

Framework for Community action in the field of water policy. Water Framework Directive

1997/0067(COD) - 24/06/1998

The Committee voted overwhelmingly to adopt a wide-ranging in-depth report on a Commission proposal - to which members had tabled nearly 300 amendments - for the first ever Community framework directive on water policy. The occasion was marred, however, by the knowledge that the Council appeared to have already reached "political agreement" on the legislation without waiting to receive Parliament's opinion. There was universal condemnation of the Council, which had already announced that on 16 June it reached "a considerable degree of common understanding" on the proposed directive. The rapporteur, Mr Ian WHITE (PES, UK), warned that the Council might have to reconsider its "political agreement". Mr White pointed out that the Commission proposal was to a large extent moulded by the views of Parliament, which had for a long time been pushing for overarching legislation on water. The initial Commission proposal had already been heavily influenced by a parliamentary hearing on water policy in June 1995 as well as by reports on the subject by Mr Karl-Heinz FLORENZ (EPP) and Mr Ken COLLINS (PES, UK). The overall aim of the proposal, after amendment by the committee (cooperation, first reading), is to protect surface water, coastal and territorial waters and groundwater through a framework which prevents further deterioration, protects ecosystems, promotes sustainable water use, helps combat floods and drought, and phases out discharges of hazardous substances into the aquatic environment by the year 2020. Specific directives will subsequently be adopted within this framework. With the committee's agreement, the proposal singles out river basins as the basic unit for water management. River basin district management authorities will draw up management plans for their district containing a programme of measures for the achievement of environmental objectives. Measures designed to control pollution at source will involve setting emission limit values and environmental quality standards. Under the proposal, all water service costs must be recouped and the "polluter pays" principle must apply. In its amendments, the committee also stressed the importance of wetlands, the integration of tourism and water policies and the implications for coastal fisheries. Members were also concerned to avoid excessive concentrations of radioactive substances in water and they added endocrine disrupters to the list of pollutants annexed to the proposal. Standardized methods recognized by all Member States must be used to monitor water quality. Every two years a conference on water policy should be held including representatives of the EP, NGOs, the social partners, consumer bodies, academics and experts. Members also want the Commission to publish a biennial report on implementation of the directive. The timescale for the directive includes a preparatory phase (1999-2005), involving setting up the river basin authorities, collecting data and identifying problems, and an implementation phase (2006-2009).