



Chemical Cocktails: how can we reduce the toxic burden on our rivers?

Summary

Chemical pollution is causing harm to biodiversity, climate and health. For example, [0%](#) of English rivers meet good chemical status. The forthcoming Chemicals Strategy is an opportunity to plan a more effective regulatory framework.

Please ask the Government to commit to **phasing out the most hazardous chemicals, reducing the risk of dangerous chemical mixtures in the environment**, and **better monitoring of chemicals** in our environment.

To show your support and find out more, please come to our event '*Chemical Cocktails: how can we reduce the toxic burden on our rivers?*' on the 23 May 2023, 5:30-7:30 at The Farmers Club, 3 Whitehall Ct, London SW1A 2EL.

Chemical pollution: an introduction

Cocktails of hazardous chemicals pollute the UK's ecosystems, often harming wildlife and other organisms such as soil microbes. Chemical pollution is one of the [key drivers of the biodiversity crisis](#) and is also [affecting human health](#). Scientists have warned that the planetary boundary for chemical pollution has been [exceeded](#) and have urged immediate action to reduce the production and release of human-made chemicals. With global chemical production growing markedly and projected to double by 2030, the release of chemical pollutants to the environment is [set to increase](#).

While there are some practical and in limited cases essential uses of hazardous chemicals, many are used too widely within the UK and can be found in numerous consumer products, including clothes, toys, cleaning products, electronics, furniture, food packaging, cosmetics and more, causing widespread pollution with little understood impacts.

With chemical pollution levels making local and national [news headlines](#) and grassroots [campaigns](#) for local rivers emerging, there is growing public concern about this issue.

The Chemicals Strategy is an important opportunity for the Government to avert the growing risk of chemical pollution. It can do this through:

- **Strict controls on groups of harmful chemicals and dangerous chemical cocktails.**
- **Phasing out known toxic chemicals (such as PFAS) from all but vital uses.**
- **Better monitoring of chemicals in the environment.**

Health and environmental groups from across the country are calling on the government to take action to protect people and wildlife from harmful chemicals, with **30 organisations supporting these [12 key asks](#)** for the UK Chemicals Strategy.

The National Action Plan on the Sustainable Use of Pesticides is also a vital policy for reducing pesticide pollution. It should commit to at least a 50% reduction in both pesticide use and toxicity.

Chemical pollution in your constituency: a case study on 'forever chemicals'

Rivers in your constituency are affected by chemical pollution. A [recent study](#) of Per- and Polyfluorinated Substances (PFAS) in English rivers found that at-least 77% of English river sites where PFAS were found would fail proposed new EU safety standards for surface water. Of these, 42% of sites exceed proposed EU safe levels by more than 5 times.



Map 1 (left): Map of the top 20 sites with the greatest annual average concentration; Map 2 (right): Minimum concentration levels at sites with positive detections for 24 types of PFAS substances

PFAS are known as 'forever chemicals' because they do not break down easily in the environment. Many forever chemicals also have damaging impacts on wildlife. For example, some PFAS are known to impact the immune system, blood, liver and kidney function of marine mammals, and are also linked to some cancers in humans.

The impacts of many PFAS- and other chemical types- in use are still largely unknown. This is why when one chemical is similar to another, it is important to regulate them by group to avoid one harmful chemical being replaced by another, similar chemical.

Last year 35 organisations signed a [statement](#) calling on the Government to **phase out all forever chemicals from all but the most vital and unavoidable uses.**

In April 2023, the Government accepted advice from the Health & Safety Executive and the Environment Agency to restrict some uses of some PFAS, starting with a restriction on PFAS in firefighting foams. While this is a step in the right direction, there is a risk that this piecemeal approach leaves the door open to loopholes. A comprehensive action plan for the phase-out of all PFAS/the whole PFAS group in all but vital uses is needed.

What can Parliamentarians do?

- **Write to or ask PQs of Ministers, asking them to commit to a strong UK Chemicals Strategy**, which includes strict controls on groups of harmful chemicals and chemical cocktails; phasing out known toxic chemicals and better monitoring of chemicals in the environment.
- **Write to or ask PQs of Ministers, asking them to commit to a strong National Action Plan for the Sustainable Use of Pesticides**, which includes a commitment to a 50% reduction of pesticides in both use and toxicity.
- **Attend the upcoming event 'Chemical Cocktails: how can we reduce the toxic burden on our rivers?'** on the 23 May 2023, 5:30-7:30 at The Farmers Club, 3 Whitehall Ct, London SW1A 2EL. Please RSVP to matt@wcl.org.uk

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This briefing is also supported by:

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