Advice on reporting pollution incidents...

One of the most important aspects of the Westcountry CSI scheme is that through increasing the number of people closely watching their rivers and streams we are more likely to spot pollution incidents and enable them to be reported to the Environment Agency.

Pollution events are often short-lived and most apparent close to the source so it is vital that we have as many volunteers regularly visiting as many sites as possible. You don't need to have your water testing kit with you to spot and report an incident – many common types of pollution (sewage spills, agricultural runoff, soil/sediment erosion) are noticeable to the naked eye (or nose) whilst they are happening and leave tell-tale evidence afterwards.

The Environment Agency are the responsible body for recording and responding to pollution incidents in England – they have a dedicated incident hotline that you can call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week 0800 80 70 60 you can also report incident via email to ics@environment-agency.gov.uk

You should call the Environment Agency incident hotline if you see any of the following:

- pollution to water or land
- damage or danger to the natural environment
- dead fish or fish gasping for air
- flooding from main rivers or the sea
- illegal removals from watercourses
- main rivers blocked by a vehicle or fallen tree causing risk of flooding
- poaching or illegal fishing
- unusual changes in river flow
- collapsed or badly damaged river banks

When you call the incident hotline you will be connected to a national call centre, they will need to know where the incident has occurred so please have a national grid reference to hand. They will ask your name but it is possible to report incidents anonymously. The incident will be recorded on the National Incident Recording System (NIRS) and forwarded to your local EA team. They may get in touch to discuss the incident and any follow up actions with you. You will also be given an incident reference number.

The Westcountry Rivers Trust staff that support the CSI volunteers do not work during the evening or at weekends, CSI surveys are not checked straight away. **It is important that if you see a pollution incident that you call the Environment Agency** as they will log the incident immediately and are best placed to respond in an emergency.

There have been reports recently that Environment Agency staff are being told not to respond to "low- and no-impact environmental incidents" – also known as category 3 and 4 incidents. The Environment Agency classify environmental incidents on a scale from category 1 – 'major, persistent and/or extensive impact' to category 4 – 'no impact'. Despite the recent revelations, due to significant on ongoing reduction in EA funding this has been the situation for some time – ever since we started the Westcountry CSI scheme in 2016 we were told that it was unlikely that category 3 and 4 would be attended in person.

However – it is still vital, perhaps more important than ever, that environmental incidents are reported to the Environment Agency and we hope that our CSI volunteers will continue to do so. Rest assured that although an incident may not be attended by EA staff, the report will be placed on the NIRS database and that data is used in a number of ways.

- Local EA staff are well aware that category 3 and 4 incidents are often the precursor to more serious incidents and/or a sign that something is amiss and will refer to the NIRS database when prioritising areas for further investigations, compliance visits or farm inspections

- Continued reporting of incidents (116,000 were reported in 2021) makes it harder for the government to justify further reductions in funding for incident response

- A reduction in reporting would likely be portrayed as a reduction in pollution incidents (perhaps justifying further cuts)

- Only by increasing our awareness of what constitutes a reportable incident, the incident reporting process and likely response can we properly hold the Environment Agency accountable for its performance

Given the importance of the distinction between events of different severities – **it is helpful to have some understanding of how the Environment Agency assign a categorisation to an environmental incidents.** A summary of the impact categories relating to water quality, ecology (water) and fish can be found on the following pages. This information is taken from a larger Environment Agency document - Incidents and their classification: the Common Incident Classification Scheme (CICS) which also covers impacts on potable abstractions, physical habitat, human health and amenity value.

Reporting pollution to the water company.

In the Westcountry we are served by two water companies – South West Water and Wessex Water. Both have incident reporting mechanisms where you can report pollution **that you think could be related to sewage.** Signs of sewage pollution include:

- Sanitary products in the water, on land, on bathing beaches or the coast (toilet paper, tissues, wipes, faecal matter, condoms)
- Watercourse appears cloudy, milky or foamy
- Dead or gasping fish
- A noticeable sewage smell
- Grey coloured water
- Sewage solids
- Soap suds or foam in the water

South West Water

Call 0344 346 2020

Web form:

https://www.southwestwater.co.uk/advice-and-services/your-wastewater/reporting-a-suspected-pollution/

Wessex Water YTL GROUP

Call 0345 600 4 600

Web form:

https://www.wessexwater.co.uk/help-and-advice/emergencies/reporting-pollutions

If you are in any doubt as to the source of a pollution incident then it is best to call the Environment Agency. In either case (EA or water company) please make a note of any incident reference number you are given (ideally in the notes section of the CSI survey form) and let us know so that we can monitor the level of response.

