

Water for all: Born to run...

As a result of growing demand and climate change, freshwater is getting scarce. In Europe, although the situation is improving, the quality of many freshwater bodies and ecosystems is poor. The European Union has comprehensive rules protecting water and an update to legislation on drinking water is now under discussion.

Water is getting scarce

Although the earth's water resources may seem plentiful, freshwater is getting scarce: while supply is relatively stable, demand has risen quickly. This trend is expected to continue in the coming decades, mainly as a result of population growth, rising living standards, and higher water needs in the agricultural, energy and industry sectors. Water scarcity could pose serious challenges in the future, and could be exacerbated by climate change. As water is essential for a wide variety of uses, a lack of it could have far-reaching and diverse consequences, affecting not least the global economy, food security and migration patterns.

One way to address water scarcity is through its re-use (following treatment processes), either as drinking water or for non-drinking purposes, such as irrigation, cleaning, cooling or groundwater recharge. Wastewater re-use is well-established or increasingly important in several places, including Israel, Australia, Singapore, Namibia, the USA, China, Mexico and Europe, mainly for non-drinking purposes. However, high costs and limited public acceptance are hurdles.

In the European Union, the [Right2Water](#) European Citizens' Initiative submitted in 2013 called for European legislation implementing the human right to water and sanitation, as recognised by the United Nations, and promoting the provision of water and sanitation as essential public services for all.

The poor (but improving) state of European freshwaters

Human activities, such as intensive agriculture, urbanisation, industry, inadequate urban water management and certain flood protection measures can put pressure on rivers and other water bodies. Pressures include pollution, over-abstraction of groundwater and altered surface waters. As a result, the quality of many freshwater bodies and ecosystems in the European Union is poor.

On the bright side, many water bodies in the EU are much cleaner than they were a few decades ago. In 2015, about half were considered to be in good shape. The improving trend is expected to continue.

What is the European Union doing?

In 2000, the European Union adopted comprehensive legislation for the protection of water, aiming to address pressures and to provide extensive protection for all water bodies. It requires Member States to achieve a good status for all bodies of surface water and groundwater by 2015 or 2027 at the latest. 'Good status' means that the water shows only a slight change from what would be expected under conditions with a low human impact. Despite considerable improvements in water quality, this goal has not been achieved yet. A [report](#) by the European Parliamentary Research Service estimates that, if fully implemented, existing European legislation on water could generate financial benefits of around €28 billion per year for the EU. Externally, the European Union encourages countries to cooperate on the management of trans-boundary waters.

In early 2018, the European Commission proposed significantly tightening requirements for drinking water quality in the EU, encouraging the use of tap water in public buildings and restaurants and addressing concerns raised by the Right2Water initiative. The proposal is currently under discussion.

This note has been prepared for the [European Youth Event](#), taking place in Strasbourg in June 2018.

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