

Water Management in the Enlarged European Union



Photo: Stephanie Blencauer

Protection and management of water within the European Union (EU) has a long history. Various types of legislation have been developed and implemented since the 1970s. These have focused primarily on the efforts to reduce emissions of certain substances from different sources – such as hazardous substances from industries or eutrophying substances from wastewater or agriculture – as well as water quality objectives for drinking water, bathing, shellfish water, etc.

Implementation of these directives have had mixed results, but in general the water quality in many regions has improved considerably over the years.

During the early 1990s, however, the need to address the challenges of water

management from a more integrated and holistic perspective was identified. In 1997 the European Commission forwarded the proposal for the Water Framework Directive (WFD). After negotiations between the member countries, the Directive was adopted and entered into force in December 2000, and is now subject to implementation in all 25 EU member states.

The Water Framework Directive is a legislative framework to protect and improve the quality of all water resources within the European Union. The Directive establishes the principles of river basin management, ranging from the very source of the watercourses to their outfall into the sea, and requires that River Basin Management Plans should be established every six years, with the first one ready by 2009.

These principles prevail equally for the big rivers, for example, in Central Europe, or the more modest watercourses in Western Europe.

An ambitious and innovative approach

The new Directive represents an ambitious and innovative approach to water management. Key elements of the legislation include:

- The protection of all waters, including rivers, lakes, coastal waters and groundwaters
- The setting of ambitious objectives to ensure that all waters meet “good status” by 2015
- The requirement for cross border cooperation between countries and all involved parties
- Ensuring the active participation of all stakeholders, including non-governmental organisations and local communities, in water management activities
- Requiring water pricing policies and ensuring that the polluter pays
- Balancing the interests of the environment with those who depend on it

Old and new EU member states, together with stakeholder representatives and NGOs, have worked together since 2001 to develop guidance for the implementation of the detailed and very demanding Directive.

Challenges facing member states

The challenges facing member states, old as new, when implementing the Directive, in and of itself, are huge. For those member states that joined the EU on May 1, 2004,

(the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Malta and Cyprus) there are also a number of already existing directives that must be implemented simultaneously.

The development in many accession countries in recent years to meet the new requirements – for both the WFD, and for other existing legislation – have in many cases been astonishing, but of course still much remains. Each country has a specific timetable on when and how to meet different pieces of EU legislation. The co-operation between the new and the old members has been intense and very constructive.

Many of the remaining problems in Eastern Europe are backlogs from an earlier era. Some areas still suffer from historic pollution or emissions from old industries that have not modernised. Urban wastewater systems are still in many cases outdated: sewage systems and treatment facilities are in need of improvements in order to reduce pollutant loads in many rivers. Institutional capacities also need to be strengthened in order to be able to meet all the requirements in the new EU legislation.

But it is also important to recognise that in many countries in Eastern Europe there are still a lot of undisturbed and unpolluted small rivers and streams, with good water quality.

Urban issues during the World Water Week

A number of issues in focus during the World Water Week in Stockholm this year will be of particular interest to new EU member states. Urban water service is recognised as being very costly in Eastern Europe, particularly the EU requirements for drinking water and wastewater treatment. In a number of seminars and workshops in Stockholm these challenges will be taken up, both from a technical and a management perspective. Other workshops and seminars will focus on river basin management, integrated water resources management, and aspects related to the implementation of the Framework Directive. Particularly, aspects to be examined include water and agriculture, fisheries, groundwater management and water quality – all issues of extreme relevance for Eastern Europe. The World Water Week provides a unique opportunity for experts from the EU to share experiences with colleagues in other parts of the world.

To learn more about the Water Framework Directive, visit http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/water/water-framework/index_en.html.

The World's Most International River Basin

The Danube River perhaps best exemplifies the interconnected nature of Europe and the European environment, as well as the need for and usefulness of the Water Framework Directive.

The Danube is more than Europe's second longest river, extending 2,778 km from its source in Germany to its delta at the Black Sea. It is more than a line on a map and a political boundary for 10 countries experiencing vastly different political, economic and historical contexts. It is even more than a cultural and romantic symbol of Central Europe's rich past and hopes for future integration. It is an immense basin that drains water from countries, much like a huge bowl. With over 80 million people, the Danube is the most international river basin in the world.

Countless other European rivers drain from the basin into the Danube River – from the Inn River in Germany; to the Morava River in the Czech Republic, Austria and Slovakia; to the Tisza River in Hungary and Romania; to the Sava River through Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina and FR Yugoslavia; to the Prut River in Romania and Moldova; and the list goes on and on.

Key Facts about the European Water Situation

- 20% of all surface water in the European Union is seriously threatened with pollution.
- Groundwater supplies around 65% of all Europe's drinking water.
- 60% of European cities overexploit their groundwater resources.
- 50% of wetlands have "endangered status" due to groundwater over-exploitation.
- The area of irrigated land in Southern Europe has increased by 20% since 1985.

Source: European Union, www.europa.eu.int/comm/environment/water/



Photo: TB

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