

EU Member States seek to quietly dismantle EU rules protecting water

Brussels, 19 June 2024 - Today, Member States' ambassadors to the EU have adopted an agreement giving EU countries the right to pollute rather than protect our water for the next decades, and to weaken existing water protection rules. The deal is a huge disappointment that fails to respond to Europe's pressing water and biodiversity crises, environmental NGOs warn.

The Belgian Presidency of the European Council sealed the deal that includes proposals pushed by the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Finland and Luxembourg [1] to change the Water Framework Directive (WFD) by **introducing two new exemptions to the WFD's environmental objectives**. These exceptions allow short-term negative impacts on water bodies and deterioration in water quality following water or sediment relocation. For example, it could greenlight even more pollution incidents such as the [Lynetteholm housing development project](#) in Copenhagen's harbour where 200,000 cubic metres of sludge contaminated with heavy metals and nutrients were dumped in the Køge Bay .

This unwarranted step threatens to **severely undermine water protections across the EU** - and in turn, people's health and key environmental objectives. It also completely disregards the Commission's 2019 ["fitness check"](#) which found the WFD fit for purpose and highlighted its inadequate implementation by Member States.

Sara Johansson, Senior Policy Officer for Water Pollution Prevention, European Environmental Bureau, said: *"With only a few years left until a legal deadline to comply with the Water Framework Directive, it's hugely disappointing to see Member States weakening existing water protection provisions and wanting to give themselves legal rights to pollute water for the next decades. Pushing action on water pollution into the future will only make it more difficult and costly to deal with."*

Claire Baffert, Senior Policy Officer, Water and Climate Change Adaptation, WWF European Policy Office, said: *"Citizens need access to safe, unpolluted water which can be achieved with proper implementation of water protection rules. Instead, Member States are risking harm to citizens by actively watering down the Water Framework Directive. We are calling on the European Commission and newly elected European Parliament not to let this happen when negotiating the final version of the text."*

Manon Rouby, Policy Officer & Legal Adviser, PAN Europe, said: *"Member States drastically lowering their ambition both in the timeline and scope of reducing chemical pollution is profoundly disappointing. Their refusal to take ambitious actions against EU-wide chemical water pollution, such as from pesticides or PFAS, not only puts both the citizens and biodiversity at increased risk but also defers the problem to a later date, worsening the situation significantly. This is unacceptable."*

PFAS pollution allowed for at least another decade

Member States have also agreed to push back the legal deadline for reaching compliance on proposed new pollution standards – including for glyphosate, a group of PFAS ('Forever Chemicals') and pharmaceuticals – **to 2039**, with options to further delay until 2051. For the

next ten years, **Member States would only be obliged to monitor** the presence of new pollutants in water. Additionally, the agreed text weakens the already scarce provisions in the Commission's proposal to address the effects of chemical mixtures ('cocktail effects') and weakens provisions for groundwater protection.

The Council's move does not respond to peoples' concerns - the recent Eurobarometer survey on [Attitudes of Europeans towards the Environment](#) **showed that 78% of Europeans** want the EU to do more to tackle water pollution.

Next steps: negotiations between the EU institutions (the Council, the European Parliament and European Commission) will begin once the new Parliament is in place. This process will agree the final version of the text.

Notes to editor:

- The WFD is the EU's main law for protecting coastal and freshwaters. It requires Member States to bring Europe's waters back to health by 2027 at the latest.
- Member States are far from delivering on their obligations, and less than 40% of surface waters are in good chemical status under the WFD.
- The lists of EU water pollutants and their legal limits, against which chemical status under the WFD is assessed, should be updated every six years. However, the ongoing update is several years overdue as the last revision took place in 2013 (surface water) and 2014 (for groundwater).
- Environmental organisations have flagged their concerns about the proposed weakening during the spring, e.g. in a joint letter to Water Directors [2]

Notes:

[1] [Non-paper on deterioration](#)

[2] [Joint letter to Water Directors](#)

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