

# RESTORATION & PROTECTION OF FRESHWATER IN EUROPE



## RIVERS AS LIFELINES FOR PEOPLE & NATURE



### Summary of Key Takeaways & Points for Action for the EU and Member States on River Conservation

The **15th of October**, TNC Europe and Wetlands International Europe hosted the conference and webinar '**Rivers as Lifelines**', an **EU Green Week** and **World Fish Migration Day 2020** event. A fully booked event, with over 50 participants joining in from all over the world (EU Member States & Greater Europe, Brazil, Philippines, among others).

**Rivers as Lifelines** aimed to bring a great degree of varied content, views, and interesting discussion on the topic of river restoration and protection, in Europe and beyond, with a broad representation of stakeholders and decision makers at the event, including the European Parliament & Commission, Member States & CSOs. **The event was held virtually**, due to the Covid19 pandemic, between 10.30-15.45, and expertly moderated by **Chris Baker** of Wetlands International.

**A link to the presentations and recording**, an extensive briefing, and this summary report can be found at: <https://europe.wetlands.org/news/rivers-as-lifelines-key-messages-and-actions>

**Water Management for the sake of reversing biodiversity decline** and improving the freshwater environment needs to be holistic to be successful, and as such the event reflected this through the number of topics brought forward during the sessions, not to mention the great content provided by all of the event's speakers.

**In summary**, the seminar covered everything from the current situation for freshwater in Europe, including the supporting nature of current and future freshwater, pollution and biodiversity legislation and strategies; the 25,000 km river restoration target in the EU; an illustration how effective restoration and protection measures are and what best options are; what finance options are available or merits further exploration; and what Member States are doing regarding the restoration and protection of our rivers for the future; zooming in to specific examples and regions.

Taking the above, and from discussions during the event, several identified actions can be deemed crucial in ensuring EU and Europe-wide enabling conditions for holistic, dedicated river restoration and protection initiatives and long-term strategies. These **three key strands and their necessary next steps** will only be possible with the support from the **European** Parliament, Council, Commission, **Member States** and **Stakeholders**:

1. The proposals for freshwater ecosystem restoration in the **EU Biodiversity strategy for 2030**;
  - The ambitious **commitments within the Strategy** are the right steps in the right direction for securing a future for European freshwater biodiversity, and **should be endorsed** by the Council; thus giving the needed impetus towards implementation
  - Specifically, the **25,000 km river connectivity restoration target** needs to be upheld;
2. The **Water Framework Directive is a robust instrument to deliver on freshwater protection and restoration needs - fit for its purpose**;
  - Member States need to adopt ambitious River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) in 2021, aiming to achieve good status for rivers and other water bodies by 2027. The RBMPs must include measures for the **removal of primarily obsolete obstacles** in rivers and wetland restoration to deliver on the target of 25,000 km of free-flowing rivers
3. The EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 in conjunction with the Water Framework Directive **has the potential for an increased level of protection for rivers, through complementarity actions**;
  - **Rivers in (near) natural condition need to receive protected area designations**, an approach a few Member States are already taking or exploring, as contribution to a coherent network of protected areas.
  - **The linkage between protection and restoration** needs to be emphasised, to make sure that restored rivers remain restored and free-flowing, granting these a level of protection for the future
  - **Hydropower development**, notably small hydropower plants, **and its compatibility with environmental objectives** related to biodiversity and water quality need to be assessed against the consequences of ecosystem fragmentation – especially, but not only, in the Western Balkans.
  - The **Green Agenda for the Western Balkans** should promote a **balanced approach** between renewable energy and infrastructure development, economic growth, and river

conservation, primarily aiming to create a growth trajectory which is not based on unsustainable use of ecosystems but rather recognise their contribution to well-being and economic growth

- There is a need to **make stakeholders and the public more aware** of the issues and developments around freshwater, and **what the role and long-term benefits of nature-based solutions** to these problems are.

As all the above topics and points are a part of the puzzle in solving the problems Europe's rivers are facing, a comprehensive image of what Europe is currently doing, and needs to do in the future for our rivers, can effectively be portrayed.

This is especially the case for the Western Balkans and specifically the EU Candidate Countries – mentioned frequently in the event - who are looking to transpose EU Environmental Acquis, and because of the region's near pristine river systems and other freshwater bodies. The Green Agenda for the Western Balkans was discussed in relation to these questions, and it is clear it sets out to do much on the question of pollution issues and development aspects in the region, including tackling direct freshwater issues. The timing of the Green Agenda, Biodiversity Strategy, combined with the transposition of EU water law, couldn't be timelier in the discussion around the balancing renewable energy development, growth, and the threat of fragmentation of the watersheds in the Western Balkans. Ideally, the resources unleashed by governments and the EU would also rather underpin and not contradict these objectives.

An important point, is that the EU Biodiversity Strategy should aim to support the preparation of the National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) under the Convention on Biological Diversity's new Global Biodiversity Framework (post 2020), especially for Western Balkan and Neighbourhood Countries, where the EU Acquis and guidelines don't directly apply, yet their river systems in need of a strategic approach for restoration and conservation purposes

Member States are acting on the calls by global (CBD), regional (EU) as well as stakeholders, like NGO actors, the science community and other groupings, at varying scales for river conservation. Member State representatives from Finland, France, Slovenia, and Spain illustrated at the event measures are currently being taken to tackle the question of restoration and protection of rivers, and that these initiatives have been successful, even if certain aspects are still need to be extended, elaborated and further developed. In general, these initiatives seem to have the potential to evolve into holistic approaches dedicated to contribute to biodiversity restoration, especially with the new EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and an EU Water Framework Directive which is 'fit for purpose' in mind.

As for a very first step, restoring 25,000 km of our European *priority* rivers, is a vital steppingstone in breathing new life into the 'blue veins' of our continent. In this, many speakers expressed their confidence that the European Parliament, and the European Commission, will full heartedly pass on the message that rivers - Europe's lifelines – need our utmost attention, and foster the political will to prioritise our freshwater ecosystems, stepping up the political discussions around the future for our rivers.

*Continued overleaf -*

Once again, we (*The Nature Conservancy Europe & Wetlands International Europe*) thank you for participating at the Rivers as Lifelines event, we count on your continued engagement with the issues raised and topics covered during its course,

*Cordially,*

Henrik Österblad

*Freshwater Conservation Coordinator*  
**The Nature Conservancy Europe**



Eef Silver

*Policy Officer Water and Rivers*  
**Wetlands International Europe**

