



22 October 2022

## The EU drags its feet on addressing water pollution

*Today marks two years since the European Commission published its [proposal](#) to update the lists of EU priority pollutants that should be monitored and regulated in EU waters. With a number of harmful substances still not regulated under these lists, posing high risks for human health, this update to protect Europe's precious waters is needed urgently, but EU institutions are delaying action...*

### An urgent warning

While scientists have [revealed](#) the presence of more than 500 chemicals across European water courses, often in mixtures of dozens of chemicals in single samples, only a fraction of them is currently regulated under the EU's Water Framework Directive (WFD), resulting in biodiversity loss, and degrading the quality of drinking and bathing water.

Two years ago today, the Commission proposed adding some substances of known concern, among them a group of PFAS ('forever chemicals'), glyphosate and pharmaceuticals to the lists of pollutants that Member States are required to monitor in surface and groundwater and ensure that legal thresholds are not exceeded.

These updates of the pollutants' lists are required by law every six years, but with the last ones carried out in 2013 (surface water) and 2014 (groundwater), they are now long overdue but EU institutions are dragging their feet. Inaction of the Swedish Presidency of the EU Council delayed the file to the point that inter-institutional negotiations (trilogues) could not begin before the EU elections. Since the elections, the Parliament has appointed a new negotiating team, but the needed 'go-ahead vote' to kick off these negotiations is not yet scheduled.

This irresponsible delay coincides with the recent publication by the European Environment Agency on water resilience which calls on European decision makers on urgent action to address water pollution and improve water resilience.

Time is of the essence, as in 2025, Member States will develop their next River Basin Management Plans (RBMP) due under the WFD. Unfortunately, Member States only want to implement measures for the new substances from 2033, and only *monitor* pollutants until then. This means leaving the gates open for the next decade for emissions, discharges and losses of harmful substances into our waters, the consequences of which will be disastrous. The longer the trilogues are delayed, the less time Member States will have to plan measures in the next RBMP (2027-2033).

## **Fox in the henhouse**

The WFD recently underwent an [evaluation](#) which concluded that the legislation is fit for purpose, with sufficient flexibility. However, the **Council has severely overstepped its mandate by using this technical update of EU water pollution standards as a [backdoor](#) to weaken vital core principles of the WFD. Many industry groups are now following suit, proposing to broaden existing exemptions.**

The amendments proposed by the Council to dilute environmental protections – in the name of supporting ‘sustainable development’ – would also open the floodgates for unregulated pollution of water. An example of pollution which would be facilitated by the new exemptions proposed by the Council is the discharge of PFAS-contaminated groundwater into the Scheldt in Antwerp, Belgium [by the 3M company](#).

**Claire Baffert, Senior EU Policy Officer, Water & Climate Change Adaptation at the WWF European Policy Office, said:**

*“This is outrageous. Excessive exemptions are sabotaging the Water Framework Directive, blocking citizens from access to clean, high-quality water, and endangering our natural resources. Yet, Member States and industry are pushing for ever more exemptions. We cannot trade the health of Europe’s water resources for short-term industrial gains. If we fail to protect our water now, we’re risking the health of our environment and our society for generations to come.”*

**Sara Johansson, Senior Policy Officer: Water Pollution Prevention at the EEB, said:**

*“The disheartening numbers on the poor state of Europe’s waters come as no surprise granted the slow pace of the EU to regulate chemicals in water. We’re now marking two years since the Commission proposed new water pollution standards – some of which were already proposed 10 years ago – but negotiations to adopt them are still not scheduled. Every month of further delay, means another month of legally allowing the presence of PFAS, pharmaceutical residues in our waters.”*

**Erik Ruiz, Safer Pharma Programme Manager at Health Care Without Harm Europe, said:**

*“In the EU, 591 pharmaceutical substances have been detected in the environment above detection limits. The ongoing inaction on adopting a new list of substances to be monitored is delaying crucial steps needed to address pharmaceutical pollution which significantly contributes to major health threats such as antibiotic resistance.”*

**Manon Rouby, Policy Officer & Legal Adviser at PAN Europe, said:**

*“The latest EEA report makes it clear that the agriculture sector is a major source of pressure on surface and groundwater. It is frankly shocking that, two years after the European Commission published its proposal, the European Parliament is unwilling to take the next needed steps to tackle EU-wide chemical water pollution, such as from pesticides or PFAS.”*

**Lucille Labayle, Water Quality and Health Policy and Lobbying Officer at Surfrider Foundation Europe added:**

*“The celebration of EU institutions’ 2 year-delay is shocking at a time when the Commission has promised to put water and its resilience at the heart of its priorities. Our marine and coastal waters, and the people who depend on this resource for their daily lives and livelihoods, are the big losers in this irresponsible delay which further undermines any ambition to achieve healthy waters in Europe any time soon”.*

It's time for EU policymakers to listen and urgently respond to the defining challenge of our time and make these vital changes to legislation that protect Europe's vital waters and ecosystems at the foundation of our health, prosperity and survival.

ENDS

**Notes to editors**

- [The EEA State of Water report](#) showed that over 70% of surface waters and nearly 25% of groundwaters are not in a good chemical status, However, this is currently only assessed against 45 substances for surface water, while for groundwater only pesticides and nitrate have EU-wide quality standards.
- The European Parliament adopted its position in September 2023, and the Council adopted its mandate in June 2024.
- The file is awaiting a ‘greenlight vote’ in the European Parliament’s environmental committee for the inter-institutional negotiations to start.
- In the next River Basin Management Plans, we expect to see real actions to protect water – see our [recommendations](#) for the upcoming trilogues.

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