

WILL THE EU'S WATERS BE REVIVED?



WATER IS LIFE

Water is our most precious natural resource, it's vital for our survival and livelihood, vital for our environment and our wildlife, vital for our economy. Our food and clothing cannot be made without a great deal of water. That water is sourced from ecosystems. As well as supporting agriculture to produce food, fibre and fuel, hydropower to produce energy, and inland navigation to transport goods, freshwater ecosystems provide other services to society: they regulate water flows, purify waste water and detoxify wastes, regulate climate, mitigate erosion, and offer cultural benefits, including significant aesthetic, educational, and spiritual benefits. It is therefore vital that we maintain and enhance our freshwater ecosystems and secure the important services and benefits they provide.

Governments and authorities are now acknowledging that Europe's water environment is in a worse state than expected. The majority of rivers, lakes and coastal waters have been degraded to the point where they cannot sustain functioning ecosystems, or their services to humans. The main reason for this decline is insufficient natural space and water volume left for nature to maintain functioning ecosystems and landscapes. Groundwater levels are falling and pollution levels remain high.

EUROPE'S RESPONSE

The EU's Water Framework Directive provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity to restore Europe's rivers, lakes and wetlands to ecological health by 2015 with each member state committed to produce a water management plan by the end of 2009. Eight years in the making, these plans are now the subject of consultation with EU's citizens and interested parties in many of Europe's 110 river basin districts. If developed and implemented properly, they provide a real hope for an alternative situation in which we keep our rivers clean and healthy and our wetlands wet; where we are less wasteful of our water; where the water we use is priced fairly and those who pollute it are made to pay; and where our waste is properly treated and not washed straight into waterways.

WHAT FUTURE FOR EU'S WATER?

An assessment by European Environmental Bureau (EEB) and WWF of these draft plans and their consultation process has revealed that, as they stand now, these plans will fail to adequately protect Europe's water resources. At a time when Europe is becoming increasingly aware of its water challenges, exacerbated by expected climate change impacts, such as increased droughts, floods and changes to precipitation patterns, governments are shying away from taking resolute steps to deal with existing and emerging water challenges. The consequences further down the line can be significant in the form of diminishing water supplies, ever more expensive treatment, ever-increasing impacts on the economy and greater exposure to catastrophic events.

FIVE PRIORITIES FOR BETTER WATER MANAGEMENT

EEB and WWF identified 5 key priorities which we believe must be tackled most urgently if the challenge of sustainable water management is to be met. Carefully considered and based on a decade of close involvement in EU water policy reform, these priorities also act as headline indicators by which we assessed the draft plans:

- Transparent and publicly owned water management
- Reducing wastage and using water well
- More space for living rivers
- Healthy, safe water for people and nature
- Visionary and adaptive water policies

May 2009

EUROPEAN RIVERS LEAGUE TABLE

A comparison of the draft plans found that although some plans are showing best practices in some areas, there are no plans that really stand out in a positive or visionary way. Although the WFD has been successful in starting off a reform process, it is very far from clear what this process will now deliver.

Country	River Basin	Transparent & publicly owned water management	Reducing wastage and using water well	Space for living rivers	Healthy and safe water	Visionary and adaptive water management
Austria	National	Bad	Moderate	moderate	moderate	moderate
Belgium	Meuse	Bad	Poor	moderate	moderate	moderate
Belgium	Scheldt	Poor	Moderate	moderate	moderate	poor
Czech Republic	Morava	Bad	Bad	poor	poor	poor
Germany	Elbe	moderate	Good	moderate	poor	poor
Germany	Rhine	Poor	Poor	good	moderate	poor
Germany	Weser	Poor	Poor	poor	poor	poor
Spain	Baleares	Poor	Poor	moderate	bad	poor
Spain	Duero	Bad	Bad	moderate E	bad	poor
Spain	El Tajo	Bad	Good	bad	poor	moderate
Finland	Kymijoki-Suomen.	moderate	Poor	poor	poor	poor
France	Loire-Bretagne	moderate	Moderate	good	moderate	bad
France	Rhone	Poor	Moderate	moderate	poor	poor
Ireland	Shannon	Poor	Poor	bad	moderate	poor
Netherlands	Meuse	poor	Poor	good	moderate	moderate
Netherlands	Rhine	poor	Poor	good	moderate	moderate
Poland	Vistula	poor	Moderate	poor	poor	poor
Romania	Arges-Vedea	poor	Poor	moderate	moderate	poor
UK	North Umbria	poor	Poor	poor	moderate	poor
UK	North West	poor	Moderate	moderate	moderate	poor
UK	Scotland	moderate	Moderate	moderate	poor	moderate
UK	Severn	moderate	Poor	poor	good	moderate
UK	South West	poor	Poor	poor	moderate	moderate
Average		poor	Poor	moderate	moderate	poor

