

Welsh Affairs Committee

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From: The Chair of the Committee

Julie James MS, Minister for Climate Change, Welsh Government
5th Floor, Tŷ Hywel
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1NA

[via email]

24 April 2023

Dear Julie,

My Committee recently held two evidence sessions focused on the regulation of water companies in Wales in the context of growing concern about poor water quality as a result of sewage discharges.

We heard, in our first session, from representatives of Surfers against Sewage and Afoyndd Cymru, and the environmental campaigner, Angela Jones. In the second session we questioned Natural Resources Wales and the UK regulator, Ofwat, followed by the two water companies operating in Wales, Dŵr Cymru and Hafren Dyfrdwy.

We were grateful for the engagement by these bodies. We were very concerned, however, by the evidence we heard about the condition of Welsh rivers and coastal waters and the current approaches to monitoring, enforcement, and regulation.

Key points of concern include:

- the accuracy of monitoring equipment, and therefore reliability of data;
- the lack of monitoring of the volume of sewage discharged as well as the frequency of outflows;
- the frequency of “unpermitted” sewage discharges from storm overflows; and
- the low number of prosecutions in Wales to enforce water quality regulations and the apparent lack of appetite from regulators for stronger enforcement powers and sanctions.

We were also concerned at the apparent lack of urgency in tackling these challenges on the part of regulators and water companies. Although data collection on sewage discharges began in 2013, the response of regulators and water companies appears to be to pursue further research into the impact of the discharges up to 2027. The significant work required to replace Wales’s combined sewerage system means there is no time to lose, and regulators and companies need to have a clear long-term plan stretching over medium term.

The general view of the Committee was that there seemed to be a lack of a clear and timely plan to address the issues highlighted, including the sheer quantity of sewage being discharged. We would, therefore, be interested to know what steps are being taken by the Welsh Government to address this set of problems. I would be grateful for your reply by 15 May.

I know that the problems of water pollution are of concern to all the people of Wales. Our counterparts on the Senedd Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee have previously published reports on this subject and I am copying this letter to the chair, Llyr Gruffydd MS.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stephen', followed by a small dash.

Rt Hon Stephen Crabb MP