

FORCE PRESS RELEASE JUNE 2014
RIVER CRANE POLLUTION OF OCTOBER 2011
THAMES WATER FOUND GUILTY OF NEGLIGENCE AND FINED £75000 + COSTS

Lawyers for Thames Water and the Environment Agency met at Isleworth Crown Court on 27th June to contest the causes of the October 2011 pollution event on the River Crane which devastated 20 kilometres of the river and left it devoid of life with 10,000 fish killed.

The case rested on the maintenance and operation of a large pen stock weir, known as “The Cranford Bridge penstock”, designed to hold back sewage for maintenance purposes. On that fateful weekend, in late October 2011, Thames Water staff closed this sluice and were then unable to re-open it. As a result sewage backed up in the sewer main and, over the course of the next 48 hours, threatened to flood Heathrow Airport and led to three major releases of sewage effluent into the River Crane. The last of these continued for 15 hours, turning 20 kilometres of river into a foul open sewer and killing everything in it.

Thames Water accepted responsibility for the incident immediately and yet, in court last week claimed “the absence of any real fault”, stating that the sequence of events made the release of sewage an “extra-ordinary and unforeseen event”. The Environment Agency presented evidence that showed Thames Water had no records of risk assessments carried out at the site and, due to access problems, had not undertaken key maintenance there for the previous three years. The event was due to the failure of a key piece of equipment, for reasons Thames Water still does not have an explanation for, and the further blockage of an emergency bypass system due to a basic design error.

The judge found in summary that Thames Water had been negligent in their maintenance and operation of this facility and fined the company £75,000 plus costs. This fine was initially set at £300,000, but was reduced by the judge due to the early admission of guilt by Thames Water and the pledge by the company in 2012 of £400,000 towards improvement of the river.

Speaking after the case Rob Gray, chair of Friends of the River Crane Environment (FORCE), a community based charity that helps look after the river, said that; “The size of the fine, given the scale of the damage done and the finding of negligence on the part of Thames Water, feels like an insult to the River Crane. Three years later, and following further pollution incidents, the river has still not recovered and only now are tiny fish starting to return. As a comparison, this fine is equivalent to around 5 hours profit for the company, and less money than they made during their day in court”.

“FORCE remains appreciative of the monies provided by Thames Water to the Crane Valley Partnership for improvements to the river. However, the claim in court by Thames Water that this funding is “a symbol of its remorse” for the incident sits uncomfortably with the company’s failure to acknowledge the failings of its systems and its lobbying of the judge to have this funding reduce the level of fine. It appears at least possible that the £400,000 fund was not given to express remorse but to reduce the size of fine and thereby limit the adverse publicity that would follow”.

Thames Water stated in court that they had, as a result of this incident, introduced new systems both at the site and organisationally so that such an incident, in the words of their barrister, “would not happen again”. FORCE will ask for these systems and procedures to be reviewed independently to provide comfort to the thousands of local people using the River Crane corridor every week that this pledge can be relied upon.

Note for Editors

FORCE is a local community and environmental charity founded in 2003. More information can
FORCE can be found on www.force.org.uk and www.facebook.com/friendsrivercrane or by
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