

Environment Agency:

- Sir James Bevan, Chief Executive
- Dr Toby Willison, Executive Director of Operations
- Sarah Chare, Director Operations South East
- Simon Hawkins, Deputy Director Hertfordshire & North London

Canal & River Trust

- Richard Parry, Chief Executive
- Peter Birch, Group Environment Manager
- Jon Guest, Waterway Manager in London
- Nick Smith, National Waste and Contamination Surveyor

Government and Opposition:**Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA):**

- Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs
- Thérèse Coffey MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Environment

The Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (EFRA) Committee:

- Neil Parish MP, Chair

Environmental Audit Committee (EAC):

- Mary Creagh MP, Chair

Labour Party:

- Sue Hayman MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs
- David Lammy MP, Tottenham North & Stoke Newington, Shadow Home Secretary
- Meg Hillier MP, Hackney South & Shoreditch

River Lea Oil Spill

Authorities must adopt a new approach to prevent future disasters

The River Lea flows south from the Chiltern Hills through East London to the River Thames, and is a major source of London's drinking water. The Lea Valley is home to over 200 bird species, over 35 species of mammal and over 500 species of plant; all of which are under persistent threat from contaminated waste entering the river at Pymmes Brook.

On Sunday 11th February 2018, the River Lea saw its worst – but by no means only – incident of waste crime in recent history when used engine oil entered the river at Pymmes Brook. The slow emergency response by both the Environment Agency and the Canal & River Trust enabled the contamination to spread up- and downstream over five miles of waterway.

By the Environment Agency's own calculations, over 78,000 litres of oil-polluted water has been removed from the contaminated area since the incident. The Swan Sanctuary rescued more than 30 swans and other waterbirds. Many other animals died. There were already 40 swans in care at The Swan Sanctuary following another recent pollution event from Pymmes Brook on 28th December 2017 – otherwise admissions in February 2018 would likely have exceeded 70.

Local residents, businesses, rowers, walkers, tourists and live-aboard boaters have been subject to harmful fumes, along with the sight of dead and contaminated wildlife; not to mention the toxic waste itself. Some local river-based businesses and organisations have had no option but to cease operations during this time.

A boater and Canal & River Trust joint volunteer clean-up effort was undermined when hazardous waste held in unsealed tonne bags, including dead animals, was left on public towpaths uncollected by the Environment Agency for over three weeks. Volunteers have noted the Environment Agency's proactive work at the source of the spill, as well as the initial dedication of a handful of Canal & River Trust staff on the ground. It is, however, over one month since the incident and volunteers are still organising regular clean-up operations with no support from the Environment Agency or the Canal & River Trust.

After one month, the oil spill has still not been contained or cleaned

Throughout this environmental disaster communication between agencies and the affected communities has been substandard, and has fallen short of the most basic expectations:

- No clarity between Environment Agency and Canal & River Trust's responsibilities
- No evidence of an emergency response contingency plan or strategy
- Insufficient briefing of Canal & River Trust staff and volunteers
- No proactive or clear communication with boat licence holders, rowing clubs or marinas
- No education of towpath users or local businesses
- Lack of clean-up resources available to boaters and volunteers
- Failure to close waterways quickly and the premature reopening of Hertford Union Canal leading to spread of the contamination

The Canal & River Trust has acknowledged they "deal with on average six pollution events each year relating to the discharges from Pymmes Brook". Why then were authorities so unprepared to cope with this major incident?

The Canal & River Trust's purpose is "to act as guardian for the canals and rivers of England and Wales – ensuring that history, nature and communities are central to everything we do." The Environment Agency "protect and improve the quality of water, making sure there is enough for people, businesses, agriculture and the environment."

We, the Undersigned, call upon the Addressees to provide:

- **Explanations** – Why was an environmental disaster neither acted upon immediately, nor respective actions clearly communicated?
- **Transparency** – We call on the Environment Agency and Canal & River Trust to share publicly their waste crime response and communication strategy, including roles and responsibilities and allotted emergency budget.
- **Improvements** – We demand an inter-agency investigation and root cause analysis of the February 2018 River Lea Oil Disaster and clean-up response. Lessons learnt and future measures to prevent and cope with disasters of such nature should be shared publicly.
- **Accountability** – We call on DEFRA, EAC and the EFRA select committee to hold the Environment Agency and the Canal & River Trust to account for their handling of this disaster and to consider whether the agencies are adequately funded to meet their public objectives.
- **Scrutiny** – A process established whereby charities and community groups can review the approach to water quality and pollution management within the Lea Valley.

Online petition and photos: bit.ly/leadisaster



Caroline Day and Abigail Woodman on behalf of Save Lea Marshes



Theo Thomas, Chief Executive



Alan Wildman, Chair



Dorothy Beeson MBE, BEM, Founder



Dave Mendes da Costa, Chair



Debbie Leach, Chief Executive



Katy Hogarth and Alfie Hatt, Founding Directors



Caroline Russell, Assembly Member
Sian Berry, Assembly Member
Alastair Binnie-Lubbock, Hackney Green Party Mayoral Candidate

ALFRED LE ROY
Ben Perkins, Captain