



Driving the restoration of free-flowing rivers to support biodiversity

Briefing paper on setting an EU free-flowing river restoration target in the EU Nature Restoration Law

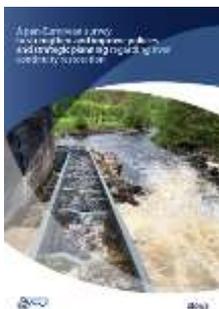
July 2021

On 27 May 2021, the European Centre for River Restoration published a [report](#) outlining the results of a pan European survey of national governments on river continuity restoration. The survey reveals that a majority of countries have databases of artificial river barriers, prioritisation lists for their removal, and river continuity restoration policies or strategies in place. According to LRE, those results show that European countries are ready to implement a legally binding target on free-flowing river restoration. We recommend including a legally binding obligation to restore at least 25,000 km of free-flowing rivers through barrier removal and wetland and floodplain restoration by 2025 in the EU nature restoration Law now as well as any other monitoring requirements needed in order to increase this target during the next review of the Law or separate act.

Introduction

The commitment of the EU Biodiversity Strategy to restore at least 25,000 km of free-flowing rivers by 2030 through the removal of primarily obsolete barriers and the restoration of floodplains is a step in the right direction to halt and reverse current fragmentation of rivers. It is important that the European Commission proposal on the EU Nature Restoration Law, expected at the end of the year, builds on this momentum and sets the framework necessary for implementing the EU Biodiversity commitment. While the lack of adequate data on artificial river barriers has sometimes been presented as an obstacle for the implementation of a free-flowing river restoration target, we believe that the recent survey of the MS administrations carried out by the European Centre for River Restoration (ECRR) provides the evidence on current state of play.

This briefing paper complements the scoping paper '[Protecting and restoring river ecosystems to support biodiversity](#)' released by the Living Rivers Europe coalition in March 2021. It summarises the key results of the survey released by ECRR and provides an analysis of those survey results.



The ECRR report

The report '[A pan-European survey to strengthen and improve policies and strategic planning regarding river continuity restoration](#)' brings valuable information regarding available data on artificial river barriers and the recognition in participating countries of the importance of river continuity in national policies.

The report includes survey results from 29 European countries including 20 EU Member States.¹

The survey of 60 questions was put to national governments, mainly Environmental ministries, nature agencies, and marine and riverine knowledge institutes for water resources management. The survey covers both longitudinal and lateral barriers.

Questions covered the following topics:

- the recognition of river continuity in current national policies;
- the potential of river continuity restoration in each country;
- observations/opinions on the importance of and opposition to river continuity restoration.

Key results of the survey

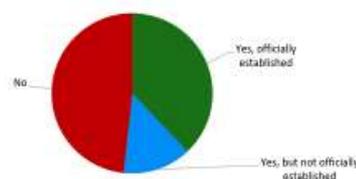
- Regarding inventories of artificial river barriers: **72% of participating countries indicate having a national database of the artificial barriers.** In 80% of participating countries either the total number of artificial barriers (14%) or the greatest part (66%) is known.

DOES A NATIONAL DATABASE EXIST OF THE ARTIFICIAL BARRIERS IN YOUR COUNTRY?



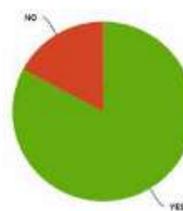
- Regarding prioritisation: **52% of participating countries indicate having a priority list of barriers where river continuity should be improved,** either officially (38%) or unofficially (14%) established. When such a priority list exists, it is most of the time national (50%), sometimes for parts of the country (30%), and sometimes in cooperation with other countries (20%). Barriers that are prioritised are mainly barriers with the largest environmental or ecological impact (mean = 8.7/10), followed by barriers where it's easy to implement measures or 'low hanging fruit' (mean = 5.5/10). High dams are not or barely addressed (mean = 1.5/10).

IS THERE A PRIORITY LIST IN YOUR COUNTRY OF BARRIERS WHERE RIVER CONTINUITY SHOULD BE IMPROVED, AND IF SO, IS THIS LIST OFFICIALLY ESTABLISHED?



- On policies: **83% of participating countries indicate having national policies and/or strategies operative to restore river continuity.** 93% of participating countries indicate that river continuity is specifically mentioned in any or all of the river basin management plans. However in 76% of participating countries, river continuity is 'rarely' mentioned as an issue in any political discussions.

ARE THERE ANY NATIONAL POLICIES AND/OR STRATEGIES OPERATIVE IN YOUR COUNTRY TO RESTORE RIVER CONTINUITY?



