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Marine Conservation Society to take legal action over ocean sewage spills

- Marine Conservation Society taking legal action to stop sewage polluting our seas
- Sewage poured into English Marine Protected Areas for a total of 263,654 hours in 2021 – more than 30 years
- Protected seas disregarded in not fit-for-purpose Government plan to address sewage pollution

The [Marine Conservation Society](#) is announcing joining as co-claimant in a legal case against the UK Government's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to protect English seas from sewage dumping.

The legal case seeks to compel the Government to rewrite its *Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan 2022*, impose tighter deadlines on water companies and redevelop the Plan to effectively apply to coastal waters which are, currently, almost entirely excluded.

Sandy Luk, Marine Conservation Society CEO: "Untreated sewage is being pumped into our seas for hundreds of thousands of hours each year; putting people, planet and wildlife at risk.

"We've tried tirelessly to influence the UK Government on what needs to be done, but their Plan to address this deluge of pollution entering our seas is still unacceptable. We owe it to our members, supporters and coastal communities to act, which is why we've joined as co-claimants on this case. We're out of options. Our seas deserve better."

Launched and funded by the Good Law Project, the Marine Conservation Society will stand as co-claimants on the case with Richard Haward's Oysters, and surfer and activist, Hugo Tagholm.

Before reaching this point, the charity responded to a government consultation in March 2022 and met with DEFRA to express concern. In August 2022, the charity wrote an [open letter](#) to DEFRA outlining the ways in which the proposed *Storm Overflow Discharge Reduction Plan* fails to protect the environment and public health from dumping raw sewage into the sea. However, the Plan hasn't been amended and still fails to adequately address water companies' excessive reliance on storm overflows and the harm their heavy use causes to our ocean.

The plan virtually excludes most coastal waters (except for bathing waters) either directly or indirectly, with some types of Marine Protected Areas and Shellfish Waters totally excluded.

600 storm overflows are not covered at all by the Plan and will continue to – completely legally – be able to dump uncontrolled amounts of sewage directly into English seas and beaches. What's more, the Plan lacks all urgency – with long-term targets set for 2050, and the earliest, most urgent targets not to be met until 2035.

Meanwhile, Marine Conservation Society analysis finds that raw sewage is pouring into the ocean at an alarming rate. In total, there are at least 1,651 storm overflows within 1km of a Marine Protected Area (MPA) in England. These overflows spilt untreated sewage 41,068 times in 2021. Of these, almost half the overflows spilt more than 10 times in 2021, with an average of 48 spills for each of those overflows. Overall, in 2021, sewage poured into Marine Protected Areas for a total of 263,654 hours.

According to [DEFRA's own latest assessments](#), only 19% of estuaries and 45% of coastal waters are at 'good ecological status', with none meeting 'good chemical status', and three quarters (75%) of shellfish waters failing to meet water quality standards.

Rachel Wyatt, Policy & Advocacy Manager for Clean Seas at the Marine

Conservation Society: "Untreated sewage contains a cocktail of bacteria, viruses, harmful chemicals, and microplastics. It's nearly impossible to remove microplastics and 'forever chemicals' once in the environment. Due to their persistence, with every discharge, these pollutants will continue to increase, meaning eventually they will pass – or may have already passed – a threshold of harm."

In addition, it's not just invisible toxins that are causing problems. In September this year at the charity's annual Great British Beach Clean, sewage related pollution, such as wet wipes and sanitary products, were found on 73% of the beaches surveyed across England.

A new DEFRA report, [Ocean Literacy in England and Wales](#), shows that 85% of people say marine protection is personally important to them. Yet this is being ignored.

Emma Dearnaley, Legal Director at the Good Law Project, said: "The Marine Conservation Society is at the forefront of tackling the ocean emergency and standing up for coastal communities impacted by climate change and pollution. We are delighted to have them on board as a co-claimant.

"Good Law Project will work closely with the claimants, including the Marine Conservation Society, to put forward the case for more ambitious and urgent measures to reduce sewage discharges by water companies. These sewage spills are threatening human health, biodiverse marine life and the fishing industry. We believe that taking legal action now is vital to help safeguard our coastal waters for generations to come".

If the case is won, the Marine Conservation Society hopes to see the UK Government amend its Plan so that it meets the DEFRA Secretary of State's legal obligations to protect the ocean and its inhabitants from raw sewage spills.

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Images

Please find a selection of infographics and high-res images linked in this [Dropbox folder](#).

Press Contact

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Notes to Editors

The **Marine Conservation Society** is the UK's leading ocean charity, fighting for cleaner, better-protected, healthier seas. The charity works to highlight the importance of our ocean, and the life within it, through working with government, industry and education, to take action to restore and protect the marine environment.

About **Good Law Project**: [Good Law Project](#) is a not-for-profit that uses the law for a better world. We hold the Government and public bodies to account and protect the interests of the public. We had a primary role in overturning the prorogation of Parliament in 2019 and, more recently, have been shining a spotlight on the Government's award of PPE contracts to their friends and associates.