

Drought water firm failed to tell watchdog it was badly prepared

Rhys Blakely Science Correspondent

A government watchdog has issued a scathing rebuke of South West Water for not being honest about how poorly prepared it was for the record-breaking 2022 drought.

The company, which provides drinking water for more than 3.5 million people across southwest England, was “not well prepared” for a lack of rain that led to a hosepipe ban that lasted more than a year in parts of Cornwall.

It was “not honest, open and transparent with regulators about ... potential risks to security of supply”, according to a damning assessment by the Environment Agency (EA).

The agency said South West Water (SWW) had shown “complacency” before the drought as well as “a lack of understanding of their own supply system”. In an email to Ofwat, the water regulator, the EA also said that “SWW acted too late” in response to the drought, and that this “presented a

genuine risk of loss of supply in west Cornwall”. The documents were obtained by Uearthed, an investigations unit run by Greenpeace, through a freedom of information request.

The revelations come after Pennon Group, the listed company that owns SWW, said in November it was increasing its interim dividend payment to shareholders by 8.3 per cent, despite the water firm reporting a fall in profits and receiving a record fine of £2.1 million last April for illegal sewage pollution.

The lack of drought preparation “undoubtedly” had an impact on customers and the environment, the EA said.

For instance, SWW had not applied in advance for permission to take water from rivers to bolster supplies. The EA eventually issued new drought permits to allow this but concedes some were “highly contentious” because water was drawn from river ecosystems that were already struggling with low flows.

Charles Watson, who leads the campaign group River Action, said that the

documents called into question the competence of SWW. “The water industry is facing a complete crisis, which is the result of years of chronic underinvestment, in order to produce dividends for shareholders,” he said.

A spokesman for SWW said: “No customer went without supply or impact to the quality of supply due to the drought. We reacted well ... South West Water strongly disagree with any suggestion it had not adequately prepared for the risk of a drought.”

Ancient St Ives game faces rocky future

Will Humphries

Southwest Correspondent

An ancient game played on the beach in St Ives since the 16th century could be stopped over health and safety concerns because traditionalist councillors have refused to change its rocky location and allow chocolate coins to be thrown at children instead of pennies.

The game of Cornish hurling involves throwing a silver ball over the wall of St Ives’ parish church to competitors on Porthminster beach. It is an integral part of St Ives’ feast day, which celebrates the consecration of the church by the Bishop of Truro in 1434.

The tradition began as an ancient form of rugby, in which two teams of men from different parts of the town competed for the ball on the beach. Over the centuries it has morphed to involve teenagers trying to keep possession of it until the clock strikes noon.

Feast day is held on the first Monday after February 3 each year but the construction of a new lifeboat house in the 1990s and the cycle of the tides means sand has shifted from the beach. This year, because of a high tide, the only area for the children to start the game will be on jagged and unstable rocks.

A health and safety review by Cornwall council suggested moving it to one of the town’s other sandy beaches but councillors narrowly voted to refuse this option. This throws the future of the game into doubt if the council can’t get insurance cover owing to the danger the game poses to players.

Johnnie Wells, 50, the mayor of St Ives, backed the location change. He said: “It’s the worst kind of rocks, they are shin height and they move. They are the most dangerous size of stone. We are now waiting to see if the insurance companies will let it happen ... people who voted to defend the tradition may cause it to be stopped.”

The game starts with the mayor throwing the ball into a crowd on the beach below Lambeth Walk, while shouting “guare wheg ya guare teg”, which means “fair play is good play”. Players return to the guildhall, where councillors drop pennies from



The game, which has been played in Cornwall since the 16th century, involves local young people trying to win possession of a silver hurling ball on Porthminster beach, which they then hand back to the mayor to win a silver coin

the balcony to participants who wait for the clock to strike midday. The person with the ball then collects their reward of a silver coin from the mayor.

The review proposed dropping chocolate coins instead of pennies because children had been hit in the eye with the money, and suggested bringing back the tradition of throwing tangerines wrapped in foil to act as decoys.

Andrew Mitchell, a councillor, said the location must not be changed.

“Feast day is to celebrate the Bishop of Truro coming to St Ives church to consecrate it, not bless the harbour, not to consecrate the Tate [art gallery] or anything else,” he said. “It’s that church; the church of the parish of St Ives, and that is the only place [from which] to throw the silver ball.” Mitchell also asked: “How would a chocolate coin hitting you in the eye be less of a problem than an actual penny?”

Luke Rogers, 43, a Liberal Democrat councillor, said: “This is St Ives culture. I am absolutely shocked when we have

got people moving from other parts of the UK coming to St Ives and changing local traditions.”

Steve Hynes, a councillor who was not born in St Ives, said: “Let’s get a bit of a grasp on reality here ... it’s not safe to chuck a ball off a cliff on to rocks with teenagers chasing it ... It doesn’t matter if you are born in St Ives or not.”

The council agreed to a road closure, the presence of a first aid service and an event management plan, but votes for a change of location, the use of chocolate coins and tangerines were all refused.

Cull saves riverbank Rattys from the invasive American mink

Will Humphries

An American invader that is threatening to wipe out native water voles has been eradicated from Norfolk and Suffolk, proving that a national culling effort could succeed.

The water vole, immortalised as Ratty in Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows*, is facing extinction at the hands of the American mink, which has been killing British wildlife since thousands escaped from fur farms last century. Water vole numbers have fall-

en by 90 per cent in the past 40 years but a small team of conservationists and volunteers from the Waterlife Recovery Trust has now managed to remove mink completely from East Anglia. They believe that their success could be repeated across the country.

Their key weapon is smart traps: floating cages laced with mink scent that send a text and email when they are sprung. Rather than daily checks, the traps need attention only when they catch something.

This reduced the number of trap vis-

its needed by 98 per cent and enabled a team of hundreds of volunteers to cover a “core area” of 5,852 square km (almost 5 per cent of England) with 441 smart traps. The trial has now been declared successful, as the team found no evidence of mink reproduction within the core area during last year’s breeding season. Water voles are also returning to areas where they have been missing for decades. The trust plans to extend its trapping system across Britain.

Tony Martin, emeritus professor of animal conservation at the University



Saving water voles could be repeated elsewhere, conservationists believe

of Dundee, led the effort under the Waterlife Recovery East, a partnership between conservationists, charities and water management companies. He thought the mink would be difficult to eradicate but was “honestly flabbergasted” by what was accomplished for less than £500,000.

“Until now, the complete removal of American mink from Britain has been an impossible dream, but the success of this trial offers hope that a century of catastrophic damage to precious native wildlife can be brought to an end.”