

Tyson Foods dumps millions of pounds of toxic slaughterhouse pollutants into US rivers and lakes, report finds

From [Amy Jones, SpeciesUnite.com](#)

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Tyson released 87 billion gallons of wastewater, containing contaminants including blood, bacteria, and animal feces, directly affecting water sources relied upon for drinking, fishing, and recreation.



Image from USDA

The biggest meat producer in the United States has dumped millions of pounds of pollutants into America's rivers and lakes over the last five years, endangering wildlife and ecosystems, and potentially human health, a new investigation has revealed.

From 2018 to 2022, 41 Tyson slaughterhouses and mega processing plants were responsible for releasing 371m lb of pollutants, including nitrogen, phosphorus, chloride, oil and cyanide, into waterways, according to the investigation by the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS).

According to the findings, published in a report titled [Waste Deep: How Tyson Foods Pollutes US Waterways and Which States Bear the Brunt](#), Tyson released 87 billion gallons of wastewater into streams, rivers, lakes and wetlands. This wastewater contained contaminants mixed with blood, bacteria, and animal feces, directly impacting water sources used for drinking water, fishing, and recreation.

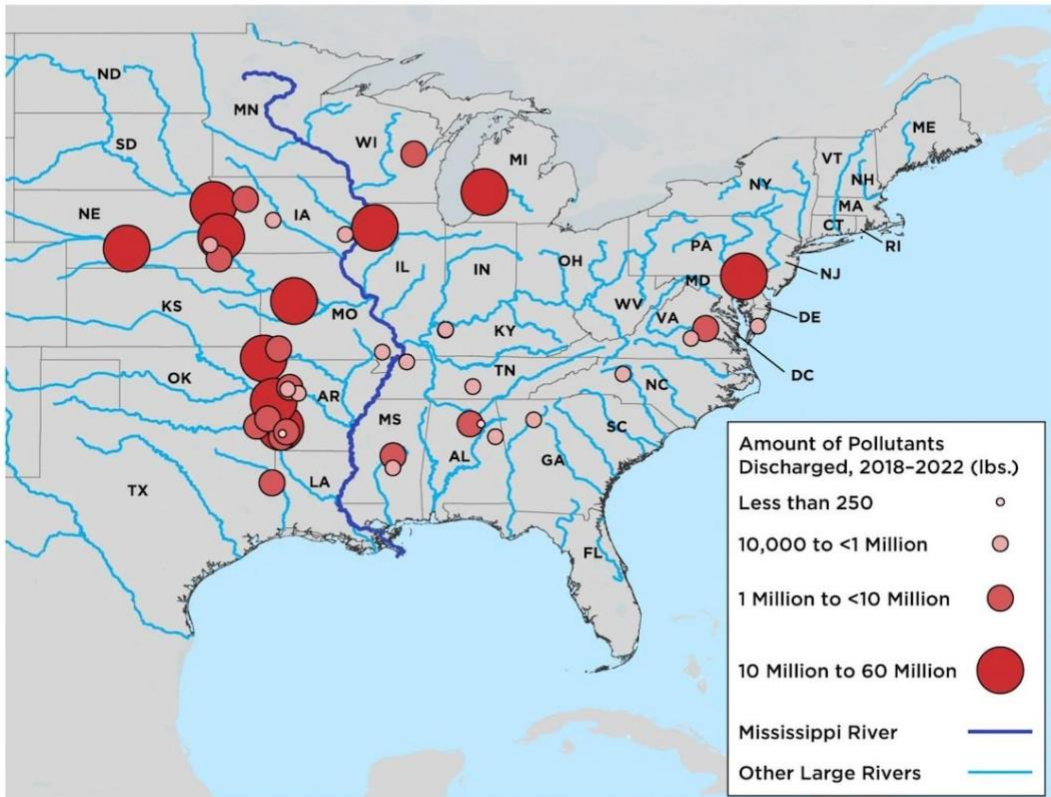
“As the nation's largest meat and poultry producer, Tyson Foods plays a huge role in our food and agriculture system and has for decades exploited policies that allow big agribusiness corporations to pollute with impunity,” said Omanjana Goswami, co-author of the report and an interdisciplinary scientist with the Food and Environment Program at UCS. “In 2022, the latest year for which we have data, Tyson plants processed millions of cattle and pigs and billions of chickens, and discharged over 18.5 billion gallons of wastewater, enough to fill more than 37,000 Olympic swimming pools.”

