

How do rivers fare in the manifestos? A review by River Action

By James Wallace CEO, River Action UK

The water pollution crisis in our rivers, lakes and seas is one of the leading issues for the 2024 general election. River Action, joined by communities and organisations nationwide, has raised the alarm and called on voters to join the campaign. But are suggestions like The Charter for Rivers reflected in the manifestos?

Freshwater is the lifeblood of our land, enabling food and water security, underpinning our economy, literally sustaining lives. But our rivers and lakes are dying – only 14% of rivers in England are in good ecological condition and 83% of rivers are highly polluted by sewage and agriculture.

Earlier this year, water quality testing from River Action revealed high levels of dangerous E.coli bacteria in the River Thames ahead of the famous Boat Race. With 3.6 million hours of raw sewage spilled in 2023 and water companies accruing £64 billion in debt since privatisation while rewarding shareholders with £78 billion of dividends, this is no surprise. Known by many of our neighbours as 'The Dirty Man of Europe', the UK has some of the worst water quality.

'Don't throw the cox into the Thames', Boat Race crews warned, as high levels of E-Coli found in the water

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Meanwhile, we risk running out of clean freshwater with no joined-up national plan. Water companies leak 3 billion litres every day, and we are facing a shortfall of 5 billion litres a day in just a few years.

Now that we are clear on the scale of the crisis, let's look at how our rivers, lakes and seas could be protected and restored in the next government.



LABOUR

Starting with (according to the polls) the frontrunner candidate for the next government. The manifesto essentially wrote itself from various recent Labour announcements. Having first trumpeted it would ban bonuses for polluting water company bosses' in October 2023, they have made it a top feature in the manifesto. Likewise bringing criminal charges against persistent lawbreakers. This is a welcome policy but not the urgent systemic root and branch regulatory reform needed.

How, we wonder, will they accelerate the penalty and prosecution process, having committed to automatic and severe fines? It took 6 and 4 years respectively for Thames Water and Southern Water to be prosecuted for major fish kills by the poorly performing Environment Agency. It needs a new bold government to give the enforcers back their sharp teeth. Labour's commitment to independent pollution monitoring is well received. We can't have polluters marking their own homework. But, with the Environment Agency notoriously turning-up late and downgrading serious pollution incidents, we need the threat of immediate inspections reinstated to rattle illegal polluters.

In March this year, Labour vowed to put water companies into special measures to force them to clean up their toxic mess and protect people's health. This made the manifesto, but the party has been light on detail of what these special measures would be. For example, what is their commitment to ensuring the taxpayer does not bail out a failing water company like Thames Water?

Labour has remained quiet on agricultural pollution, likely due to its targeting of rural votes and pacifying the National Farmers' Union. The manifesto recognises that the Environmental Land Management scheme (ELMS) must work for farmers and nature. But unlike the other manifestos it does not put a number on what support would look like. A missed opportunity to support struggling farmers.

Surprisingly, there is nothing on water scarcity - how can a party claim to prioritise growth when our freshwater, therefore economy, is at risk of drying up?

CONSERVATIVE

With the backdrop of an attack on net zero costs and threat of new oil and gas licensing rounds, the Conservative's environmental manifesto pledges are a

roundup of the policies introduced while in government. Why does it take an election to announce reviewing Ofwat's dreadful Price Review process? They lack ambition compared with 2019 and what is needed to remedy more than a decade of environmental degradation.

Their manifesto is marred by almost daily news about the failing water industry while under their tenure – most recently, analysis from the BBC found every major English water company has reported data showing they have discharged raw sewage when the weather is dry. We are concerned to see the returned threat of scrapping the nutrient neutrality rules which protect vulnerable waterways. If last autumn's Commons v Lords debacle is anything to go by, can we expect the Conservatives to continue to set up housing against clean rivers? We can and must have both. And the proposal to use polluter fines to fund nature based solutions will only work if sufficiently punitive and hefty. At the moment it pays to pollute.

We were pleased to see the River Wye get a mention in the manifesto. However, it was in reference to the 'Plan for the River Wye' which local campaigners have ridiculed for falling 'far short', countering with their own action plan to revive the river. The manifesto does at least recognise the need for an increased farming budget, with a commitment to increase it by £1 billion over the Parliament; mimicking but not matching a policy first mentioned at the Liberal Democrat conference last autumn.

As the Conservatives fight to hold their rural seats, expectations were almost non-existent about the potential for a shake up on their water policy. With the announcement of banning wet wipes made three times over as many years, we have become accustomed to repeated broken/recycled promises. Perhaps a new version of the Conservative party, reverting to its small 'c' conservative roots might emerge post election, incorporating more of the Conservative Environment Network's manifesto for rivers, seas and waterways; such as linking water company CEOs pay with environmental performance and ensuring housebuilding doesn't contribute to storm overflow discharges?

LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

After Ed Davey fell off a paddleboard in Lake Windermere to highlight the sewage crisis, it was no surprise that our polluted waters feature as the top Lib Dem environmental message. While they have long trailed their sewage policies, the manifesto included a few interesting new ideas. Policies include 'blue flag standards' and 'blue corridors' to drive clean and healthy waterways and giving local environmental groups a place on water companies' boards.

Restructuring water companies into public benefit companies could help put people and planet before profit, giving a voice to communities and ensuring financial rewards relate to environmental performance. Their proposed abolition of Ofwat may be a good step too... will a tough new regulator rise from the swamp?

