

Rt Hon Therese Coffey MP
Secretary of State
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
2 Marsham Street
London, SW1P 4DF

By email

10th August 2023

Dear Secretary of State,

Defra's recent requirements of water companies to explore the deferral of many environmental projects under the Water Industry National Environment Programme and Water Resources Management Plans until after 2029 would delay essential environmental action and, ultimately, increase costs to consumers.

This requirement on companies is out of step with the Government's commitment to halt the decline of nature by 2030 and reverse it by 2042. It also contradicts DEFRA's latest Strategic Policy Statement to Ofwat, which named 'protect and enhance the environment' as the top strategic priority for the water industry.

We accept that prioritisation will be necessary in PR24. However, deferring vital environmental projects will not drive nature's recovery, will not meet public expectations for a clean, healthy and thriving water environment, and nor will it represent good use of public money. Water has never been higher on the public agenda and there is a high public willingness to pay to tackle pollution and improve water quality. Measures such as a universal social tariff should be implemented to protect the most vulnerable customers from rising bills.

We welcome that tackling sewage pollution from storm overflows remains a key priority, but this does not mean that other issues should be neglected. Customer money must be spent efficiently. Yet the statutory target framework and steer given would together lead to a narrow focus on engineered solutions to sewage pollution in PR24, missing cost-effective opportunities for environmental improvement and failing to tackle other major water industry impacts.

Wider catchment investment and the use of nature-based solutions will be essential to meet targets under the Environment Act and achieve Net Zero by 2050. One simple step would be to accept Baroness Willis's amendment to Clause 158 of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, to empower the water industry to make greater use of nature and catchment-based solutions to manage nutrient pollution at wastewater treatment works.

Cutting back on essential environmental improvements now is a complete false economy. Instead, Government must direct Ofwat and the water industry to deliver a transformational price review in 2024, with a step-change in environmental ambition.

We have reached a critical point where the cost of delay far exceeds that of a targeted and efficient course of action. We urge you to reconsider.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Benwell, CEO, Wildlife and Countryside Link
Mark Lloyd, CEO, The Rivers Trust
Joan Edwards, Director of Policy and Public Affairs, The Wildlife Trusts
Michael Copleston, Director, RSPB England
Tim McGrath, Director of Conservation (interim), WWT
Paul de Zylva, Senior Analyst, Friends of the Earth
Nicci Russell, CEO, Waterwise
Kathy Wormald, CEO, Froglife
Nick Measham, CEO, WildFish Conservation
Jamie Cook, CEO, Angling Trust
Marcus McAuley, Policy Director, Institute of Fisheries Management
Jeremy Biggs, CEO, Freshwater Habitats Trust
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