

Improving bathing waters

How farmers can improve bathing water

15 January 2014

Across the North West, the Environment Agency is working with various partners, including National Farmers Union, to improve the quality of bathing waters.

Over the last 25 years, we've helped to improve the quality of bathing waters considerably. Back in 1988, only 18% of them passed our sampling tests. In 2013, that number was up to 88%.

It's been a huge improvement, but there is still more work to do. In 2015 a new, stricter, directive on bathing water quality will come in, raising the bar even higher, and making the challenge even tougher. To hit these new targets we need your help.

Where do I fit in?

We are already doing a lot to improve the water quality. Now we're asking people from all walks of life to play their part in helping us improve.

We're already talking to businesses, hotels and local communities to help us – but they're not the only ones. Farmers can have a huge impact on the quality of our water and rivers.

A recent study by Defra found that in rural areas, 40% of the contaminating faecal indicator organisms (FIOs) in the water were from agricultural sites. These FIOs are normally a good measure of infection risk, due to the dangerous pathogens that can be carried with them.

What can I do about it?

The scale of risk posed by these FIOs is a combination of its source and its pathway to the river. For example, fresh excrement from livestock with a direct route to a waterway will pose the greatest risk.

Generally, these FIOs tend to die off rapidly when they are stored, and are less dangerous than if they enter the water while fresh. The speed that these FIOs reach the water can also have a big effect; the quicker that the FIOs enter the water, the more dangerous they can be.

There are a few things that you can do to help minimise the impact on the quality of the water:

- 1) Collect the runoff from dirty hard standing area and leachate from solid manure heaps. This will prevent the direct run of FIOs to water while the runoff and leachate can be returned to land after storage when it is less likely to get in to the water.
- 2) Manage farm tracks to minimise runoff to surface waters. For example: constructing tracks to improve drainage and reduce runoff volumes; locating tracks to avoid concentrating flows (i.e avoiding steep slopes); directing track runoff towards grassed areas, soakaways or swales.
- 3) Fencing off rivers and streams from direct livestock access and constructing bridges for livestock crossing rivers/streams to stop animals defecating directly into water courses.
- 4) Not grazing livestock when soils are wet and there is a high risk of surface runoff.
- 5) Not applying slurry or fresh solid manures to land when soils are wet (<10mm soil moisture deficit) and there is a high risk of surface runoff or drain flow that would transport manure-borne FIOs to water courses. To find out about all the work that is being done to improve bathing waters around the North West, visit www.lovelybeach.org