Legend

No consultation	Lack of information in the draft RBMP, assessment used preparatory documents or lack of information in the NGO answers.
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Performance rating: high Good Moderate poor Bad

KEY FINDINGS FOR EACH OF THE FIVE NGO PRIORITIES

Transparent and publicly owned water management

Across Europe governments are engaging into one of the EU's biggest coordinated consultation exercises: the consultation on plans to restore the ecology of our river basins by 2015 and beyond. Our survey based assessment has confirmed that a mobilisation has indeed taken place in most river basins. However, although a recent Eurobarometer (March 2009) showed that two thirds of EU citizens believe there is a serious water problem and are willing to be involved in shaping water management, water authorities have largely failed to open up water management. Most critically they have failed to provide relevant information to the public such as for example what objectives they try to achieve by when and what strategies they've chosen to achieve them.

Reducing wastage and using water well

Although large parts of Europe are already suffering from periodic droughts, only a few plans set water saving objectives (for example in Loire-Bretagne in France or Severn in the UK). Groundwater bodies seem to be receiving better protection from over-abstraction because the WFD sets very explicit objectives for this. Water pricing is used in very few cases to create an incentive to consume less water and to pollute less. Measures are more often aimed at households than at agriculture even though the latter is the larger consumer of water and is highly vulnerable to water scarcity.



Giving more space to living rivers

Europe has lost most of its space for rivers. However, space is critical to our ability to adapt to climate change impacts. Those countries that have lost much of their natural rivers and waters in the past, such as the Netherlands, have started encouraging initiatives to give more space to rivers. However, deeply worrying developments are now taking place in those countries where rivers are still more natural, such as in the Czech Republic or Portugal, where rivers continue to be poured into concrete straightjackets for the purpose of navigation, hydro power or flood defense.

Clean and healthy waters for nature and people

Although pollution levels of some well known substance, such as nutrients and pesticides, have been stabilized as a result of older water policies, it is unlikely that the draft plans will now take the next step and bring them down to acceptable levels. Cost-effective pollution controls, including phasing out hazardous substances at product level, is not part of basin planning with a few exceptions like in the Danube for example. As a result, large portions of Europe's waters are at risk of becoming unavailable, or in need of expensive treatment, to be used as drinking or bathing water for people or to bring back life-giving water to wetlands and degraded natural systems.

Visionary and adaptive policies

To tackle Europe's challenges, the river basin management plans need to be visionary, abandoning a minimalistic approach to implementation and becoming the central plank of efforts to tackle lasting food and energy security, public health and climate challenges. Yet an integrated approach with even the most obvious water-related policy areas - flooding - is not uniform and has only happened in a few cases.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN NOW?

Most importantly and most urgently, national and river basin authorities should use the last six months of 2009 to dramatically improve their river basin management plans and increase efforts to improve public participation. As a priority:

- Clear and relevant information - understandable to a wider public - about proposed objectives, budgets and scope of measures, should be provided before the consultation processes closes. Allow full scrutiny of proposed objectives and measures and ensure appropriate feedback to public comments are provided during the consultation.
- Ambitious water saving objectives should be supported by effective measures such as water pricing and targeting all water users including agriculture.
- Much stronger protection is needed for Europe's more natural rivers against modifications for navigation, hydropower or flood defences. Encouraging efforts to create more space for water in other places needs to be substantiated by clear restoration targets and budgets.
- Serious additional efforts are needed across Europe to bring down concentrations of well known pollutants such as nutrients and pesticides. We also need to face up to the challenge of addressing the challenge of pollution upstream through product controls.
- A clear vision for future water management needs to be provided, taking up the challenge posed by climate change impacts and leading to integration into important sectors such as agriculture, energy and transport.

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CONCLUSIONS

We hope that this report will help policy makers to understand the central place that water should have in political decision making and what they need to do about it. But, the European water laws on their own are not sufficient. If the EU's waters are to be revived, the political will is required to make Europe's water policy reform a lasting success and give our most precious natural resource a sustainable future.

You can find the full report as well as the WWF/EEB publication outlining priorities for better water management in the EU at www.eeb.org and www.panda.org/eu