

Protesters to take to beaches over sewage discharges into English seas

Demonstrations from Falmouth to Whitstable to demand water firms do more to reduce pollution

Sandra Laville and Stephen Morris *The Guardian* 9.10.2022

Protests against sewage discharges blighting English beaches will take place across the country this weekend to highlight what demonstrators say is the failure of water companies to reduce pollution.

From Falmouth in Cornwall, where bathers, lifeguards and synchronised swimmers are demonstrating, to Whitstable in Kent, where protesters will turn a beach into a crime scene, activists say the problem of sewage discharges by water companies has not improved.

The demonstrations come after the water regulator, Ofwat, this week issued penalties of millions of pounds to many water companies for pollution incidents, missing compliance targets for treatment works and internal sewer flooding in 2021 and 2022. The amounts must be taken off customers' bills, Ofwat said.

Swimmers and beachgoers will barricade Tankerton beach near Whitstable on Sunday to identify it as a "crime scene". Ed Acteson, from campaign group SOS Whitstable, said the demonstration was taking place a year after the first beach protest garnered huge support: "We were really optimistic that after the huge turnout last year, the public support and media attention, that there would be significant changes. But if anything, it has got worse.

"The government's storm overflows discharge reduction plan seems to have made it easier for companies. Southern Water has been issued with another penalty for pollution and there have been more than 100 hours of raw sewage discharges into Tankerton beach this year alone."

Data shows that so far in 2022, there have been 67 combined storm overflow releases over 44 days – totalling 166.6 hours – into Tankerton beach.

In July, Southern Water was awarded one out of five stars by the Environment Agency, making it one of the two worst-rated water companies in England and Wales. In 2021, the company was fined a record £90m for deliberately discharging billions of litres of raw sewage into Kent and Hampshire coastal waters. A criminal investigation is ongoing.

The government's storm overflow reduction plan involves £56bn of investment over 25 years into a long-term programme to tackle storm sewage discharges by 2050. But critics say the plan lacks urgency.

Hundreds of miles west, protesters will gather at Cornwall's popular Gyllyngvase beach where there were 15 sewage pollution alerts in September – equivalent to the number for the whole of 2021.

Jo Curd, who runs exercise classes in the sea at Gyllyngvase and is organising the protest, said she hoped hundreds would attend. Pollution alerts affected her business, she added, forcing her to cancel two or three classes a week. "There were so many alerts in September – more than one on some days. There's anger and frustration. We've been complaining about this for so long and nothing has changed."

Curd, whose seven-year-old son Ollie will be at the beach protest, pointed out that Falmouth's swimming pool had closed, making the sea the only option for many people who wanted to swim. "South West Water say they are going to improve things but he's going to be an adult by the time anything changes," she said.

Last weekend a popular competition, the Endless Summer Swim, was cancelled because of a pollution alert.

Simon Thomason, chair of the event organiser, the Gyllyngvase Surf Life Saving Club, said it had no choice but to cancel on ethical grounds and because its insurance would have been invalid.

“This year has felt like we’ve had constant alerts on the beach,” said Thomason, adding a call for South West Water to invest more money in stopping sewage discharges: “The climate crisis means our winters are going to get wetter. Sewage also effects the ocean’s ability to store carbon, so we need to act now.”

Members of the Out of Sink synchronised swimming team from Penzance will also take part in the protest.

Spokesperson Pippa Best said: “The release of sewage in our waters is something that’s very close to our hearts and, unfortunately, our mouths, eyes, and entire bodies.

“We will be attempting to perform some synchro in the sea, hopefully not in the midst of sewage.”

Jayne Kirkham, the Labour leader on Cornwall council, said: “We use our beaches and rivers so much down here. They are vital to our health and our economy. I’ve met with representatives of South West Water but nothing is changing at any pace.

“Fixing our broken systems will take time. They have been swamped by new housebuilding without the obligation or investment to rebuild our sewers to keep up. But we have to solve this problem for the sake of the health of ourselves and our children, our ecosystems, and our economy.”

Glyn Winchester, a charity worker and frequent swimmer at Gyllyngvase and neighbouring Swanpool beach, said: “I am really angry that we are having to gather and protest shit in the sea. September is an exquisite time of year for sea swimming. Crowds have reduced, the light takes on a new quality of clarity, the sea is beginning to nip at your breath upon diving in. Sometimes there’s an ethereal fog hovering just above the surface. But if it has rained the night before, it is bittersweet as there will be danger lurking below the surface.”

Southern Water said it understood the concerns of those protesting at the weekend.

“Protecting the environment is a key priority for us and we are leading the water industry in developing solutions to reduce our reliance on permitted storm overflows. These are the combined sewage system’s pressure valve at times of increased rainfall, to avoid flooding people’s homes and communities – but we agree that these are not an acceptable measure.

“Working in partnership with councils and other stakeholders we are finding ways to remove rainfall from the sewage network, utilising Southern Water engineering and nature-based solutions. We already engage extensively with campaign groups and will continue to do that at every available opportunity.”

A spokesperson for South West Water said: “South West Water’s largest environmental investment programme in 15 years, WaterFit, is now well under way, focused on delivering benefits for customers, communities and the environment. Through WaterFit we will dramatically reduce our use of storm overflows, reduce and then remove our impact on river water quality by 2030 and maintain our excellent bathing water standards all year round.”