



Living
Rivers
Europe

A Water handbook for the 2024-2029 mandate

Preserving Europe's waters,
keeping Europeans safe



Water is vital to Europe's security, health, social justice, supporting ecosystems and their recovery, as well as competitiveness. Our society relies on clean and abundant water for drinking and sanitation, crop production, cooling down power plants, and manufacturing goods. However, mismanagement and accelerating climate change are making Europeans increasingly vulnerable to water pollution, water scarcity, and floodings. The EU has a role to play in ensuring Europeans are protected from these risks, that farmers are adequately supported in the transition to climate-resilient agricultural models, and that Europe remains an attractive place for businesses.

Water must be prioritised in the upcoming mandate of the EU institutions. The NGOs united in the Living Rivers Europe coalition urge decision-makers to mainstream the protection of water and freshwater ecosystems (such as rivers, lakes, wetlands, deltas and estuaries) across the policy spectrum, so that water quality and water availability are factored into the decisions we make concerning Europe's agriculture, industrial policy, energy and transport.

Key facts and figures



The first-ever annual estimate of the economic value of water and freshwater ecosystems is over **€11 trillion** in Europe – about 2.5 times the GDP of Germany.¹



15% of industrial facilities in the EU are located in flood-risk areas, posing significant risks of water pollution.²



Water pollution leads to water shortages. **200,000** people in Spain cannot drink their tap water due to unsafe levels of nitrates from agriculture.³



Worldwide, freshwater species are hit the hardest by biodiversity collapse, with monitored freshwater populations having declined by an average of **83%** since 1970.⁴



In Europe, freshwater fish are the second most threatened animal group, surpassed only by freshwater molluscs. Fishes that need to migrate between environments (rivers and sea) or within river systems to complete their life cycles, are particularly threatened.⁵

WE URGE THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION AND EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT TO:

1 Maintain strong environmental standards, including the Water Framework Directive.

Over twenty years after its entry into force, the Water Framework Directive (WFD), Europe's main water law, evaluated "fit for purpose" by the Commission in 2019, still suffers from inadequate implementation as more than half of rivers and lakes are not in good status. Implementation costs are high, but the costs of inaction are much higher. In France for example, the investment gap required to achieve good status of water bodies under the WFD was estimated at €66.65 billion in 2021,⁶ while the costs of wastewater

treatment amounted to €13.5 billion in 2019 alone, making a strong case for further investments to decrease need for treatment. Promoting better implementation of the WFD would also contribute to creating a stable and predictable framework for all economic actors. However, introducing more exemptions might jeopardise the quality of the resource, its availability for future uses, and the resilience of our societies to climate change impacts.

This will require to:



Commit to the maintenance and enforcement of the WFD and allocate more resources to its enforcement.⁷



Push back on the Council's proposal to introduce new exemptions to the WFD through the revision of the list of pollutants in surface and groundwater during the upcoming trilogues.⁸



Dedicate more EU funds to support investments in water protection and pollution prevention.

2 Fight against water pollution to protect citizens' health.

The latest Eurobarometer survey on Attitudes of Europeans towards the environment shows that 78% of Europeans want the EU to do more to tackle water pollution⁹. Water pollution, from known substances such as nitrogen or phosphorus coming from intensive agriculture, or from emerging pollutants such as PFAS ("forever pollutants") or

pharmaceuticals, is putting human health at risk, making the costs of good quality water higher, increasing water scarcity (as more water becomes unsuitable for consumption), and accelerating biodiversity loss. This highlights the urgency to improve measures at EU level to better protect water.

This will require to:



Support the European Parliament's *position* adopted in September 2023 in the revision of the list of pollutants in surface and groundwater during the upcoming trilogues in 2024.¹⁰



Not weaken the standards of the Nitrates Directive during its ongoing evaluation, and reject the Commission's *proposal* to amend its annexes to promote the use of fertilisers obtained through the treatment and processing of animal manure ("RENURE" fertilisers).

3 Promote water resilience, primarily through nature-based solutions.

Currently, 12% of Europeans live in areas potentially prone to river flooding, although often with flood defences in place.¹¹ Increasing water infiltration into soils is necessary to better cope with more frequent and intense floods, but also droughts and forest fires. Nature-based solutions (NbS), such as the preservation, protection and restoration of wetlands that act as “sponges” and of hedgerows that slow down

water, must be systematically prioritised over traditional solutions, such as building reservoirs or dykes. NbS are generally more cost-effective than grey infrastructure or built structures such as dams, dikes, channels and storm surge defences, and provide multiple benefits in terms of carbon sequestration, biodiversity protection, health, and recreation.¹²

This will require to:



Support the release of the European Water Resilience Strategy announced by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in her political guidelines. The strategy should systematically prioritise nature-based solutions as a pathway to resilience as requested by the Council *conclusions* on the 8th Environmental Action Programme.¹³



Incentivise and fund NbS and natural water retention measures which include the restoration of wetlands and the definition and adoption of a sound ecological flow regime for all rivers in Europe so that enough water remains in the landscape.

