

Our position on...

## Working with water Companies

January 2024

West Cumbria Rivers Trust (WCRT) is committed to caring for our rivers and lakes. As part of achieving our vision, we undertake conservation works that improve and protect our catchments and their water courses for the benefit of people and wildlife.

### The Issue – why is this relevant to WCRT?

Water and sewage utilities are the single largest players in the UK water sector. They have some of the largest impacts on the quantity and quality of water in rivers through the abstraction and discharge of treated and untreated wastewater. They control important engineered infrastructure impacting rivers, and (almost) every household and business are connected to them as paying customers for water supply and/or sewage.

United Utilities – (the North West’s Water utility provider) are invested in the broader health of catchments and consequent impacts on rivers. There are many schemes through which water companies are trying to reduce nutrient pollution from other sectors, particularly agriculture. Water companies have the single largest spend on the water environment through the Water Industry Natural Environment Programme (WINEP approx. £1 bill p.a.) in England and are linked to local authorities and other urban stakeholders through their Drainage and Wastewater Management Plans.

### Why is working with water companies contentious?

According to the Environment Agency, up to 53% of rivers in England are not achieving good ecological status because of the activities of water companies (43% due to treated effluent discharge, 12% due to storm overflows, 7% due to groundwater abstraction and 4% due to surface water abstraction). The operations of water and sewage companies have negative impacts on rivers, and they are rightly criticised for this.

The government’s Environmental Audit Committee report recommended that much stronger and more effective regulation of water companies is needed, including potential reforms to how they declare profits and financially reward performance. The current poor state of our rivers is in part due to poor operational management and underinvestment in infrastructure by water companies. This is in breach of their legal and social licence to operate. Their environmental performance varies substantially in terms of pollution incidents and delivery on the WINEP.

Our umbrella organisation - The Rivers Trust (RT) - aims to improve transparency in the sector, and they have made data on sewage pollution by water companies publicly accessible through their [sewage map](#). They are working hard with other E-NGOs and parliamentarians to end sewage pollution. Their role in holding water companies to account and sharing data and evidence on their impacts on the water environment is important in strengthening good governance in the water sector. They speak up for healthier rivers and safeguard that independence.



In the course of this work, the RT will always speak up against pollution and poor management, and champion better access to data and evidence on the state of our rivers. The RT safeguard their independence, for instance, with contract clauses that uphold our right to criticise water company partners publicly.

## What is the legal context?

Water companies in England are private corporate (pseudo-) monopolies regulated by Defra, the Environment Agency, and OfWat. They are regulated by a suite of laws including the Water Resources Act, Water Industries Act, Water Act, and the Environment Act. Broadly, these require water companies to provide a public service of water supply and wastewater treatment; to invest in the infrastructure they own, mitigate pollution and negative impacts on the water environment; and to deliver fair value for money to customers.

The approach to regulating water companies in England has recently come under criticism and the new formed Office of Environmental Protection has launched [an inquiry](#) into whether the responsible authorities have failed to comply with their legal responsibilities, particularly with respect to water companies discharging untreated sewage into rivers and water ways.

## WCRT's position

Given the scale of operation and impact of United Utilities on the rivers in our patch, WCRT wants to work with them at a strategic level to accelerate the recovery of our rivers. Any system for solving the complex problems facing our rivers will have to involve United Utilities as part of the solution.

WCRT works with local communities and Nature Based Solutions to improve the state of our rivers and resilience in our catchments. We are a valuable partner for United Utilities in planning and delivering community and nature-based improvements to rivers and their catchment areas. But our role in holding United Utilities to account and building a more transparent sector that the public understands, is core to our charitable objectives. We will not compromise that role.

WCRT will collaborate with United Utilities in order to achieve strategic objectives and systemic change that will improve the state of our rivers for the long term. This involves delivering implementation projects such as farm advice and river restoration and partnership projects when United Utilities are one of the funders. Current projects funded by UU are the River Irt, River Ehen and St Johns Beck.

WCRT is entering into these partnership agreements in order to accelerate the recovery of our rivers. These agreements demonstrate new approaches to rebuilding nature and working with catchment partnerships.