

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

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The Commission presents a report reviewing the European Water Scarcity and Droughts Policy. It recalls that, following one of the most widespread droughts in 2003 affecting over 100 million people, with a cost of at least EUR 8.7 billion, the Commission adopted the [Communication on water scarcity and droughts in the EU](#). This laid down a water hierarchy under which water demand management should come first, with alternative supply options only when the potential for water efficiency has been exhausted. This report assesses the **7 main policy options** identified in that Communication and also reviews whether the policy on water scarcity and droughts has achieved its objectives of reducing water scarcity and vulnerability to droughts. It also looks into whether action taken in the implementation of the **Directive 2006/60/EC** (Water Framework Directive - WFD) has contributed to addressing water scarcity and droughts. This assessment is based on a number of studies launched by the Commission and on the assessment of the Member States river basin management plans (RBMPs).

Generally, **the Commission considers that overall objective of the water scarcity and droughts policy - to reverse the water scarcity and droughts trends - has not been achieved**, although there has been progress in implementing the 7 policy instruments identified in the Commission's 2007 Communication. The report highlights certain points.

1. Integration of Water Scarcity and Droughts measures in the RBMPs: water scarcity and droughts are recognized as relevant issues by RBMPs across the EU. Water scarcity is reported for the whole Mediterranean area, and for some areas in Central, Eastern and Northern Europe but **41% of the RBMPs do not consider water scarcity as a relevant concern**. Drought is reported for a wide range of River Basin Districts across Europe but 40% of the RBMPs do not consider drought relevant.

The analysis of water quantity aspects lacks adequate foundation in many RBMPs: quantity data are insufficient and water scarcity is often not clearly distinguished from droughts and vice-versa. Water demand scenarios are presented for only 35% and water availability scenarios for less than 25% of the RBMPs. 80% of the plans do not assess the uncertainty of data and 90% do not specify the sources of funds to implement the relevant measures.

Measures to ensure the achievement of the WFD objectives by enhancing the resilience of the ecosystems are included in 45% of the RBMPs. Only in a few basins that face water scarcity, restrictions to new water-consuming developments are envisaged as a high priority in the RBMPs.

The influence of other sectoral policies on the reduction of water scarcity and the mitigation of drought effects is not sufficiently covered: for only 12% of the RBMPs, the pressures on water resources by the different sectors are identified.

2. Gaps in the current Water Scarcity and Droughts policy: the Commission's assessment shows a diversity of inter-linked policy gaps in addressing water scarcity and droughts in Europe. These include:

- **conceptual gaps:** the understanding of the causal relationships between drivers, pressures, states and impacts that would help identifying the most cost-effective measures for addressing water scarcity and droughts is still not sufficient. Water scarcity and droughts are often not distinguished

and indicators to illustrate the two phenomena have so far been insufficient. Newly agreed indicators need to be calculated for the entire EU at appropriate geographical and time scale. This requires a coherent dataset at EU level;

- **information gaps:** the RBMPs include only limited data on current and future water demand and availability as well as on measures that target water scarcity and drought, availability of funding and their expected impact on WS&D. The absence of robust information hampers a proper assessment of the effectiveness and socio-economic impacts of measures;
- **policy, governance and implementation gaps:** overall, most support actions and measures proposed by Member States target pressures, state and impacts, giving priority to measures to increase water supply. Measures that target key drivers at the origin of water scarcity and drought, or the implementation of accompanying measures such as metering, pricing/subsidies and restriction of water consumption are proposed in a few RBMPs only. **Responsibilities for and financing of the proposed measures is unclear. Adequate coordination with other planning processes and availability of financial resources is not satisfactory.** Lastly, the links between water scarcity and ecological flows are not well established.

3. Tools for improving water quantity management: in addition to the [European Innovation Partnership on Water](#) and the [European Innovation Partnership ‘Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability’](#), the review **highlights a number of tools** to improve water quantity management in the next RBMPs. These include the following:

- **Defining and implementing ecological flows:** this requires the adaptation of current water allocation to consider the ecological needs of water-dependent ecosystems. If water allocations reflect ecological flow requirements, it will be possible to prevent or mitigate the effects of water scarcity and droughts.
- **Defining and implementing targets for water efficiency:** targets are best set at local level by stakeholders who have full knowledge of the different water use sectors and components of the hydrological cycle and who can ensure that targets are coherent and that efficiency measures are implemented where the socio-economic costs are the lowest.
- **Promoting economic incentives for efficient water use:** widening the scope of current economic instruments will provide incentives for sustainable water abstraction and use.
- **Guiding land use to respond to water scarcity:** ensuring that new economic development is coherent with the water availability is the basis for long-term sustainability, and specific attention on land use is required. This re-emphasises the need for proper integration between RBMPs and other economic and physical planning processes.
- **Enhancing drought management in Europe:** further development of the European Drought Observatory to operate as an early-warning system should be combined with an effective adaptation of the EU Solidarity Fund to cope with damages that could not be avoided.
- **Promoting resilience to climate change:** climate change is expected to worsen the impacts of already existing stresses on water, as changes in precipitation, combined with rising temperatures, will cause significant changes in the quality and availability of water resources. A combination of adaptation measures must be included in the policy answers to water scarcity and drought.

The report considers that the **water scarcity and droughts policy has to some extent been considered as self-standing by Member States** and a stronger focus on quantity issues in the implementation of the Water Framework Directive is critical. In the next implementation cycles of the Directive, this needs to be ensured along with further integration of water quantity issues into sectoral policies.

The policy gaps and concrete options to address them are considered in the [Commission Communication Blueprint to Safeguard Europe's Water Resources](#) with a view to integrating water quantity issues more fully into the overall policy framework. Where relevant, further policy measures may be addressed in the Adaptation to climate change Strategy foreseen for spring 2013.