

Our reference: STOF-0271-2023

Rt Hon Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP  
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Telephone: 028 90 569206

4 October 2023

Dear Mr Donaldson

## **SERIOUS POLLUTION ISSUE IN THE LAGAN RIVER**

Thank you for your e-mail received on 21 September 2023 regarding the above matter which has been passed to me to provide a response.

I can confirm that NIEA received a significant number of similar reports of potential water pollution impacting the River Lagan the period 18 September to 26 September 2023. Reports of foam on the surface of the River Lagan at, and significantly downstream of, Lisburn are a frequent annual phenomena. Geographically, foam reports were received this year from Lisburn to as far downstream as the Odyssey Arena.

In respect of each report received, an NIEA Water Quality Inspector (WQI) was tasked to carry out an investigation and, following your correspondence, the Inspector assessed a significant reach of the river including the reach in the vicinity of Drumbeg/Ballyskeagh. From the Inspector's investigations, no water pollution, unsatisfactory discharges, pollution signs or sewage related materials were observed. However, large volumes of naturally occurring foam related to the presence of increased volumes of organic material at this time of year were observed. The resultant foams can gather in natural catch points along the river and canal system and the natural processes that cause these foams to appear are described briefly below.

At this time of year, as we move from Summer into Autumn, the organic matter content of our waterways increases due a number of processes including leaf-fall and aquatic plant dieback. As this organic matter decays, naturally occurring surfactants (from fatty acids) are released into the water. When energy is applied within a river system e.g. at weirs (as found at and below Lisburn) or due to heavy rainfall and spate conditions occurring, production of these naturally occurring surfactants and foams increases as surfactant molecules trap small air bubbles creating foam on the river's surface.

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In summary, the foam reported by your constituent has been determined from a widescale investigation to be of natural origin and not related to an introduced pollutant.

I trust you find this update helpful, however, if you require any further information regarding this incident, or should you wish to report water pollution at a future date, then please contact the NIEA Incident Hotline on 0800 807060 or email [emergency-pollution@daera-ni.gov.uk](mailto:emergency-pollution@daera-ni.gov.uk)

Yours sincerely



**RICHARD CROWE**  
Director of Resource Efficiency Division

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