

Addressing the challenge of water scarcity and droughts in the European Union

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PURPOSE: to address the challenge of water scarcity and droughts in the European Union.

CONTENT: over the past thirty years, droughts have dramatically increased in number and intensity in the EU. The number of areas and people affected by droughts went up by almost 20% between 1976 and 2006. One of the most widespread droughts occurred in 2003 when over 100 million people and a third of the EU territory was affected. The cost of damage to the European economy was at least EUR 8.7 billion. The total cost of droughts over the past thirty years amounts to EUR 100 billion. The yearly average cost quadrupled over the same period.

While “drought” means a temporary decrease in water availability, “water scarcity” means that water demand exceeds the water resources exploitable under sustainable conditions. At least 11% of the European population and 17% of its territory have been affected by water scarcity. In a context where changes in climate are foreseen in spite of significant EU mitigation efforts, this trend is expected to continue and even worsen. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, climate change would bring water scarcity to between 1.1 and 3.2 billion people if temperatures rose by 2 to 3° C. Drought affected areas are likely to increase in extent. In these circumstances, it has become an EU priority to devise effective drought risk management strategies.

CONTENT: Against this background, this Communication presents an initial set of policy options at a European, national and regional level to address and mitigate the challenge posed by water scarcity and drought within the Union. It is also a response to a request for action on water scarcity and droughts from the Environment Council meeting in June 2006.

In this Communication the Commission sets out a list of challenges that need to be addressed. For each challenge a way forward is proposed and an example of “good practice” given. In summary, the main challenges, faced by the EU include:

Progressing towards the full implementation of the Water Framework Directive (WFD): Implementation of this Directive (Directive 2000/60/EC) is given high priority in order to address the mismanagement of water resources.

Ineffective water pricing policies: The “user pays” principle is hardly implemented beyond the sectors of drinking water supply and waste water treatment. Introducing this principle at an EU level would put an end to needless losses or waste, thereby ensuring that water remains available for essential use across Europe, including all parts of trans-boundary river basins. A more effective water pricing policy would encourage efficient water use.

Land use planning: This is also one of the main drivers of water use. Inadequate water allocation between economic sectors results in imbalances between water needs and existing water resources. A pragmatic shift is required in order to change policy-making patterns and to move forward effective land-use planning at the appropriate levels.

Water savings: There is a huge potential for water savings across Europe. Europe continues to waste at least 20% of its water due to inefficiency. Water saving must become the priority and all possibilities to improve water efficiency must therefore be explored. Policy making should be based on a clear water

hierarchy. Additional water supply infrastructures should be considered as an option when other options have been exhausted, including effective water pricing policy and cost-effective alternatives. Water uses should also be prioritised: it is clear that public water supply should always be the overriding priority to ensure access to adequate water provision.

Improving drought risk management: at European level, the Commission proposes fostering exchanges of information and best practices on drought risk management; identifying methodologies for drought thresholds and drought mapping and developing recommendations by the end of 2008. At national level, by 2009, it proposes the drawing up of specific drought management plans to supplement WFD river basin management plans, where needed, in accordance with WFD provisions. It also recommends the creation of a drought observatory and a rapid alert system and to make use of the EU's Solidarity Fund and the Civil Protection Mechanism for these purposes.

Considering additional water supply infrastructures: there are several possible ways of developing additional water infrastructures, (e.g. the storage of surface or ground waters, water transfers, or use of alternative sources). The construction of new water supply dams and water transfers are subject to EU legislation. Alternative options like desalination or waste water re-use are increasingly considered as potential solutions across Europe.

Fostering water efficient technologies and practices: in addition to improving technologies, the upgrading of water management practices is a necessary instrument in all sectors where huge quantities of water are used (e.g. agriculture, manufacturing or tourism). The Commission suggests, among other things, the development of standards for water-using devices, such as irrigation systems and other energy-using farm equipment, as well as developing a new directive similar to the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive for the water performance of buildings.

Fostering the emergence of a water-saving culture in Europe: developing a responsible water-saving and efficiency culture requires an active awareness-raising policy in which all actors in the water sector need to be involved. Information, education and training are priority areas for action.

High quality knowledge and information: existing European and national assessment and monitoring programmes are neither integrated nor complete. Filling knowledge gaps and ensuring data comparability across the EU is therefore a precondition. In this context, research has a significant role to play for policy makers.

To conclude, the challenge of water scarcity and droughts needs to be addressed both as an essential environmental issue and also as a precondition for sustainable economic growth in Europe. As the EU seeks to revitalise and reinvigorate its economy and continue to take a lead on tackling climate change, devising an effective strategy towards water efficiency can make a substantial contribution.

The Commission has identified a first set of policy options with a view to opening up a wide-ranging debate on how to adapt to water scarcity and droughts – two phenomena that could potentially increase. The Commission is of the view that more has to be done in order to introduce these measures swiftly at an EU level. In future, it will review progress towards the set of orientations and will report on them to both the Council and Parliament. Any follow-up initiatives may be considered within the coming few years.