Toxic sludge scandal: The hidden threat lurking in our fields

Author : Molly Allen

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By Amy Fairman, Head of Campaigns, River Action

Across the UK, millions of tonnes of toxic sewage sludge is being dumped on our farmland every year. Marketed as “fertiliser,” this hazardous waste produced by water companies can contain a cocktail of microplastics, heavy metals, and dangerous “forever chemicals” that persist in the environment and accumulate over time. Shockingly, around 90% of this sewage sludge is ending up on the land that grows our food, leaching pollution into our soils and rivers.

This isn’t just a failure of transparency, it’s a ticking environmental time bomb that could even lead to soils becoming unable to support crop growth.

Thanks to our legal challenge against the Environment Agency, the Government is finally under pressure to confront this scandal head-on. And behind the scenes, water companies are panicking. A recent investigation by Unearthed has exposed their growing fears: if new regulations come into force to stop this reckless sludge spreading, they’ll be left with millions of tonnes of waste without

a home.

And their plan? To make *you*, the public, pay for the clean-up. Again.

A broken system

Sewage sludge is the solid material left behind after wastewater is treated. It's a necessary part of managing sewage. However, this sludge is *not* harmless compost. It's laced with toxic pollutants, including PFAS (forever chemicals linked to cancer and infertility), microplastics, and heavy metals that poison the land and waterways. Yet water companies have been quietly offloading this waste

onto UK farmland for decades, with little accountability and woefully inadequate oversight.

What's worse, the water industry has not been upfront about what this sludge contains. Farmers have unknowingly spread this material across their fields, and regulators have turned a blind eye. Shockingly, the Environment Agency has axed its pledge to test sewage sludge for microplastics and 'forever chemicals' – an issue exposed recently by Fighting Dirty in its legal challenge.

But now the pressure is mounting for the Government to step up.

River Action's legal push for change

Last year, we launched a legal challenge against the Environment Agency and the Government for failing to enforce the rules on sewage sludge spreading. Our case argued that the authorities were breaching their legal duties to protect human health and the environment by allowing excessive muck spreading that exceeds the immediate soil and crop nutrient needs, leading to nutrient runoff into waterways.

The result? The Government is now reviewing its enforcement guidance, a crucial step toward stopping the spread of toxic waste on our land and rivers. This could force water companies to find safer, cleaner ways to manage their sludge. But there's a catch: if that happens, they're already warning they'll ask Ofwat for an emergency rise in water bills to cover the cost.

Let’s be clear: **the public should not foot the bill for the water industry’s environmental negligence.** We’ve already paid the price through polluted rivers, poisoned soil, and mounting ecological damage. The companies responsible must be made to clean up their own mess.

Sewage outflow into the River Thames © Getty Image

Time to act

This is a defining moment. For too long, the water industry has prioritised profit over public health and environmental protection. That must end.

Together with Greenpeace, we are calling on the new Secretary of State for Environment, Steve Reed, to take urgent action:

> **Stop the spreading of toxic sewage sludge on farmland**
> **Make water companies pay the full cost of disposing of this waste safely**
> **Introduce proper regulation and legal limits on the content of sludge used in agriculture**

Sign the petition today and demand the Government puts an end to this toxic scandal. Let’s hold water companies accountable and ensure our land, rivers, and future are protected from pollution.

[**SIGN THE PETITION**]