in better condition. This simply isn’t true and this is shown by the testing, and for Thames Water to state this beggars belief.

“Thames Water is the primary cause of pollution in the Thames and has failed in both its moral and legal duties. As a result of sewage pollution my constituents are facing disruption to their livelihoods and more seriously many of them have become unwell due to the pollution in the river. The pollution is also having a very damaging impact on the ecosystem and wildlife in our rivers, and if this is not tackled with urgency the damage could be irreversible. This is a serious public health and environmental issue and Thames Water should be ashamed that for years they have prioritised private profit over the public good.

“I am proud that Henley Town Council, and subsequently Witney Town Council and Oxfordshire County Council have passed motions of no confidence in Thames Water and hopefully many more councils will follow suit. The people of this county have clearly had enough and I am pleased to be working with River Action to address this issue.”

River Action writes to the Secretary of State for the Environment

As revealed in last week’s King’s Speech, the newly elected Government will

introduce a Water Bill to improve water quality by putting failing water companies under tough special measures by strengthening the water regulators.

With this in mind, River Action has shared the open letter to Thames Water with the Secretary of State for the Environment, Steve Reed MP.

“The Secretary of State for the Environment has said he will prioritise water quality, so we hope that addressing our concerns with Thames Water’s record on river pollution is seen as an excellent opportunity for him to show leadership and give the environmental regulators sufficient resources and powers to sort this mess out. The Environment Agency’s Environmental Performance Assessment published on Tuesday for 2023 shows Thames Water only reported 76% of pollution incidents, proving yet again they can not be trusted, not least because the record shows they were the worst polluting water company in England with 14 serious pollution incidents,”

added CEO of River Action James Wallace.

Notes to editor

In the interests of transparency and to encourage openness about data collated on the UK's rivers, River Action published the findings of its water quality testing at Fawley Meadows, Henley-on-Thames. The verified results are published here and on another site by the River Thames Water Quality Testing Group here. For ease of use, you can also download the report here.

This map illustrates where River Action tested on the Regatta racecourse, versus the testing done by Thames Water some distance from it. Here is a link to the Thames Water testing at Hambledon Lock and Marsh Lock, some distance from the racecourse. Use this graphic to understand their data and why, using the Environment Agency definition of bathing water status graded poor (when water quality is poor, the EA advice is not to swim), to understand why it was misleading for the Thames Water spokesperson on BBC Radio Berkshire to claim they were seeing "some pretty good water quality."

Listen to Thames Water on BBC Radio Berkshire here. View their statement calling River Action alarmist on BBC South Today report.

ENDS

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