A Sewage Tax on water company profits may resonate with voters, a direct way of linking environmental and financial performance. An explicit reference to enforcing laws on sewage overflows is welcome, but should extend to other water pollution including agriculture. The current damp squib advisory approach to law enforcement has led to the ecological collapse of rivers like the Wye. As with the other manifestos reviewed, there is limited explicit reference to the essential ingredients to regulatory reform such as an increase in Environment Agency inspections and publishing independent pollution monitoring data. The public has a right to know what goes into their inland and coastal waters – and who is to blame – and all parties should commit to transparency (which would also save the regulators time and money on information requests and legal prosecutions).

The Lib Dem manifesto does make the direct link between farming and rivers, with a commitment to “support farmers to reduce the pollution of rivers, streams and lakes” and plans to properly fund the Environmental Land Management scheme with an extra £1 billion a year. The creation of an Environmental Rights Act – guaranteeing everyone’s right to a healthy environment could help them achieve the target of doubling nature by 2050.

It seems that beyond the confines of electoral targets, the Lib Dems have an opportunity to position themselves as the party for water and broaden focus out from just sewage pollution. This was demonstrated with voter approval in the rural Tiverton by-election last year and may be repeated in the general election. But as with the others, there was silence on water shortages, although a single social tariff for water bills to eliminate water poverty was a nod in the right direction.

GREEN

Finally, to the Greens, who recognised in their manifesto launch that they have no expectations of forming a government but instead will play a key role in holding the party in power accountable. Their manifesto states what they will push for in parliament rather than what they would implement as Government.

Backed by a promise to tax the super rich, the Green Party manifesto has the

environment as one of its three key pillars, and directly recognises the food system as the “greatest driver of nature loss and pollution.” They would triple support for farmers to transition to nature friendly farming, and link payments to reduced use of pesticides and agrichemicals. And, they would end factory farming, which by default would significantly reduce agricultural nutrient pollution.

REFORM

There is not much to say here. Reform’s manifesto commits to cancelling all EU inherited regulations (i.e. all our current environmental standards and protections) and abandoning any commitment to achieving net zero. The Reform Party will scrap climate-related farming subsidies and stop Natural England protecting wildlife. There is no reference to rivers or ending pollution.

In conclusion

It is very encouraging that four manifestos have cited water pollution but there’s little to get excited about. Whichever party forms the the next government has a long way to go to inspire belief that significant action will be taken to save our rivers, lakes and seas over the next parliament, as key measures were limited or missing from the manifestos including:

- **Sewage** – significant reform of Ofwat’s failed regulation of the water industry to end decades of profiteering and pollution, and restructuring and refinancing failing water companies linking environmental and shareholder performance, putting people and planet before profits.
- **Agriculture** – strengthening regulation on intensive livestock farming and enforcing the law, limiting density of factory farms in catchments, supporting farmers with environmental incentives, enabling nutrient trading – turning farm waste into resource – and increasing farmers’ share of food pricing.
- **Water scarcity** – restoring wetlands, building more reservoirs and fixing leaking water pipes so we do not run out of water; delivered through a nationwide plan to secure water within and between catchments, while decreasing demand for abstraction, protecting our most vulnerable waterways like chalk streams.
- **Monitoring and enforcement** – properly funding environmental protection agencies and water industry regulators, publishing independent pollution monitoring and sharing data with the public and between regulators, equipping and instructing them to take firm action against polluters.

- **Protecting public health** – ensuring the Environment Agency properly monitors our rivers and publishes transparent data and guidance about when it is safe to use rivers, and making water companies introduce tertiary treatment of final effluent in areas of high use and risk.

It's not our job to tell anyone how to vote on July 4th, but as we head to the polls what we can do is constantly urge all politicians to put water – rivers, lakes and seas – at the heart of the next parliament.

We must value water as if it's the elixir of life and enabler of every aspect of our economy. We must start acting like we are in a freshwater emergency. That means a government that prioritises this urgent mission. One that will provide the financial and policy commitments, but also the leadership to rebuild trust and mobilise regulators, civil servants, politicians and industry into action. We need to welcome in a new era of collaborative working – across parties, sectors and communities – moving beyond blame and deceit to achieve rapid transformational systemic solutions. To do this, the new government must define and own the problem, be transparent and fulfil its promises now, not in future decades, and that starts with committing to wholesale regulatory reform backed by sufficient funding.

For real change, we need the new Secretary of State for the Environment to sit opposite the Prime Minister at Cabinet, next to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and for the environment to be front and centre in our nation's political future.

#VoteCleanRivers

James is Chief Executive of River Action. He is a naturalist, archaeologist and social entrepreneur and has established enterprises ranging from renewable energy, regenerative agriculture and green finance to ecotourism, nature restoration and deep sea exploration. Prior to helping Charles Watson develop River Action into a national charity, James was CEO and Co-founder of Beaver Trust where he led the coalition to protect and live alongside native beavers.



James campaigns to rescue Britain's rivers using systemic, local solutions, working collaboratively in the freshwater emergency. He convenes national stakeholders, bringing together government, industry, NGO and community leaders to secure abundant, clean water and restore wildlife habitats, while holding polluters and regulators to account in the courts of public opinion and law.