



Private water company fined record Â£2m over hospitalising parasite outbreak

Description

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water

One privately-owned water company has been [fined almost Â£2m](#) after it was found that its water supply was infested with the [dangerous parasite cryptosporidium](#). The outbreak affected Brixham in Devon.

The private utility firm was sentenced to this record fine for a drinking water offence at Exeter Magistrates' Court. The prosecution was brought by the Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI).

The privately-owned firm plead guilty [to supplying water unfit for human consumption](#) at an earlier hearing, offering a "full and unreserved apology".

Four people were hospitalised out of an astonishing 140 confirmed cases of sickness and diarrhoea during the 54-day incident around May 2024.

Magistrate judge Stuart Smith told the court that the corporation had caused "a major public health incident" in which "disruption to daily life was extensive".

South West Water: failing "systemically"

Judge Smith continued, the "unvarnished reality" was that there was zero visual inspection scheme for air valves. This amounted to a "systemic failure of governance" by South West Water.

Advice not to drink unboiled tap water was in place for 54 days for local properties.

The judge [told the court](#) of detrimental impacts to local businesses at the water giant's hands:

Businesses were heavily impacted during what should have been a high season period.

The DWI investigation found cryptosporidium from [animal faeces](#) had entered the drinking supply network on agricultural land, likely via an exposed and faulty air valve.

[Smith said](#) that the firm responded rapidly once contamination was discovered, deployed "substantial personnel" and provided "substantial financial remediation" to those affected.

The [total penalty](#) ordered on South West Water was £1.93m, comprising a £1.853m fine, a surcharge of £2,000 and costs of £75,000.

The fine set a pollution [offence record](#) South Devon's Liberal Democrat MP Caroline Voaden said that it was [nowhere near enough](#)

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It is disappointing after this lengthy saga to see South West Water escape with such a small fine.

I am sure many in Brixham will feel the punishment "does not reflect the seriousness of the contamination or the effects it had on public health and the local economy."

[Corporate parasites use socialist saviour myth to try to blackmail Thames Water](#)

One drop in a large, rotten bucket

Voaden is right "it's barely a drop in a rotting bucket for the Pennon-owned corporation."

Pennon Group also owns waste and recycling company Viridor and Bournemouth Water, and lists on the London Stock Exchange. Pennon Group PLC has an estimated [enterprise valuation](#) of £6.76 billion, making the relatively poxy £2m fine almost irrelevant.

According to [campaign organisation weownit.org.uk](#)

In 2023, South West Water paid its shareholders £23 for every hour it dumped sewage.

England and Wales are the *only countries* to have fully privatised water and sewerage systems. Our bills have gone up by at least 40% in real terms since privatisation.

This *“profit from pollution”* rate is based on South West Water polluting for 530,737 hours in total. The shareholders of its parent company, Pennon, received some £12.3m in dividends in that time.

South West Water has paid out a total of £4.5 billion in dividends since privatisation in 1989. In that same time, its debts have reached £3.1 billion. It was privatised with no debts.

14% of your bill is spent servicing South West Water’s debts. The corporation probably knows that one day, British people will wake up to this robbery and force our politicians to re-nationalise water.

When we do, they’re banking on their debts being paid off at public expense. We absolutely should not.

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Privatisation: UK’s biggest

Since Margaret Thatcher’s governments privatised the majority of our water infrastructure private water companies have paid out over £85b in shareholder dividends. They’ve invested relatively fuck-all.

By fuck-all, I mean a real-terms drop on investment of £5.5b. Meanwhile, corporate asset managers have piled debt onto the companies at over £60b (See *“Take Back Water”* for more info.)

They’ve liquidised our once-public assets, leveraged debt onto them, then often resold at immense profits. What do we have to show for it? Only recurrent national sewage scandals and misery.

Oh, but who could forget the rage-inducing TV drama

Labour MP Clive Lewis rightly points out that water privatisation was a complete scam with no tangible benefits to the English and Welsh public. Scottish water, like most countries, remains publicly owned

However, the man Lewis wished to sacrifice his own seat for *“* before journalist intimidator Josh Simons beat him to it *”* Andy Burnham has ruled out renationalising water. Burnham now wants to be PM.

Labour might be complacent, but Manchester Green Party has had enough of this:

So too has Green Party leader Zack Polanski, who’s regularly made scathing remarks about the sorry state of water privatisation. It’s a clear case study for capitalist profiteering at immense public expense.

The Green Party [supports re-nationalisation](#) of water and major [energy infrastructures](#). Alongside, of course, a speedy and [just transition](#) to renewable energy. (Ideally [without](#) the new [green resource imperialism](#))

That's needed to avert more unmanageable weather events and ensuing climate collapse. And these corporate pirate companies deserve not a penny of compensation.

[Private water company leaves thousands dry amid record May heatwave](#)

Featured image via Hugh Hastings/Getty Images

By [Cameron Baillie](#)

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