

Statement of support for updated EU water pollution standards

We, the undersigned scientists, support the swift adoption of updated water pollution standards for the EU to address the issue of chemicals in European waters. We urge the European Commission, EU Member States and the European Parliament to prioritise the state of Europe’s freshwaters in the upcoming negotiations and to stand by the environmental objectives laid out in the Water Framework Directive.

Freshwater and coastal habitats are biodiversity hotspots and provide society with a range of ecosystem services, from drinking water and food to recreation. However, human impact has degraded freshwater ecosystems, to the extent that they are now among the most threatened habitats on Earth. **The decades since 1970 have seen an 85% collapse in freshwater species populations due to habitat loss and pollutionⁱ resulting in the alarming observation that fewer than half of Europe’s water bodies are in good health.** Additionally, the recovery of Europe’s freshwater biodiversity has come to a halt since 2010.ⁱⁱ **Scientists and conservation organisations list pollution reduction among key priorities to halt freshwater biodiversity loss.**ⁱⁱⁱ

The **Water Framework Directive (WFD)**, adopted in the year 2000, is the EU’s key law to protect freshwater and coastal ecosystems, by providing an integrated and holistic approach to water management. It has played a pivotal role in advancing European water management. However, the rules that relate to monitoring, reporting and tackling pollution need to be updated to reflect the real extent of chemical pollution and its impact on aquatic biodiversity.

Current monitoring practices overlook the real load of pollutants felt by aquatic life as only a limited, and outdated, lists of pollutants are monitored¹, while hundreds of substances have been detected in rivers across Europe, often in complex mixtures.^{iv} Additionally, substances are mostly regulated on an individual basis, which overlook the effects of chemical mixtures that are known to occur even when individual substances occur at ‘safe’ levels.

We therefore welcome that the WFD and its ‘daughter directives’ the Environmental Quality Standards Directive and the Groundwater Directive require regular updates of the lists of pollutants that guide monitoring and management efforts within the EU and that such an update – although several years overdue – is underway.

Meanwhile, scientific efforts have helped advance new tools to monitor, analyse and assess chemicals in water and their cumulative effects on aquatic life, e.g., effect-based monitoring, and non-target screening but regulatory action is needed to put them into practice.

Stepping up monitoring and analytical efforts naturally costs money, but the cost of such an investment is negligible when compared to the expensive – and multiplying – costs of water pollution that include biodiversity loss, drinking water contamination, human exposure and

¹ For surface water: 45 so called ‘priority substances’, for groundwater EU-wide standards only for nitrates and pesticides

remediation needs. Monitoring is not only about showing progress; it is a tool to identify exceedances and to address pollution at source.

Given the solid evidence of the impacts of pollution on ecosystems and health, we also underline the need to preserve the environmental objectives of the Water Framework Directive, in particular its key principle on non-deterioration.

We, the undersigned scientists, urge Member States, the Members of the European Parliament and the European Commission, to reject proposals that undermine the Water Framework Directive and its environmental objectives, and instead adopt up-to-date rules, reflecting the state of the current scientific knowledge to address chemical water pollution.

Turning a blind eye to this issue and pushing action into the next decades or introducing new ways to circumvent existing requirements is only aggravating the problem, and creating a far greater social, environmental and economic challenge for the future.

***Disclaimer:** This statement has been coordinated by the European Environmental Bureau (EEB).*

References

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