

Farmers test the waters in stable laboratory to fight river pollution

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A group of Wiltshire farmers have created a laboratory in the corner of a stable to test pollution levels in one of the country's most important chalk streams.

The 31 members of Wylve Valley Farmers, an environmental cluster group, have raised £18,000 to buy a photometer to test for phosphates and nitrates in the River Wylve.

Their aim is to pinpoint the source of pollution — even if it is caused by a fellow farmer — that is resulting in a decline in biodiversity in the river, which is loved by fly fishermen.



The Wylve Valley Farmers are determined to discover the source of the pollution in the River Wylve

“We have war-gamed this,” said Josh Stratton, one of the members. “If one of our team turns out to be a polluter, we will have to be brave and knuckle down on it. We are working closely with the catchment sensitive farming officer from Natural England and they can suggest ways forward. It’s about cleaning the river and not prosecuting someone.”

The farmers have been trained by a fisheries officer from the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) to take water samples and prevent cross contamination. Their sample sites will be upstream and downstream of Wessex Water storm overflows, villages with private septic tanks and riverside livestock and arable farms.

They also hope to carry out sediment fingerprinting of the riverbed to discover which fields are the source of the pollution. A build-up of silt on the gravel bed prevents fish eggs from being oxygenated in the loose stones and carries pollution into the stream.



The farmers have been trained how to do scientific testing by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust

Surveys of invertebrates in the water, carried out by anglers who are members of the Wiltshire Fisheries Association, show declining biodiversity on the river and localised dramatic decreases.

The Times's Clean It Up campaign is pressing for improvements to rivers, lakes and beaches. It calls for the Environment Agency to be given greater resources to prosecute polluters. Jonathan Jardine Paterson, 63, who is hosting the makeshift lab in his stable, said: “This is a finger-pointing exercise. People have tried to say it isn't but there is no point getting all this information if you are not going to do anything with it.”

The farmers will take weekly samples and test the water quality at 17 sites along the Wylde as it flows past Warminster towards Salisbury. They hope to produce high-quality field data that can be used by the Environment Agency.

Robin Leech, an ecologist who is leading the Wiltshire project, said: “This level of testing is what the Environment Agency want to be doing and it’s what they are there for but because their funding has dropped so much they don’t have the resources, time or money, so we are taking it in-house.

“They can only afford to monitor relatively few sites throughout the catchment and only once a month. We are going to work with them and make sure they are happy with what we are doing.”

The agency’s accounts show that funding received from the government for enforcement activity fell from £157.3 million in 2010 to £75.6 million in 2019. While budgets have increased, Sir James Bevan, its outgoing chief executive, said they have not kept pace with a growing workload.

Leech said farmers would have to increasingly meet water quality targets and “rather than wait for them to be imposed on us, we want to tackle them”.

The group have been inspired by a farming cluster in Norfolk that began testing pollution levels on the River Wensum. “They were having real issues with phosphate levels and they took it upon themselves to take it on,” Leech said.

“The farmers were getting pressure from the [Environment Agency](#) because it was deemed that they were causing it but through their sampling they found the water company was the primary cause.”

The Wylde Valley Farmers are running a pilot scheme and, if successful, the GWCT aims to roll out large-scale testing by farming clusters across the Hampshire Avon catchment.

Agricultural pollution is one of the biggest reasons that nine out of ten English rivers do not meet “good” ecological status. Legislation was introduced in 2018 to regulate how and when farmers can apply and store manure and other fertilisers. If misused close to watercourses, they can cause algal blooms that choke wildlife.

Since April 2021 Environment Agency inspectors have logged more than 6,000 instances where farmers were told to make improvements to stay inside the law. However, no penalties have been imposed, according to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

The Times is demanding faster action to improve the country’s waterways. Find out more about the [Clean It Up campaign](#).