4 Help Europe use less water to improve water security and maintain Europe’s competitiveness.

Water stress, which occurs when the demand for water exceeds the available supply in a given period or when poor quality restricts its use, affects 30 % of Europe’s population in an average year and is expected to worsen. Groundwater pumping is not a sustainable solution, as it leads to groundwater depletion, increased groundwater pollution, loss of habitats and intrusion of seawater in aquifers.¹⁴

Developing storage infrastructure or making irrigation more efficient won’t solve the issue of overexploitation, but perpetuate it. Instead, the EU policy framework must better guide economic actors and main water users (industry, agriculture, energy) to use less water at least in water stressed areas, so that enough water remains to meet the basic needs of people and ecosystems.

This will require to:



Integrate water in any upcoming strategic framework for industry, as well as in the next CAP post 2027.



Promote the development of water saving targets that apply to all water users, for instance through a Water and Climate Resilience Law – see *LRE proposal* – and as a first step, through the European Water Resilience Strategy.



5 Protect and enhance river connectivity to maintain and boost water quality and freshwater ecosystems.

Europe has lost most of its free-flowing rivers. Too often, the connection between rivers with oceans, sea, or floodplains is broken. Rivers, which tend to be fragmented with dams, weirs, or regulated with drainage channels or dykes, cannot provide the essential services that free-flowing rivers usually provide. These include the replenishment of aquifers, sufficient water flow to counteract the effects of saltwater

intrusion, floodplains that act as buffers against flooding, or sediment transport that helps fight against delta erosion and sea level rise. Therefore it is essential to protect free-flowing rivers and all the riparian habitats they sustain (e.g. riparian forests) from infrastructure development, and to restore them.

This will require to:

- ✓ Push back on new hydropower development in the EU, which exacerbates river fragmentation and leads to the loss of precious habitats and species, including in the designation of Acceleration Areas for Renewables. Instead, foster the drastic transformation of the hydropower sector to reduce its environmental impact – see *NGO manifesto*. In the short term, oppose the addition on the List of Renewable Energy Cross-border Projects under the Connecting Europe Facility for Energy, of the Turnu Magurele-Nikopol Hydraulic Structures Assembly (TMNHSA project), *a harmful new hydropower plant* on the border between Romania and Bulgaria that would have devastating impacts on communities, crops, infrastructure, and ecosystems.
- ✓ Call on national authorities to implement the EU Nature Restoration Law, in particular the target of restoring at least 25,000 km of free-flowing rivers by 2030 (article 9); and establish a restoration fund under the next Multiannual Financial Framework.
- ✓ Urge more Member States to join the Freshwater Challenge, which the EU joined in June 2024.¹⁵

References

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2. EEA (2024), *Responding to climate change impacts on human health in Europe: focus on floods, droughts and water quality*, available at <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/newsroom/news/climate-health-risks-posed-by-floods>
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4. WWF (2022), Living Planet report 2022, available at <https://livingplanet.panda.org/en-US/>
5. Costa M.J., Duarte G., Segurado P. (2021), *Major threats to European freshwater fish species*, in *The Science of the Total Environment*, available at <https://europepmc.org/article/med/34303251#impact>
6. European Commission (2021), *Economic data related to the implementation of the WFD and the FD and the financing of measures*, available at <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/9e25fb48-5969-11ec-91ac-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>
7. As recommended by the final report of the Strategic Dialogue on the future of EU agriculture, available at https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/document/download/171329ff-0f50-4fa5-946f-aea11032172e_en?filename=strategic-dialogue-report-2024_en.pdf
8. The Council *mandate* adopted on 19 June 2024 severely weakened the Commission's proposal by suggesting amendments to core principles of the WFD. For instance, Member States introduced two new exemptions to the WFD, allowing more flexibility to deteriorate water bodies.
9. European Commission (2024), available at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3173>.
10. On 26 October 2022, the European Commission presented its *proposal* and the European Parliament adopted *its position* in September 2023. The Council *mandate* adopted on 19 June 2024 weakened the Commission's proposal.
11. EEA (2024), *Responding to climate change impacts on human health in Europe: focus on floods, droughts and water quality*, available at <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/newsroom/news/climate-health-risks-posed-by-floods>
12. OECD (2020), *Nature-based solutions for adapting to water-related climate risks*, available at <https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/OECD.pdf>
13. Council of the EU, Council conclusions on the 8th Environmental Action Programme Mid-term Review, paragraphs 22 and 59, available at <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11326-2024-INIT/en/pdf>
14. EEA, European Climate Risk Assessment, pages 118-119 and 121, available at <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/european-climate-risk-assessment>
15. The international *Freshwater Challenge*, which aims at restoring 300,000 km of degraded rivers and 350 million hectares of degraded wetlands by 2030 (as well as conserving intact freshwater ecosystems), can help foster commitments for restoration.

