

Rt. Hon. Elizabeth Truss MP  
Prime Minister  
10 Downing Street  
London SW1A 2AA

cc. Rt. Hon. Ranil Jayawardena MP, Environment Secretary

20<sup>th</sup> September 2022

Dear Prime Minister,

I am writing as the Founder and Chair of UK-registered charity [River Action](#) to congratulate you on your appointment and also to urge you to take immediate action to address the appalling state of the UK's rivers which are amongst the [worst in Europe](#).

Every single river in England is now [polluted](#) beyond legal limits. Our wildlife is disappearing, and our waterways are no longer fit to swim in. Some of our most iconic rivers, such as the Wye, are just a couple of years from [complete ecological collapse](#). This is a crisis – and one which the UK public wants to see resolved as a matter of urgency.

One key driver of this crisis is certainly the discharge of untreated sewage into rivers: the most recent data shows that raw sewage was discharged into English rivers [375,000 times in 2021](#) across a total of 3.1 million hours. However, agricultural pollution is as significant, albeit less widely known, a driver of this crisis, responsible for [40% of damage](#) to our waterways.

We are undoubtedly also experiencing a period of crisis in the food and farming system. However, solutions that seek to trade people and nature off against each other will never succeed – the two are inherently interlinked. We cannot achieve long-term food security without a stable climate and a thriving environment: clean water, healthy soils and abundant pollinators. UK farming's reliance on imported artificial inputs is detrimental both to farmers' business models and to the natural environment. Breaking that dependence would benefit both.

We will not find our way out of this double-edged crisis by rolling back the meagre protections and incentives currently in place to protect our rivers or by delaying farming reforms.

Instead, we need your Government to deliver a positive and forward-thinking vision of a rural economy in which farmers are supported to grow good, affordable, healthy food, while protecting the natural resources upon which all of us ultimately depend, and which are essential to the future of our food system.

River Action urges your Government to address the pollution crisis on our rivers by:

1. Setting a clear overall national target under the Environment Act for restoring our rivers to health.
2. Substantially strengthening proposed targets under the Environment Act for the reduction of agricultural pollution in our rivers.
3. Setting targets on a catchment-specific basis so that rapid action can be mobilised on rivers such as the Wye where we have just a couple of years left to prevent complete ecological collapse.

4. Using agricultural support payments to support farmers who do the right thing for our rivers and wildlife.
5. Maintaining and strengthening the legal protections given to our rivers including nutrient neutrality requirements and habitats regulations.
6. Giving regulators the powers and duties to protect our rivers – and the capacity and resources to do so.
7. Developing a soil fertiliser and fertility plan to dramatically reduce our dependence on imported inorganic fertilisers and increase nutrient recycling whereby incentives are created for the processing and relocation of manure – to both protect our rivers and also reduce vulnerability of the food system to geopolitical shocks.

The UK cannot lead the way in tackling the climate and biodiversity crises, or secure commitments from our partners to do so, as long as our rivers remain in their current decimated state.

We therefore urge you to prioritise this pressing environmental crisis and look forward to hearing your commitments to taking the steps outlined above.

Yours sincerely,

Charles Watson  
*Founder and Chairman, River Action*

Ruth Chambers  
Marina Gibson  
Ben Goldsmith  
Isabella Gornall  
James Macpherson  
George Monbiot  
Feargal Sharkey  
Amy Slack  
James Wallace  
*Members of the River Action Advisory Board*