Protection of groundwater: prevention and control of pollution

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PURPOSE : to improve the quality of Europe's groundwater. PROPOSED ACT : Directive of the European parliament and of the Council. CONTENT : to recall, groundwater acts as a reservoir from which good quality water can be abstracted for drinking and for use in industry and agriculture. It is also important for maintaining wetlands and river flows, acting as a buffer through dry periods. In addition, groundwater provides base flow to surface water systems, feeding surface water systems all through the year. Thus groundwater quality has a direct impact on the quality of those surface waters as well as that of associated aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. As groundwater moves slowly through the ground, the impact of human activities can last for a relatively long time. For these reasons, it is necessary to focus on preventing pollution in the first place. Existing EU groundwater policy, that is Directive 80/68/EEC on the protection of groundwater against pollution caused by certain dangerous substances, has been aimed at protecting groundwater from direct and indirect discharges of a number of pollutants. But this Directive does not set any clear quality objectives nor does it require comprehensive monitoring. As a result, there is not much data available about the quality of groundwater in Europe. The proposed Directive will change this situation. In addition to the rules in Directive 80/68/EEC on the protection of groundwater against pollution caused by certain dangerous substances, groundwater protection is also a feature of the Water Framework Directive 2000/60/EC (WFD), which is the basic legislation for the protection of Europe's aquatic environment. Article 17 of the WFD requires that on the basis of a proposal from the Commission, the European Parliament and the Council shall adopt specific measures to prevent and control groundwater pollution by defining common criteria on good chemical status and on quality trends. This proposal for a Groundwater Daughter Directive meets that requirement. The proposal is accompanied by an Extended Impact Assessment carried out in the first quarter of 2003. It should be noted that the total quality assessment costs, the costs of the monitoring and clean-up measures required by the river basin management plan, and the administrative costs are already covered under the WFD. The proposed Groundwater Daughter Directive provides clear additional specifications, which should result in a more harmonised approach to defining and monitoring groundwater status than the existing WFD specifications.