Although the contaminants were spread across 17 states, half of the pollutants were dumped into the streams, rivers, lakes and wetlands of Nebraska, Illinois, and Missouri. Waterways in Nebraska received 30 percent, or 11 million pounds, of the pollution dumped by Tyson plants, reads the report. These

include 4.06 million pounds of nitrate, which [a recent study](#) has linked to elevated incidences of central nervous system cancer in children.

One of the top three highest polluting plants in the country was the Tyson plant in Dakota County, Nebraska, which released over 60 million pounds of pollutants between 2018 and 2022, the report reveals.

Tyson Pollutant Discharges into Waterways, 2018–2022



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As per the report, the dumped pollutants contained 34.25 million pounds of nitrogen and 5.06 million pounds of phosphorus, which can cause increased growth of toxin-producing algal blooms. These can exacerbate respiratory conditions, clog water infrastructure, and cause ‘dead zones’ by depleting oxygen levels in water, which suffocate and kill fish and other marine life.

Pollution from plants in the Midwest can also travel through the Mississippi watershed and end up in the Gulf of Mexico, feeding a massive and persistent [dead zone](#) nearly the size of Puerto Rico, UCS reports.

“Pollution from these plants also raises environmental justice concerns,” said Stacy Woods, co-author of the report and research director for the Food and Environment Program at UCS. “We know from previous research that almost 75% of water-polluting meat and poultry processing facilities are located within one mile of communities that already shoulder heavy economic, health or environmental burdens.

“In mapping these plants, we found Tyson largely fit that pattern, with many plants located near communities where people live with more pollution, less socioeconomic and political power, and worse health compared to other areas of the United States.”

Shockingly, UCS’ finding only covers water pollution from one in three of Tyson’s total slaughterhouses and processing plants, and only 2 percent of the total nationwide.

“There are over 5,000 meat and poultry processing plants in the United States, but only a fraction are required to report pollution and abide by limits,” said the UCS co-author Omanjana Goswami. “As one of the largest processors in the game, with a near-monopoly in some states, Tyson is in a unique position to treat even hefty fines and penalties for polluting as simply the cost of doing business. This has to change.”

Tyson Foods, a Fortune 100 index company, earned \$53 billion in 2023 and supplies well-known food chains including KFC, Taco Bell, McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, and Walmart.

In 2018, Tyson was fined \$2 million by the Department of Justice after a discharge of ammonia at Clear Creek in Missouri killed more than 100,000 fish. In 2021, the company paid \$3 million to settle a lawsuit concerning the death of 200,000 fish in Alabama's Black Warrior River.

The report’s findings come as the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is in the process of updating its two-decade-old [Meat and Poultry Products Effluent Guidelines](#), which regulate slaughterhouse and processing plant wastewater pollution.

The agency was forced to update these standards after a 2017 lawsuit by ten environmental groups, including the Waterkeeper Alliance and the Center for Biological Diversity. The new guidelines should be finalized by August 2025.

“The current rule is out of date, inadequate and catastrophic for American waterways, and highlights the way American lawmaking is subject to industry capture,” Dani Repogle, an attorney at Food and Water Watch, told The Guardian. “The nutrient problem in the US is at catastrophic levels ... it would be such a shame if the EPA caves in to industry influence.”

“We can be sure Tyson and other big ag players will object to efforts to update pollution regulations, but the EPA should listen to communities whose wells, lakes, rivers and streams have been contaminated and put people over corporate profits,” said Goswami.