Category	Impact criteria – WATER QUALITY
Category 1	*A **persistent** and/or **extensive** effect on water quality which has a **serious** effect on the quality or use of that water.* Where ***persistent*** means an effect is still evident at least 7 days from the date of the incident. ***Extensive*** means an effect over several kilometres of a watercourse (as a guide use 1 to 2 km, although some subjectivity may be applied) ***Serious*** effects include levels of dangerous substance(s) exceeding toxicity levels known to cause serious harm/death to aquatic life, or dissolved oxygen levels falling to critical levels
Category 2	***Significant** but normally **localised** effect on water quality which has a significant impact on the quality or use of that water.* Examples of category 2 impacts include silt or soil, low dissolved oxygen or high ammonia levels along an extensive stretch of a water body. Impacts may be up to a couple of hundred metres in a larger water body or effects over several kilometres (such as a heavy rainbow coloured oil film).
Category 3	***Limited** and **localised** effect on water quality which has a minimal impact on the quality or use of that water.* Impacts are normally localised around the point of discharge but could include an impact extending over a few kilometres of a stream (such as a thin oil sheen).
Category 4	Substantiated incident with **no impact** to water quality

Category	Impact criteria – ECOLOGY (WATER)
Category 1	***Major damage*** *to aquatic nature conservation,* ***gross*** *and* ***extensive contamination*** *or coverage of the bed of the watercourse, water column or surface* *Contamination* may be fungal/bacterial/algal growths, sewage debris or particulate matter including silt deposition and ferrous deposits from mine-water. *Extensive* means an effect over several kilometres of a watercourse or a large area of a still water, as a minimum (as a guide use 1-2km, but some subjectivity may be applied).
Category 2	***Significant damage*** *to aquatic nature conservation,* ***gross*** *but* ***localised contamination*** *or coverage of the bed of the watercourse, water column or surface by fungal/bacterial/algal growths, sewage debris or particulate matter.* *The contamination may be localised, such as around the point of discharge, or a more limited effect over a wider area.*
Category 3	***Minor damage*** *to aquatic nature conservation,* ***marginal or localised contamination*** *or coverage of the bed of the watercourse, water column or surface* *Bed, column or surface of watercourse only marginally contaminated around point of discharge or in localised area. Such as a limited growth of sewage fungus around an outfall pipe.*
Category 4	*Substantiated incident with* ***no impact*** *on aquatic nature conservation.*

Category	Impact criteria – FISH
Category 1	***Major** fish mortality* The loss of: - Salmon or sea trout: 10 or more adults or 100 or more juveniles - Brown trout: 50 or more adults (>20cm) or 100 or more juveniles (<20cm) - Coarse fish: 100 or more adults (>20cm) or 1000 or more juveniles (<20cm) - Eel: 20 or more yellow or silver eel For other freshwater fish (such as bullhead, minnow and loaches) this would normally involve the death of more than 100 fish
Category 2	***Significant** fish mortality* The loss of: - Salmon or sea trout: fewer than 10 adults or fewer than 100 juveniles - Brown trout: between 10 and 50 adults (>20cm) or between 10 and 100 juveniles (<20cm) - Coarse fish: between 10 and 100 adults (>20cm) or between 10 and 1000 juveniles (<20cm) - Eel: Fewer than 20 yellow or silver eel For other freshwater fish (such as bullhead, minnow and loaches) this would normally involve the death of fewer than 100 fish
Category 3	***Minor** fish mortality* Typically involving the loss of small number of small (non-angled) species such as stickleback and/or no more than 10 coarse fish or trout..
Category 4	*Substantiated incident with **no impact** on fish.*