

Implementation of EU water legislation, ahead of a necessary overall approach to European water challenges

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The Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety adopted the own-initiative report by Richard SEEBER (EPP, AT) on the implementation of EU water legislation, ahead of a necessary overall approach to European water challenges.

The report acknowledges that Directive 2000/60/EC (water Framework Directive or WFD) constitutes a solid and ambitious legislative base for long-term integrated water management in the EU. It points out however that the **rate of implementation has been slow and uneven** across Member States and regions and that the implementation of the WFD **needs to be improved significantly** in order to achieve ‘good status’ throughout European waters by 2015.

Members state that **specific gaps** exist that need to be filled both by adapting existing legislation to water priorities and by providing new legislation to address the impact of specific sectors and activities. They reiterate their position that the Commission must submit draft legislation which encourages the adoption of an EU policy on **water shortages, droughts and adapting to climate change**. They take note of the Commission’s upcoming ‘Blueprint to safeguard Europe’s water resources’.

1) Water Efficiency and Management of Resources: the report calls for more efficient water usage especially in sectors such as **energy and agriculture**, which are the largest water users. It stresses that water use should be taken into account when assessing the sustainability of traditional as well as low-carbon energy sources, including in particular bioenergy and hydropower, and draws attention to the risks associated with non-conventional natural gas extraction. Members stress that the efficiency and sustainability of water use by the agriculture sector can be improved by the introduction of **innovative technologies and practices**, and by improvements to information and the awareness of farmers and end users. They emphasise that, in view of the challenges of climate change and food security, sufficient water resources should be mobilised for agriculture, for example by developing water storage.

The report calls for EU water legislation to be updated — as appropriate — to properly take into account technological advances for the reuse and recycling of water. Pointing out that **reducing water consumption should be a priority**, it underlines the importance of ecodesign and water-saving devices and calls for **water metering to be made binding** across all sectors and users in all EU countries. The Commission is asked to regulate the water efficiency of devices in domestic and agricultural use.

2) Water and Ecosystems: noting that water is at the core of most ecosystem services, the report stresses the importance of proper water management in reaching **biodiversity** targets. It stresses the need for **reforestation** and wetland restoration measures in the management of water resources, and calls for better alignment of the objectives of the WFD with **Natura 2000**. It stresses that the knowledge base should integrate the concept of ‘**environmental flows**’ and take into account the ecosystem services supported by water.

Members underline the impact that climate change could have on our water ecosystems, necessitating stringent, systematic measures aimed at conserving nature and biodiversity, and which require the

establishment of meticulous rules for the mass management of transformed water. Regarding the significant risks posed by **shale gas exploration and extraction**, the Commission is asked to ensure that such activities are covered by the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive.

Recalling that **soil protection** is a core element for preserving the quality of water, the report calls on all Member States to meet their obligations with regard to the assurance of soil quality and to maintain soil health, while also urging Member States where no soil protection provisions exist to step up to their responsibilities.

Members call for the establishment of **more targeted incentives** for efficient water management and – in particular for poor and rural populations – affordable access to water for all, and for the distribution of water in areas facing shortages, particularly those areas situated at a distance from large urban agglomerations equipped with water infrastructure.

The Commission is asked to step up the battle against the increasing release of pollutants such as anti-biotic and **drug residues** – as well as hormone residues from contraceptive pills – in water, as these residues have a negative effect on human health and the environment.

3) Knowledge and Innovation: whilst recognising that the EU policy framework has allowed the collection of less fragmented data on water as well as better monitoring, the report notes the **lack of reliable data** on water quantity, for instance on abstraction and leakage. It notes the potential for better data management based on an **improvement in statistical information** and on the use of data collection stations, the Water Information System for Europe (WISE) and GMES monitoring of the state of water resources. The Commission is asked to develop a new set of reliable indicators for water accounts in cooperation with the European Environment Agency.

Members believe that it is important to encourage research and innovation in connection with water and the development of European clusters in this area. They call on the Commission, the Member States and other relevant stakeholders to support the **European Innovation Partnership on Water**. They also stress the need to focus on the specific objectives and activities of the Horizon 2020 programme in terms of better, sustainable management of water resources.

4) Water Mainstreaming: the report stresses the need for better consistency and better integration of water-related objectives into the legislation at EU, national regional and local levels. It calls for a full evaluation of the effects on water resources to be taken into account in the design of the overarching economic governance policies such as EU2020 and of joint EU policies such as the common agricultural policy and cohesion policy.

5) Water and the Economy: Members call on the Commission and Member States to ensure the application of the **‘polluter pays’** and **‘user pays’ principles** by means of transparent and effective **pricing schemes** implemented in all water-using sectors that aim at the recovery of the costs of water services, including environmental and resource costs, as set down in the Water Framework Directive. They underline however that social issues should be taken into account when setting water tariffs and that clean water should be available at an affordable price for human needs. The report calls on the Commission and Member States to assess and revise subsidies harmful for water and to develop and introduce further economic instruments to reduce environmentally-detrimental activity and incentivise more sustainable use of water resources.

6) Water and Society: Members urge the Commission, Member States and regional authorities to stimulate intersectoral dialogue, as well as dialogue between the various **economic operators and citizens** on issues related to water and between authorities and the Petitions Committee whenever the latter is addressing the concerns of European citizens with regard to water issues. The Commission should also foster full and transparent participation of local communities and stakeholders at all levels in the

development of water policy. The **exchange of best practices** should be encouraged for effective multi-level governance in the field of water.

The report calls for the **strengthening of public awareness** and education on water issues, among consumers, health operators and policy and decision makers in order to bring about a better understanding of the links between water, ecosystems, sanitation, hygiene, health, food safety, food security and disaster prevention.

Members call for:

- the Blue Flag scheme to be extended to all bathing areas in Europe, including rivers, lakes and ponds;
- the provision of training in connection with saving water and the sustainable use thereof for tourism professionals, particularly in coastal areas and thermal belts;
- introducing good water systems in buildings and public areas to help reduce the need for bottled water.

7) Water and the World: the report welcomes the early achievement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goal on sustainable access to safe drinking water. It calls on the Commission, Member States and the relevant authorities at all levels to reinforce their commitment, to play an active role in achieving the MDG on basic sanitation and to take into account the relevant outcomes of the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development, ensuring that access to potable water and sanitation is **guaranteed as a fundamental human right**.