Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs

Environment Agency

BRIEFING

November 2022

Bathing water quality at Combe Martin

Many people enjoy time in or on lakes, rivers and coastal waters, and we know the value they bring in terms of social, health and wellbeing benefits. It's vital that bathing water quality is maintained and improved.

The Environment Agency monitors water quality from May to September at over 400 bathing waters so you know how clean the water is when you swim or paddle.

There are four water quality classifications Excellent, Good, Sufficient and Poor. These are set according to the level of bacteria in the water based on guidelines produced by the World Health Organisation to protect health.

Up to four years' of results are combined to let you know the standard of water quality over that time. Due to the data gap from 2020 (due to Coronavirus), the 2022 bathing water results are based on data from 2018, 2019, 2021 and 2022.

In 2022, out of the 419 bathing waters measured in England, 407 (97.1 per cent) met at least the minimum standard of the Bathing Water Regulations.

In 2022, 302 bathing waters in England (72.1 per cent) met the Excellent standard of the Bathing Water Regulations.

In 2022, 12 bathing waters in England (2.9 per cent) did not meet the minimum standard, and were classified as Poor.

Thanks to continued investment and action the standards in water quality at our beaches and inland lakes remains high, there is still more to be done to ensure cleaner and healthier waters for people to enjoy. This requires a combined effort from water companies, farmers, regulators, councils, local businesses and the general public.

Classification of water quality

The bathing water quality at Combe Martin is classified as 'Good'.

What can affect water quality?

Combe Martin is affected by a range of pollution sources, including urban runoff, misconnections and runoff from agricultural land. Occasional discharges from a South West Water (SWW) storm overflow may also impact water quality after heavy rainfall.

When it rains, pollution washes off agricultural land and flows down streams and rivers into the sea. This pollution may be from livestock grazing with access to streams and rivers and the storage and spreading of fertilisers and manure.

DNA analysis of water quality samples has also shown faecal bacteria from dogs can be a factor.

We use Pollution Risk Forecasting to advise the public when there is a risk of reduced water quality. Temporary signs are placed on the beach and pollution forecasts can also be viewed on our bathing water data explorer at www.gov.uk.

What is being done to improve water quality?

The Environment Agency continues to work with partners, including Combe Martin Parish Council and SWW to improve water quality.

In September 2022 South West Water concluded its Bathing Water Ambition Investigation at Combe Martin. The investigation focused on current understanding of water quality issues at Combe Martin. It also quantifies what changes need to be affected on bathing water quality to achieve at least 80% confidence of 'Good' compliance. The outcomes suggested that the most beneficial interventions are likely to be ongoing vigilance with respect to misconnections, and catchment management interventions - such as removing livestock access to streams to stop slurry directly entering the streams; planting more trees in the upper part of the catchment to slow down rain wash off; and installing Smart Water butts to reduce and slow down rainfall getting into the combined sewer system and reducing the amount of storm overflow spills.

South West Water also proposed that it will continue to deliver environmental outcomes through its Environment Strategy, WaterFit programme, including refurbishment/relining of old sewers to prevent groundwater getting into them and foul water seeping out. They are also looking into whether the storm overflows could be diverted to the long sea outfall instead of their current discharge into the river.

As part of their AMP7 project (the 7th Asset Management Period planned by the UK water industry), SWW has been working in the catchment to reduce infiltration of groundwater to the foul sewer system, identify and fix misconnections, and increase storm overflow storage. There has been a reduction in the number of storm overflow spills in the bathing season.

This year with SWW we investigated possible misconnections in the culverted section of the River Umber. This work will continue next year, and any misconnections found rectified.

In partnership with North Devon Biosphere monitors are being deployed across the catchment to build real time water quality data. The Environment Agency is a partner in the Smart Biosphere project.

The planting of 40,000 trees across the catchment began in February 2021. This is a partnership project between SWW, North Devon Biosphere foundation, Environment Agency, Catchment Sensitive Farming and local landowners. The trees will help reduce run-off from the steep catchment, reducing flood risk, reducing the likelihood of sewers being overwhelmed during wet weather and help improve water quality at the bathing water.

In early 2021 SWW installed smart water butts at 35 homes in the catchment. These capture roof run-off and reduce run-off entering the sewer system and overwhelming it during high rainfall events. South West Water can manage how much water is captured, retained and held back from the sewers.

Alongside bathing water sampling last year we carried out additional freshwater monitoring to investigate sources of pollution in the catchment. Latest MST analysis (microbial source tracking) shows that faecal bacteria from dogs can be a factor. We helped to provide new dog waste bins alongside the River Umber to encourage responsible dog owners to dispose of dog waste appropriately.

We continue to work with local farms to improve practices and minimise the impact on the streams and receiving bathing water.

Over the years the Environment Agency has funded the installation of 8.5km fencing, provided alternative livestock drinkers and clean-up of farmyard dirty water systems across 28 farms.

With SWW we are working with the owners of a local wildlife park to improve the site drainage and sewerage and reduce any impact on bathing water quality.