

Saving Britain's Coasts and Rivers: Addressing the threat from chemical pollution

Policy briefing

Executive Summary

- Chemical pollution has grown worse over recent years. It's now found at unsafe levels in our rivers and seas, exacerbating the biodiversity crisis and worsening human health.
- The regulation of chemicals post-Brexit is too weak, failing to properly control harmful substances at source.
- There is a policy solution - renewed alignment with the EU REACH system for the regulation of chemicals.
- This alignment would reduce pollution and the associated health effects, improve worker safety, reduce complexity for businesses and contribute to net zero.

Chemical pollution - what's the problem?

While many industrial chemicals have improved the quality of our lives, [scientists have estimated](#) that the level of chemical and plastic pollution now found in our environment is threatening the stability of the global ecosystems we depend on. We are outside the 'safe operating space' for humanity.

Pollution is [one of the five direct drivers](#) of the biodiversity crisis; the presence of hazardous chemicals in wild habitats makes our wildlife more vulnerable and less resilient. Wildlife and Countryside Link and Rivers Trust [research](#) published in May 2023 found harmful cocktails of chemicals present at over 80% of sites tested, harming mammals, fish and invertebrates alike. Chemical pollution harms people too – evidence links exposure to chemicals used in everyday life to a [wide range of health conditions](#), from breast cancer to obesity and diabetes.

Weakened regulation is making pollution worse

Under the last Labour Government, the UK was one of the driving forces behind the creation of EU REACH (Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and restriction of Chemicals) Regulation in 2007. The UK was covered by this system up until the end of 2020 and the end of the Brexit transition period.

The current Government decided to establish a standalone system for regulating hazardous chemicals, UK REACH. The new regime is more light-touch and has struggled to carry out its functions, and has been criticised by recent [National Audit Office](#) and [Public Accounts Committee](#) inquiries. The lack of capacity and the deregulatory focus of the UK system is resulting in the UK considering [fewer](#) and [weaker](#) protections from harmful chemicals, and at a [slower](#) pace than the EU. The UK is also set to fall behind the EU in [preventing harmful chemicals](#) such as PFAS chemicals from polluting our water bodies.

The UK's standalone system also adds duplication and compliance costs on UK manufacturers and chemical companies, as well as barriers to trading with the EU, their largest trading partner. UK REACH has also excluded workers' representatives and trade unions from being involved in the decision-

making process, even though workers are usually the [first to be harmed and most exposed to harmful chemicals](#).

Policy solution: Alignment with EU REACH

The system for regulating chemicals in Switzerland does not require full registration data for chemicals that are already registered in EU REACH. However, it chooses to unilaterally adopt EU controls on harmful chemicals (deviations are rare, and where they do occur, relatively minor), including as they become more protective of health and the environment under reforms set out in the [EU Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability](#). This model of alignment to EU REACH provides a cost-effective, safe and sustainable precedent for the UK. It would maintain protections for the environment, workers and public health, by pegging them to the highest standards in the world.

Benefits of alignment:

Improved water quality and human health

Alignment with EU chemical regulations would make a big difference in controlling water pollution from industrial chemicals at source, particularly its proposals for banning the most hazardous chemicals (especially very persistent chemicals such as PFAS) in uses where they are avoidable. This would protect wild spaces and species and reduce public exposure to harmful chemicals.

Helping UK businesses

The EU's shift to more protective chemicals regulation will help to [boost](#) jobs and growth in the development of safer chemicals and the creation of new markets; markets that are cleaner and safer for consumers. Aligning the UK with this approach will allow us to share these benefits and provide UK businesses with an important first-mover advantage going into the global green transition.

Alignment will also reduce the duplication and compliance costs facing UK businesses. This is why many chemicals businesses and manufacturers have gone on the record about their desire for closer alignment with EU REACH, from the [British Coatings Federation](#) to [Aston Chemicals Limited](#) and [Marott Graphic Services](#) (UK) Ltd.

Tackling the climate emergency

Decarbonising the UK chemicals industry is absolutely vital for meeting Net Zero. The UK chemicals industry has the [third largest carbon footprint](#) after steel and cement. The EU's Chemicals Strategy is a truly transformative agenda that can drive [decarbonisation](#), as well as detoxify our economies.

In May 2023 the Labour Party [expressed support](#) for closer alignment with EU REACH, for the reasons set out above. We hope this support can be sustained through into a Manifesto commitment.

Briefing prepared by CHEM Trust, Marine Conservation Society and Wildlife and Countryside Link.

For more information, contact chloe.alexander@chemtrust.org

Online version: <https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/Saving%20Britains%20Coasts%20and%20Rivers.pdf>

September 2023