¹ EU Member States that are not included in the survey results are: Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg and Slovenia. All those Member States have been contacted but did not reply or had no capacity to fill in the survey. Non-EU countries included in the survey results are: Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Russia, Switzerland, UK – England, UK - Northern Ireland, UK – Scotland, UK – Wales, Norway.

- On the removal potential: **of all barriers, 20% are thought to be obsolete, of which a third are believed to be removable (7% of the total)**. Barrier removal is noted as a rather recent activity that is gaining momentum, with a mere 1% of barriers removed so far.
- On the measures applied to restore connectivity or continuity: the most common is the addition of a fish passage to an existing river barrier (mean = 6.2/10), followed by the construction of a bypass channel (mean = 6/10), then barrier removal (mean = 5.2/10). From the estimated maximum total of 680,227 barriers in all the participating countries combined, nearly 10% is indicated to have a fish pass included, or the barrier is passable for fish already, and for 46% of this total it is said that the barriers can be adjusted to include a fish passage.
- On ambition: 86% of participating countries indicate having ambition to contribute to the aim of the Biodiversity Strategy 2030. However when asked to what extent attempts are made in their country to reach this goal, the overall mean is 5.6, with great disparities among countries.

LRE survey analysis

Inventories of barriers are very important to provide a strong baseline for prioritising, planning and implementing barrier removals. The survey results confirm that this primary condition is already met by a majority of participating countries. We believe this shows European countries are sufficiently prepared to implement a legally-binding target on free-flowing river restoration and that there is no reason to postpone the setting of such a target. Besides, the completion of inventories and the start of restoration projects can be done in parallel in the coming years.

Interestingly, this survey also shows that not only inventories, but also policies and strategies for enhancing river continuity are already in place in most of the participating countries, and that the issue of river continuity is reflected in River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs). As the third RBMPs for 2022-2027 will be finalised by EU Member States towards the end of the year or at the beginning of 2022², a legally-binding target on free-flowing river restoration would encourage even more streamlining of actions through those plans. On the contrary, delaying the obligation to restore free-flowing rivers risks halting ongoing efforts towards the implementation of the EU Biodiversity Strategy commitments.

Too many countries are still prioritising the adaptation of existing barriers over their complete dismantling. A legally binding target, accompanied by a definition of free-flowing rivers as rivers without any barriers (as proposed by the European Commission's current draft Guidance on the 2030 Biodiversity Strategy river restoration targets), would reorient the river continuity strategies of Member States towards the complete removal of obstacles.

The survey results also show that despite the existence of river continuity policies and strategies at national level, the topic does not feature prominently in political discussions. A legally binding target in the EU Nature Restoration proposal, going through co-decision, would have the benefit of bringing this topic forward on the political agenda. Such a target would also bridge the gap evidenced by the survey between ambitions and actions – widespread ambition to contribute to the EU Biodiversity Strategy objectives, and moderate attempts to reach them.

A legally-binding target would also drive further streamlining of sectoral policies, such as energy or transport, which is lacking at the moment including at national level. For instance on 17 June, the

² DG Environment has already communicated that most of RBMPs are expected to be finalised with a delay of a few months, meaning in the first semester of 2022.

French Senate confirmed the adoption of article 17 bis C of the climate and resilience bill on water mills, to definitively exclude the possibility of public financing the dismantling of mills' reservoirs.³ This is a blatant disregard of the objective of river continuity set by the national Biodiversity Plan - and the objectives of the EU Biodiversity Strategy.

ECRR concludes from their survey that “river continuity restoration is to a reasonable extent recognized in current national policies, but the speed of implementation should be substantially increased.” We strongly agree with this conclusion and believe that setting only a requirement for Member States to develop and report inventories of river barriers in the Nature Restoration law, and keeping a legally binding restoration target for a later stage, is insufficient to make this leap. **We recommend including a legally binding obligation to restore at least 25,000 km of free-flowing rivers through barrier removal and wetland and floodplain restoration by 2025 in the EU nature restoration Law now, as well as any necessary monitoring requirements in order to increase this target during the next review of the Law or adoption of the separate Legal Act.**

Living Rivers Europe is a coalition of six environmental and angling organisations: **WWF's European network**, the **European Anglers Alliance**, **European Environmental Bureau**, **European Rivers Network**, **Wetlands International Europe** and **The Nature Conservancy**. Living Rivers Europe puts forward a strong vision of healthy river ecosystems flourishing with wildlife to the benefit of society at large, the economy and sustainable development in Europe. To make this vision a reality and give our water ecosystems a real future we stress the importance of an ambitious implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive and related policies. Together with our members and supporters, representing a dedicated movement of over 40 million people across Europe, we aim to ensure that the loss of aquatic wildlife is halted and reversed and that European waters are managed more sustainably.



³ https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/15/amendements_alt/3995/AN/1831