Drinking water in the EU: better quality and access

The environment committee has backed new rules to further improve the quality and access to drinking water for everyone and ensure plastic waste from water bottles is reduced.

Most people in the EU have good access to high quality drinking water. According to a report by the European Environment Agency (2016), more than 98.5% of tests carried out on drinking water samples between 2011 and 2013, met EU standards.

The EU Drinking Water Directive sets minimum quality standards for water intended for human consumption (drinking, cooking, other domestic purposes), in order to protect us from contamination.
On 18 February 2020, the environment and public health committee approved a provisional agreement reached between Parliament and the Council in December 2019 on an update of the rules to increase consumer confidence and the use of tap water for drinking.
The new legislation updates quality standards and sets out minimum hygiene requirements for materials in contact with drinking water, such as pipes or taps, to avoid contamination. Endocrine disruptors, pharmaceuticals and microplastics will be monitored via a watch list mechanism allowing the EU to update surveillance in line with the latest scientific developments.

Under the new rules, EU countries must improve access to clean water for everyone in the EU, especially for vulnerable groups with no or only limited access, such as setting up water fountains in public spaces. On a voluntary basis, they can also opt to encourage the provision of tap water for free or for a low fee in restaurants.

Greater transparency and consumer access to information on the quality of drinking water will have to be provided.

Drinking tap water is not only cheap, but also environmentally friendly. According to the European Commission, access to better quality water can reduce bottled water consumption by 17%. Less bottled water helps people save money and benefits the environment, by reducing CO2-emissions and plastic waste.
Drinking water is very important to Europeans. The revision of the rules was a follow-up of the successful citizens’ initiative Right2Water, which gathered more than 1.8 million signatures.

As a public consultation has shown, Europeans feel insecure about the quality of tap water when abroad in other EU countries, although compliance rates are high. They also wish to receive more up-to-date information on the quality of drinking water.

The economic and environmental impact

ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

The average person in the EU consumes up to 106 litres of bottled water per year*

1 litre of tap water = about €0.002

REDUCING THE CONSUMPTION OF BOTTLED WATER

Could help households in Europe save more than €600 million per year

Cuts plastic waste and greenhouse gas emissions

*estimates
Source: European Commission
WHAT DO EUROPEANS THINK ABOUT DRINKING WATER IN THE EU?

A little over 80% say there is good access to quality drinking water where they live.

Only 20% find drinking water outside of their home country acceptable.

Slightly less than 60% consider themselves well-informed about the quality of their drinking water.

European citizens' initiative Right2Water:
- collected over 1.8 million signatures
- wants the EU to bring about universal access to water and sanitation

What do Europeans use tap water for?

- Washing and personal hygiene: 95%
- Drinking after filtering it: 10%
- Cooking directly from the tap: 84%
- Drinking directly from the tap: 55%

“percentages represent respondents who replied “always”

Source: European Commission (public consultation, 2015)

What Europeans think about drinking water

Next steps

MEPs will vote on the new rules during an upcoming plenary session.
Read our overview explaining how the EU improves public health.

Find out more
Procedure file
Check progress on the legislative proposal
Drinking water: European Commission website