

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

2008/2074(INI) - 09/10/2008 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 594 votes to 45, with 12 abstentions, a resolution in response to the Commission's communication entitled "Addressing the Challenges of Water Scarcity and Droughts in the European Union".

The own-initiative report had been tabled for consideration by Richard **SEEBER** (EPP- ED, AT) on behalf of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety.

MEPs welcome the Communication and support the proposed first set of policy options for action, but regret that its scope is limited to the EU and Member State level only. They recall that water scarcity and drought is a problem with an international dimension and that action needs to be taken accordingly.

**Integrated approach:** MEPs regret that the Communication limits itself to promoting general objectives, proposing only a limited number of precise measures and no concrete timetable for their implementation. The Commission is called upon to present an ongoing programme, in particular a progress report in 2009 and the review and development of the European Union's strategy. MEPs stress the need to mainstream the issue of water into all policy areas and to create a truly integrated approach when addressing it, including all of the financial and legal instruments of the EU. They underline that all political levels (national, regional and local) should be involved in the process.

**Coordinated action:** the resolution stresses that the cross-regional and trans-border nature of river basins can have a serious cross-border impact on upstream and downstream regions, and that it is thus indispensable for the Member States, as well as regional and local authorities, to cooperate on the issue of water scarcity and drought, ensuring sustainable and fair use of water resources. MEPs consider that the specificity of the water scarcity and droughts issue requires coordinated action at EU and Member State level as well as at regional and local government level.

**The role of regions:** the resolution highlights the importance of the regions as a driving force behind technological innovation in the field of water, the report calls on regional and local authorities to take advantage of the great opportunities offered by the Structural Funds and invest in the improvement or renewal of existing infrastructure and technology including, notably, clean technologies that facilitate the efficient use of water. MEPs maintain, in this context, that infrastructure funding should be allocated with a view to implementing measures to improve the management and supply of high-quality water, in keeping with existing needs.

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**Demand-side measures:** MEPs recall that a demand-side approach should be preferred when managing water resources. Supply-side measures should also be considered, with a view to achieving the most economically and environmentally efficient solution, optimising the balance between supply and demand, and ensuring an uninterrupted public water supply including during drought conditions. MEPs stress, however, the construction of diversions to transport water over large distances should not be the solution to the problem of water scarcity.

**Climate change:** recalling the link between climate change, water scarcity and drought, MEPs call for account to be taken of the impact on water resources when policies to combat climate change are drawn up. They stress that the revision of Community budget priorities should accord a higher ranking to environmental measures and, in particular, to policies designed to combat the effects of climate change, which include drought and water scarcity, ensuring that the necessary additional resources are available. The Commission and Member States are urged to acknowledge that deforestation and unrestrained urban development are contributing to growing water scarcity. MEPs call on the Member States and the authorities concerned to pay heed to water-related considerations in their land-use planning, especially in connection with the development of economic activities in sensitive river basins.

**Water quality:** the resolution acknowledges the importance of the WFD as a framework for achieving "good status" for all European waters, promoting inter-regional cooperation, sustainable water use and protection of available water resources while contributing to mitigating the effects of floods and droughts. MEPs call upon the Commission and all the Member States to implement fully its provisions and to ensure that water scarcity and drought measures have no negative effects on water quality objectives.

**Water saving potential:** recalling that almost 20% of water in the EU is lost due to water inefficiency, the resolution underlines the need for major investments in order to improve technical progress in all economic sectors. MEPs stress that any supply of water regardless of the purpose of its consumption must comply with the principle of fair water tariffication, thereby encouraging companies especially to use water more efficiently. Welcoming the fact that water saving is the Commission's first priority in response to water scarcity and droughts, MEPs urge the Commission in this connection to ensure that use of Structural Funds does not run counter to this priority, to incorporate sustainable water management as a criterion that projects must satisfy, and to obtain evidence of the utilisation by local and regional authorities of water savings and of their compliance with the requirements of the WFD, before granting them funding from the Structural Funds.

**Combating waste:** stressing that 40% of the water used in the EU could be saved, MEPs call for concrete measures and financial incentives to promote a more efficient and sustainable use of water. They call, likewise, for the widespread installation of metering devices to measure water consumption in order to encourage saving, re-use and the efficient and rational use of water. They call for the widespread installation of metering devices to measure water consumption in order to encourage saving, re-use and the efficient and rational use of water. Bearing in mind that losses owing to leakages in the public water supply network in urban centres may exceed 50%, MEPs ask the Commission to look into the possibility of promoting a network of cities to encourage sustainable water use with the aim of exchanging good practices such as re-use, saving and improved water efficiency and jointly carrying out pilot demonstration projects. The European Union is called on to support measures to improve water management in agriculture and to promote a modernisation of irrigation systems.

**Consumer awareness:** consumers have a major role to play if a sustainable use of water resources is to be achieved in the EU. MEPs call on the EU to launch a public information and education campaign to make people aware of the water issue and encouraging them to take concrete actions. The Commission is invited to encourage the exchange of good practice among regions, cities and civil society organisations, focusing on measures to save water (including the purification of rain and waste water), improve water efficiency and manage the risk of droughts. MEPs take the view that a labelling system for the water consumption of products, which already exists for energy efficiency, would be an appropriate tool for achieving a more sustainable water consumption. They point out that devising an efficient water pricing policy which reflects the true value of water may encourage consumers to be more sparing in their use of water.

The Parliament calls on the Commission to consider financing in 2009 a pilot project intended to cover research, surveying and monitoring for the development of prevention activities to halt desertification and steppe formation in Europe. It is also called upon to promote the entry into operation of the **European Drought Observatory** within the framework of the European Environment Agency to enhance sound, strategic decision-making.