# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE**  | **Fourth River Pollution Summit** |
| **DATE**  | **19 March 2024** |
| **BY** | **Julie James MS, Minister for Climate Change** |

Yesterday, representatives from a diverse range of sectors came together to continue to drive progress on a number of measures designed to conserve our Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) rivers and tackle phosphate pollution at the fourth River Pollution Summit. Previous summits have been chaired by myself, the First Minister and the Minister for Rural Affairs, North Wales and Trefnydd.

I would like to thank Sir David Henshaw, chair of Natural Resources Wales (NRW), for chairing the summit and for the continued engagement from regulators, water companies, developers, local government, farming unions and environmental bodies to address the challenges facing our rivers.

We have achieved a lot since the First Minister first brought organisations together at the inaugural river pollution summit at the Royal Welsh Show in 2022. Together, we continue to deliver against the [*Relieving pressures on Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) river catchments to support delivery of affordable house action plan*](https://www.gov.wales/relieving-pressures-special-areas-conservation-sac-river-catchments-support-delivery-affordable). Most of the actions have been completed, allowing some development to be unlocked without further impacting on these rivers, and providing the relevant evidence needed to develop considered interventions to improve water quality as we move forward.

NRW has made significant progress in undertaking a review of water discharge permits delivering almost 75% to date, this is allowing Local Planning Authorities to make planning decisions within failing SAC catchments. A new permit for Five Fords Water Treatment Works will unlock almost 3,000 dwellings, without leading to an additional phosphate burden on the catchment. This represents a major proportion of applications held in abeyance in the Dee catchment.

The Welsh Government has to date made over £1.5 million available to support the action plan and also is launching an all-Wales nutrient calculator which will be a vital tool for Local Planning Authorities to make informed planning decisions on nutrient neutrality, taking account of catchment-level data and local features and needs.

The summit was an opportunity for NRW to highlight a number of projects they are leading in partnership with stakeholders seated at the summit table to improve water quality in our SACs and to discuss what more we can all do to support nature recovery in our river environment.

Sir David Henshaw and Jon Goldsworthy from NRW gave an insightful presentation on the progress of the Teifi Demonstrator Catchment project. The project was launched in November, this brings together diverse partners across a single catchment to test different interventions, which if successful could be scaled up across Wales. Such interventions could include novel regulatory approaches and different ways to visualise data in the catchment. This has potential to signify a real step-change in how we approach improvements in river health.

Susie Kingham from NRW updated attendees on the Four Rivers for LIFE project, which is taking place on four SAC rivers – Teifi, Cleddau, Tywi and Usk. Susie highlighted how interventions such as the instillation of riparian buffer zones and river bank management are helping to halt the decline in these fresh water environments and begin to improve the biodiversity. Alongside these land management improvements along the rivers the LIFE project is also working to reintroduce some of our rarer and endangered species such as the Freshwater Water Pearl Mussel. Projects such as this provide important lessons for other catchments and will make an important contribution to delivering our 30x30 target in relation to our protected species and tackling nature emergencies.

Afonydd Cymru CEO, Gail Davies-Walsh gave a comprehensive summary of the river restoration work delivered through the Rivers Trust across Wales in 2023, highlights included; the planting of 39,220 trees to support the riparian buffer work and work with the agricultural supply chain businesses on nutrient reduction pathways to the River Wye.

Water quality in Wales has improved very markedly over recent decades but there is more for us to do to restore river health and promote a sustainable economy. Alongside proactive habitat restoration on our rivers, we must continue to address the pressures on them whilst delivering real benefits to local communities and businesses.

The River Pollution Summits have provided an opportunity to learn from each about the ways in which this is being successfully delivered in Wales today, through people working together across regions and sectors. I am confident the collaborative efforts initiated through the summits will continue to deliver results for people in Wales, continuing to unlock social housing development and providing the basis for further targeted initiatives to restore our vital river ecosystems to resilience.