

MANY SEE IT AS ONE OF THE environmental crimes of the century. Privatised water companies have been lining their pockets while routinely dumping raw sewage into our increasingly stinky rivers and coastlines.

After decades of gross underinvestment, England's decrepit Victorian-era wastewater system can no longer cope. The crux of the problem is that raw sewage and rainwater end up in the same pipes on their way to the treatment works. Heavy rain fills the system to overflowing, so special valves release the contents into the nearest river or sea (otherwise, the untreated sewage would back up and flood our homes). These intentional raw sewage discharges are permitted – but only under exceptional circumstances and on condition that they are reported. (Incidentally, the water companies call them 'spills', as if they are accidental.)

But recent evidence reveals that the water companies are dumping 10 times more sewage than they have been disclosing. Environment Agency figures show there were no fewer than 301,091 sewage discharges in England in 2022 – that's an average of 824 per day. In the same year, these corporations paid out £1.4 billion in dividends to their shareholders and awarded astronomical multi-million-pound bonuses to their senior management (making a mockery of 'performance-related pay').

Regulators, planners, local authorities and governments all had the power to stop this environmental vandalism and rampant profiteering – but didn't.

The health of England's waterways already lags far behind the rest of the UK. According to the Environment Agency, 67.5 per cent of water bodies in Scotland are classed as being in good health, as are 40 per cent of rivers in Wales and 31.3 per cent of rivers in Northern Ireland. In England, the figure is 0 per cent of rivers, lakes and streams. This is despite the pledge in the government's 25 Year Environment Plan for 75 per cent of water bodies in England to be in good condition "as soon as is practicable" (ahead of an unrealistic target for all water to be in good health by 2027).

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An overflow outlet on Thurlestone Beach in Devon

“England's Victorian-era wastewater system can no longer cope”

MARK CARWARDINE

OPINION

Not surprisingly, the Environment Agency recently suggested that water company bosses should be thrown into jail. Or maybe we should simply force these industry bosses to go for a swim in one of their foul sewage-laden rivers.

They are, at last, running scared.

In May, the industry trade body Water UK (which represents 25 companies across the UK) apologised on behalf of its English members for “not acting quickly enough on sewage spills”, and promised to invest in pipes and treatment works, which “could involve additional funding of £10 billion this decade” (more than tripling current paltry levels of investment).

They've got a nerve. They've had several decades to “act quickly enough” and invest in fit-for-purpose infrastructure. Their show of contrition could be seen as nothing but an attempt to quell growing public outrage.

Worse than that, they expect consumers to pick up the tab – through higher water bills. On the contrary, we should be getting a refund – compensation for the utility giants failing to fulfil their obligations – and many propose it should be bankrolled by an indefinite ban on CEO bonuses and

shareholder pay-outs.

Besides, £10 billion will barely make a dent. It is estimated that we'll need at least five times that amount to restore all our rivers and coastlines to good health.

It's no coincidence that Scottish Water and Northern Ireland Water are public

corporations and Welsh Water is a not-for-profit company with no shareholders. What more incentive do we need to take England's water companies back into public ownership? Since they were privatised in 1989, they appear to have shown nothing but contempt for the law, their paying customers and the natural world. **W**

“The water companies are dumping 10 times more sewage than they have been disclosing”



NEIL COOPER/LAWRY