Drinking water in the EU: better quality and access

The European Parliament approved new rules to further improve quality and access to drinking water and reduce plastic waste from water bottles.

Most people in the EU have good access to high-quality drinking water.

To make tap water in Europe even safer, the EU is updating its Drinking Water Directive that sets minimum quality standards for water intended for human consumption (i.e. drinking, cooking, other domestic purposes), protecting us against contamination.

On 15 December 2020, the European Parliament backed an agreement reached with the Council that aims to increase consumer confidence and the use of tap water for drinking.
Improved quality standards and access

The new law updates quality standards for drinking water, tightening the maximum limits for certain pollutants such as lead and harmful bacteria. It also sets minimum hygiene requirements for materials in contact with 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, member states must improve access to clean water for everyone, in particular for vulnerable groups with no or only limited access, for example by setting up water fountains in public places, or providing alternative supply systems. They can also opt to encourage the provision of tap water in restaurants - free of charge or for a small fee.

"For the price of a bottle of mineral water you would receive almost 700 litres of water from the tap"

Christophe Hansen (EPP, Luxembourg)
Lead MEP on the Drinking Water Directive
Consumers should also have easy access to information on their consumption and the quality and pricing of tap water, for example on their invoice or via smartphone apps.
Tap water is eco-friendly

Drinking tap water is not only cheap but also environmentally friendly: Consumers can save money by drinking tap water and lower consumption of bottled water reduces CO2-emissions and plastic waste. According to the European Commission, access to better quality water could reduce the consumption of bottled water by 17%.

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 costs about €0.002.

Reducing the consumption of bottled water:
- Could help households in Europe save more than €500 million per year
- Cuts plastic waste and greenhouse gas emissions

*estimates
Source: European Commission

gquelle: europa.eu

Clean waters by 2027

Although requirements for a certain level of quality for the EU’s rivers, lakes and groundwater, are set in the Water Framework Directive, half of the 110,000 water bodies are still not in a good condition.
In a separate resolution, Parliament called on EU countries to fully implement the provisions by 2027 at the latest, so that all ground and surface waters achieve "good status".

MEPs advocate adequate funding and enforcement and full application of the polluter-pays-principle. They want to see the directive’s objectives better integrated in the agriculture, transport and energy sectors. Additionally, the use of fertilisers and pesticides needs to go down, they say.

Europeans and their water

Drinking water is very important to Europeans. The revision of the directive was a follow-up of the successful Citizens’ Initiative Right2Water, with more than 1,8 million signatures.

As a public consultation ahead of the legislative proposal 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.
Next steps

The new drinking water directive will enter into force 20 days after its publication in the EU's official journal. EU countries have two years to comply with the directive.
Read our overview explaining how the EU improves public health.

Good quality drinking water is of vital importance

Find out more
 Procedure file: Drinking Water Directive
 Drinking water: European Commission website