

Future Trend: Changing environmental regulatory requirements (storm overflows)

Trend definition and relevance to DWMP

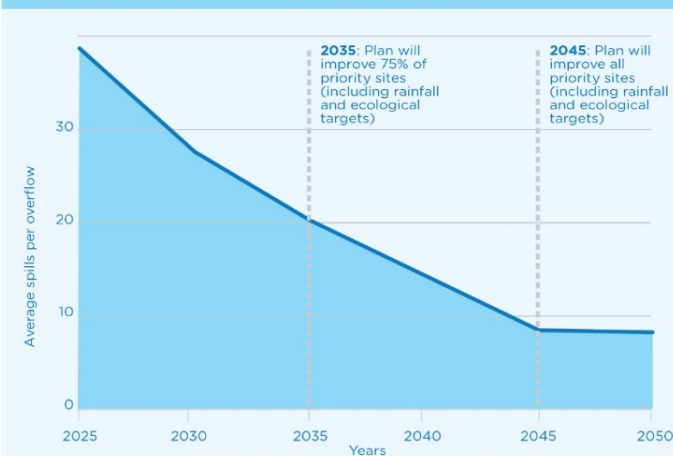
Reducing untreated sewage discharges from storm overflows remains a significant priority for customers, regulators and Thames Water. The regulatory framework governing their control and improvement is evolving rapidly. The overlap of requirements under the Water Framework Directive¹, Urban Wastewater Treatment Regulations² and the Environment Act³ has created a complex and evolving regulatory landscape. This includes meeting the requirements of the 25-year Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan⁴, the Storm Overflow Assessment Framework⁵ and Spill Frequency Threshold Permitting⁶, alongside new opportunities to treat storm overflow discharges rather than relying solely on reducing the number of spills. Our current programme of improvements is established in our Storm Overflow Action Plan, which has been shared with Defra and the Environment Agency and is published on our website⁷.

Our DWMP28, will reflect these changing regulatory requirements and set out the investment needed to improve storm overflows over the next 25 years. This will update our Storm Overflow Action Plan and primarily support the delivery of the Storm Overflow Performance Indicator targets over the medium and long term, alongside other performance indicators.

Stage of DWMP used	
Risk assessment	✗
Plan development	✓
Impact/Importance	
Short term (2035)	High
Medium term (2045)	High
Long term (2055)	High
Example PIs affected by this trend	
	Storm overflow performance
	Emergency overflow performance
	Treatment works compliance (flow-to-full treatment)

Trend description, uncertainty and potential impact on our region

Forecast annual average number of spills



- Planned storm overflow improvements are expected to significantly reduce the average number of spills across Thames Water's network. The Figure shows an estimated reduction from more than 30 spills per overflow to fewer than 10 by 2050⁸. In 2025, the recorded average was 24 spills per overflow⁸, lower than forecast due to drier-than-average weather. In some locations, water quality investigations may show that fewer than 10 spills a year are needed to protect river health.
- Defra's Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan sets the priorities and pace for delivering storm overflow improvements. By 2035, improvements must be completed at 75% of storm overflows discharging into or near High Priority Sites, rising to 100% by 2045. High Priority Sites include, for example, protected environmental sites and waterbodies where storm overflows contribute to a failure to achieve Good Ecological Status. The Government is also continuing to refine the definition of High Priority Sites, which may influence future investment priorities.



References

- 1 Water Framework Directive (Directive 2000/60/EC), European Parliament and Council of the European Union.
- 2 The Urban Waste Water Treatment (England and Wales) Regulations 1994, UK Government (1994) SI 1994/2841. London: HMSO. Available at: The Urban Waste Water Treatment (England and Wales) Regulations 1994.
- 3 UK Parliament (2021) Environment Act 2021. Chapter 30. London: The Stationery Office. Available at: Environment Act 2021.
- 4 Storm overflows discharge reduction plan, Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra), 2023. www.gov.uk/government/publications/storm-overflows-discharge-reduction-plan.
- 5 Storm overflow assessment framework 2025, Environment Agency, 2025, www.gov.uk/government/publications/storm-overflow-assessment-framework-2025/storm-overflow-assessment-framework-2025.
- 6 Storm overflows: policy and guidance, Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, Defra (2025), published 24 March 2025.
- 7 Storm Overflow Action Plan. Updated October 2024. Thames Water (2024). Available via: Investing in River Health. www.thameswater.co.uk/about-us/performance/river-health/investing-in-river-health.
- 8 National Storm Overflows Plan for England. Water UK (2024). Graph produced from data available at: National Storm Overflows Plan.

