

FAQs River Witham incident

What has happened?

The Environment Agency received reports of dead fish in the River Witham on 3 March 2018. Our officers subsequently determined that a pollution incident had occurred from ammonia which had entered the Witham. According to our latest estimates, this pollution has caused the deaths of many thousands of fish and also severely impacted the river's ecosystem (including the organisms that feed the fish population).

At this stage, we believe this is the largest river pollution incident ever recorded in Lincolnshire.

What area did the pollution affect?

The River Witham has been affected from Bardney Bridge Lock down to the Wash. We are not able to comment on the source of the pollution at this time due to potential legal action.

What has the Environment Agency been doing to mitigate the pollution?

We have had environmental experts on site, including fisheries specialists and biologists, who have been working in two teams. One team focused on isolating the source of the pollution and advising on clean-up, while a second team worked on determining and mitigating the extent of the damage. We also used a survey vessel in the Wash.

Our teams are continuing to work on this incident and we will keep the community updated as we gather more information on the full extent of the damage and the likely recovery time through our surveys and investigative work.

We have staff dedicated full-time to this incident and we are doing everything we can to ensure that the river recovers as soon as possible.

Has the pollution stopped now?

Yes, there is no further pollution entering the Witham. We continue to work to isolate the source of the pollution locally.

Has this pollution had an impact on drinking water?

No, we have found no evidence to suggest that there has been an impact on drinking water.

Whenever a pollution incident occurs, we always notify water companies and others who may abstract water so that they can put the appropriate measures in place to stop abstraction in the relevant areas. In this case, no abstraction was taking place in the affected area.

Has this pollution caused any food safety risk in relation to the shellfish fisheries nearby?

No, the Food Standards Agency has advised that there is no food safety risk in relation to shellfish due to the pollutant being diluted as it reaches the estuarine and marine environment.

Is the Environment Agency going to prosecute those responsible?

We take incidents like this very seriously and will always seek to prosecute those who negligently damage our precious environment and wildlife. This could mean a criminal conviction and a hefty fine. We have dedicated Environmental Crime officers working on this incident.

Once our investigations are complete, we will fully consider each of the enforcement options available to us. This could include but is not limited to criminal prosecution.

Although we understand that people would like to know more, this is currently an active investigation. Any information we share could prejudice and potentially undermine our investigation if found inappropriate.

What is the extent of the damage that's been caused?

It is too early to tell exactly what damage has been caused at this point, but many thousands of fish have died and there will have been an impact on invertebrates and plant life as well. We have been carrying out surveys to monitor the impact of the pollution and will continue to monitor the river as it recovers over time.

How long will it take for the river to get back to normal?

We appreciate that people would like us to be able to give concrete time scales regarding the recovery of the Witham, but in reality it is simply not possible to say exactly how and when the river will recover. A river is a complex ecosystem made up of numerous species of plants, invertebrates and larger species. Different species recover at different rates. Some are likely to return relatively quickly whilst it may take years for other species to be back to recent levels. For example, we know there were large, mature pike killed in the incident. Even if conditions were favourable to restock, it would take some years for these fish to mature. Where we can we will give nature a helping hand.

We will be carrying out an acoustic fish survey at the end of April, to compare the results directly with one we completed at the same time last year. Once these results have been analysed, we'll know more about the current state of the river. We expect the analysis of the results to become available in mid-May.

Will the Environment Agency be restocking the rivers?

Our local teams have been in contact with the Environment Agency's national fish farm in Calverton, where fish are hatched and bred to meet demand and thrive in the wild. There is still a lot of work to be done before restocking can be considered as the ecosystem of the river has to recover to be able to support and feed any fish that we restock.

The results of the fish survey may help us decide if restocking is needed. In order for restocking to be successful, the rest of the ecosystem will need to be healthy.

Will anglers still be able to fish on the River Witham?

Yes, anglers are still able to fish on the River Witham. However we know that fish populations on the affected stretch of the river will take some time to recover.

Until then, anglers who have a valid rod licence may choose to fish either on a different stretch of the river or on any of the many other rivers and lakes in Lincolnshire. Note that it is now the closed season for fishing on rivers, which lasts until 15 June.

What to do if I spot dead fish in the River Witham?

We are aware following this incident that dead fish are present within and on the banks of the River Witham, which can be distressing to see. If you do observe dead or distressed fish, please contact our Incident Hotline on 0800 80 70 60.

If you have any further queries not covered by this FAQ, please contact us at:

LNenquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk

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