



Chemical spill

Case study

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A swimming pool treatment chemicals supplier was fined £66,000 and ordered to pay £80,000 in costs after severely polluting the River Colne and killing over 2,500 fish.

The incident occurred following a fire at one of the supplier's factories that destroyed the premises and subsequently released chemicals stored on site via the drainage system into the river. The pollution spread downstream for nearly eight miles and caused severe damage to the surrounding environment. Authorities estimate that it will take years for the river to recover. The fire also caused a series of explosions which released a chlorine based smoke cloud that extended for miles. The gases caused a 24 hour shut down of the A40 and forced several businesses in the area to close for more than three days.

An investigation by the Environment Agency revealed that the company did not have the correct infrastructure on site to capture escaping chemicals and lacked the necessary procedures to manage such an incident. The supplier also failed to hold the most recent copies of appropriate drainage plans. This meant the Environment Agency and other responders were unable to determine all pathways of the pollution through the drainage system, allowing chemicals to continue discharging for more than 24 hours after the spill.

The area manager at the Environment Agency said: "We hope this will serve as a stark reminder to those companies who handle hazardous materials to make sure they have appropriate procedures in place to better protect their local environment and community, otherwise the consequences can be devastating."

Despite this being a sudden and accidental event, it is unlikely that a public liability policy would have responded to the ensuing environmental liabilities since they were not triggered by a third party action for property damage or bodily injury.