Resolution on measures against water pollution caused by nitrates, including improvements in the different nitrate measuring systems in Member States

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The European Parliament adopted by 548 votes to 15, with 65 abstentions, a resolution on measures against water pollution caused by nitrates, including improvements in the different nitrate measuring systems in Member States.

As a reminder, an excess of nitrates is one of the main factors causing harmful pollution to water in the EU due to the accumulation of nitrogen and phosphorus from livestock manure and inorganic fertilisers. High concentrations of it in water are harmful to people and nature.

30 years after the adoption of the Nitrates Directives, water quality data shows that the levels of implementation and enforcement are still not sufficient to reach its objectives and the corresponding objectives of the Water Framework Directive (WFD).

The resolution recalled that the WFD requires all European surface waters to reach good status by 2027 at the latest. Parliament regretted that half of the EU's water bodies still do not have good status and that nitrate contamination continues to be one of the biggest pressures on the aquatic environment.

Action should be stepped up to address eutrophication of both fresh and salt water caused by nitrogen and phosphorus from all sources, especially from agriculture and municipal sources such as wastewater treatment plants and untreated or inappropriately treated wastewater.

In this regard, the Commission is invited to propose ambitious measures in its forthcoming integrated nutrient management action plan, scheduled for 2022.

Common measuring systems

The resolution underlined that the use of different measurement systems in each Member State can lead to difficulties in tackling the problem of nitrate water pollution at European level. It called on the Commission to guarantee the comparability of nitrate measurements and eutrophication assessment results across the Member States. According to Parliament, the nitrate measurement and eutrophication assessment systems, and in particular the location of the measuring points, should be harmonised within the EU. Moreover, a uniform system for sampling and analysis is required to make measured values comparable.

Water protection

The resolution also stressed that the measures needed to ensure the protection of water quality and to counter pollution caused by nitrates must be designed and adopted on the basis of water quality data and not estimations produced by models, which can only provide additional information for targeted measures.

Non-compliance with the Nitrates Directive

Parliament regretted that during the period 2016-2019, ten Member States were the subject of ongoing infringement cases for non-compliance with the Nitrates Directive. The Commission is urged to adequately tackle all cases of non-compliance with the Nitrates Directive by fully taking into account the growing body of evidence and information brought forth by citizens, and to ensure full transparency regarding its overall actions against non-compliant Member States. The Commission should also greatly improve the use of its enforcement powers, including by making effective and timely use of infringement procedures in order to guarantee that Member States properly designate nitrate vulnerable zones and accurately establish and implement all relevant measures in the nitrate action programmes.

Innovation

Parliament pointed to the importance of promoting the adoption of innovations to induce efficiency and good practices in agriculture, recognising the need to reduce inefficiencies that lead to excessive use of water, fertilisers, pesticides and antibiotics. It stressed the importance of using innovative practices such as **nitrogen recovery from manure** to mitigate this pollution and minimise nutrient leakage into the environment and called on the Commission to fund research programmes under Horizon Europe to find smart and innovative solutions to the problem of nutrient pollution in the EU.