Resolution on the implementation of the EU water legislation

2020/2613(RSP) - 17/12/2020 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 622 votes to 23, with 43 abstentions, a resolution on the implementation of EU water legislation.

Parliament welcomed the fact that the Water Framework Directive has succeeded in establishing an adequate governance framework for integrated water management and in improving water quality, or at least in some cases slowing down the deterioration of water quality. It stressed that no revision of the Water Framework Directive was necessary, suggesting that the Commission should continue to propose to update it where appropriate. It also rejected any attempt to treat water as a commodity.

Restoring and improving water quality

Members deplored, however, the fact that half of the EU's water bodies are still not in good status and that the objectives of the Water Framework Directive have not yet been achieved, mainly due to insufficient funding, a particularly slow pace of implementation, insufficient enforcement, lack of implementation of the precautionary principle and the polluter pays principle, and broad use of the

exemptions of the directive in many Member States, and also regretted that integration of environmental objectives in sectoral policies has been insufficient.

The resolution stressed the need to restore and improve water quality. It invited Member States: (i) to ensure that the next River Basin Management Plans are adopted on time; (ii) to define the implementing measures necessary to ensure that bodies of water are in good status; and (iii) to design publicly available programmes of measures based on the best available data.

The Commission is called upon to take strict measures to prosecute infringements by Member States to ensure that all Member States fully comply with water legislation.

Mobilising sufficient funds

According to an OECD study, an additional EUR 253 billion needs to be invested in the EU water sector before 2030 to maintain or reach full compliance with water legislation. Parliament called on Member States to take all necessary measures, including mobilising the necessary funds, human resources and technical expertise, to achieve full compliance with the Water Framework Directive as soon as possible and in any case by 2027 at the latest.

Climate change

Members noted that climate change will continue to have a significant impact on freshwater sources, with droughts leading to river depletion and increased pollutant concentrations, and heavy rainfall leading to increased run-off from urban and agricultural sources. They called for the resilience of aquatic ecosystems, floods, water scarcity and their impact on food production to be duly taken into account in the EU's forthcoming climate change adaptation strategy.

Reducing pollution at source

Members considered that it is crucial to tackle chemical and other causes of pollution in surface water and groundwater at source as a priority as it is the most sustainable, effective and cost-effective measure, alongside implementing the polluter-pays principle.

The resolution stressed the urgent need for improvement in the field of chemicals. It stressed that substances relevant to production of drinking water, such as Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) and relevant pharmaceuticals, should be added to the list of priority substances. It considered that pollutants of emerging concern and mixed toxicity can and should be addressed within the framework of the Water Framework Directive. In this context, Members welcomed the decision to develop a monitoring method for microplastics and the establishment of a watch list in the revised Drinking Water Directive.

The Commission is invited to fund research and development of strategies to combat persistent, bioaccumulative and toxic substances in order to improve the quality of water bodies and reduce risks to animal and human health and the environment.

Urban wastewater treatment

Parliament called on the Commission to help Member States implement the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive by promoting sustainable water financing and encouraging the deployment of innovative wastewater treatment technologies.

The resolution stressed that the urban wastewater treatment directive and the water framework directive do not adequately address problems arising from climate change, such as storm water overflows, urban run-off and flooding in agglomerations, nor the impact of inadequate waste water treatment on the recipient body of water.

Hydroelectricity

Parliament welcomed the Commission's commitment, as part of its biodiversity strategy for 2030, to restore 25 000 km of free-flowing rivers in the EU by removing barriers and restoring flood plains.

Members noted that there are currently 21 000 hydropower plants in the EU and that hydropower and small hydropower stations account for the largest share of renewable energy in the EU.

Stressing, however, that the construction of dams can have negative effects on habitats and lead to high pressures on surface waters, Members called on the Commission and Member States to strictly assess the impact of the resulting alterations on water quality, quantity and ecosystems and to ensure that all hydropower plant projects comply with the objectives of the Water Framework Directive.

Water use in agriculture

Parliament recommended aligning the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the Drinking Water Directive, the Nitrates Directive, the Plant Protection Products Regulation, the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive and the REACH Regulation with the Water Framework Directive with regard to the need to strengthen water protection measures and to use water more efficiently in agriculture.

The report stressed the urgent need to reduce the impact of pesticides on drinking water resources by fully addressing the protection of drinking water resources in the approval (or re-authorisation) of active substances and the (re-)authorisation of pesticides.