



Blue Deal – European water strategy for climate resilient water management

Key Points

- Water is a human right. Universal access to water and basic sanitation at affordable prices and to appropriate quality standards as well as the restoration and protection of ecosystems must be guaranteed.
- The climate crisis is also leading to more and more extreme weather events such as droughts, heavy rainfall, and floods in Europe. One third of the region is already facing water scarcity.
- The climate crisis must be tackled together. Potential conflicts of use in water distribution must be prevented through forward-looking planning. In the event of conflicts of use, the drinking water supply must be given priority over all other uses without compensation.
- Resilient and sustainable water management requires a European solution, a “Blue Deal”, as called for by the European Economic and Social Committee, focusing on the human right to water, equitable distribution of water resources and the improvement of water infrastructure, and strengthening research and innovation.
- Public water management, by virtue of its focus on the common good, is best placed to meet the challenges of the future and to secure water supplies for future generations. There is therefore an urgent need to strengthen public ownership at European level.
- Worker’s representatives reject any liberalisation pressure or obligations to liberalise services of general interest.

Background

The extreme weather events of recent years show that the climate crisis is progressing much faster than scientists originally thought. These increasingly frequent extreme weather events are affecting people, economies and water supplies. More and more regions in Europe are affected by winter and summer droughts, as well as floods, mudslides, and landslides. Groundwater levels in some regions are lower than they have been for a long time. According to the latest IPCC report, up to 3.6 billion people already live in regions that are severely threatened by the climate crisis, and half of the world’s population suffers from severe water scarcity for at least part of the year. Europe’s water supply is affected in many ways. According to the European Environment Agency (EEA), 100 million people in Europe are currently affected by water scarcity. About a third of the Europe’s territory will face permanent or temporary water scarcity.

This raises the question of how to ensure that everyone in Europe and beyond has access to clean and affordable drinking water as well as sanitation in the future. There is therefore an urgent need to address the threat of water scarcity and to take all necessary steps to prevent potential conflicts of use. A European water strategy - a Blue Deal, as proposed by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)- is needed to ensure a resilient and sustainable water supply for all Europeans. Key building blocks for this are the strengthening of public services of general interest, adequate financing of public water services, decent work and quality jobs, a fair distribution of water resources and the strengthening of social security.

Main Findings

Access to water is a human right

The human right to water and sanitation was explicitly recognised as an independent right by the UN General Assembly in 2010. The revision of the Drinking Water Directive and the Wastewater Directive The revision of an important milestone in the implementation of this human right. The Member States commit to improving access to clean and affordable drinking water and basic sanitation for all people in the EU by 2030, especially for vulnerable and marginalised groups. The European Economic and Social Committee's (EESC) Blue Deal initiative should further intensify these efforts.

The European Pillar of Social Rights should also be considered. It would be useful to promote a common approach to understanding water poverty at EU level and to develop a comprehensive definition of water poverty so that each Member State is able to develop its own operational definition of application in line with the European definition. Public funding should be targeted towards infrastructure development, in particular to support financially vulnerable property owners and socially deprived urban and rural areas in need of infrastructure rehabilitation.

Strengthening water in public hands

As water resources become increasingly scarce, water is more and more subject to market principles. This development must be counteracted, and measures should be taken to ensure self-sufficiency in all regions.

This must be done by utilising trade agreements and negotiations and taking into account the fact that water is a public good and not a mere commodity. If necessary, regulations must also be adopted in consultation with the stakeholders concerned.

Due to its orientation towards the common good, publicly owned water management offers the best conditions for coping well with the future challenges of water management and securing the water supply for future generations.

As a result, remunicipalisation has taken place in recent years in European countries - notably France, Spain and Germany - in all areas of public services and particularly in the water supply sector. In France, over 100 cities and municipalities have remunicipalised their water services, including cities such as Paris, Montpellier, and Nice. Negative experiences with the privatisation of services in particular have prompted cities and municipalities to bring services of general interest, such as the water supply, back into public hands. Lower investment in infrastructure, poorer working conditions, higher costs for the citizens, but also a loss of control were often the side effects. In the wake of the climate crisis, there is also a desire to regain control again in order to ensure that everyone in the region has access to water despite the climate crisis.

Municipalities are currently facing enormous challenges, including in the area of water supply, partly due to the polycrises of recent years. In order to better address these challenges, inter-municipal cooperation should be further developed and made significantly facilitated in order to strengthen the provision of water supply and sanitation services, as well as water development and maintenance, and to ensure the long-term economic viability of these services of general interest in rural areas.

Against the backdrop of the climate crisis, the trade unions are firmly opposed to any liberalisation obligations in the sensitive water and wastewater sector. Especially in times of crisis, it is necessary to ensure a climate-resilient public water supply that puts the common good before economic interests. What is needed is a strengthening of public services of general interest in the water sector and beyond.

Investing in the water supply - widening the budget window

Water supply is vital for people and part of the critical infrastructure. However, water infrastructure needs to be improved in order to have sufficient water available in the future. In some EU countries for example, water losses due to leakage in the networks exceed 20 per cent. There is an urgent need to invest in the pipeline infrastructure to reduce water losses.

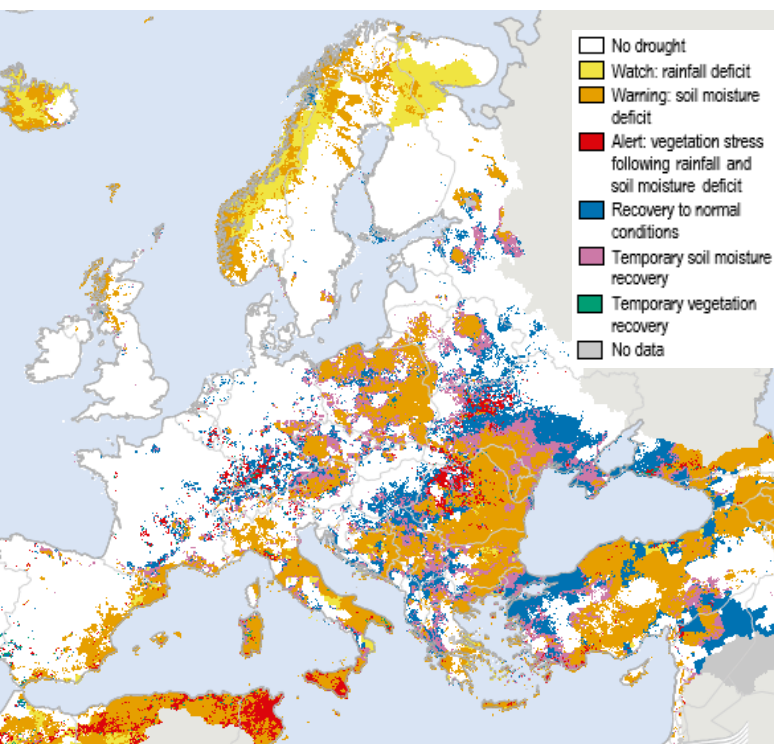


Figure 1: Drought in Europe - August 2023: The Combined Drought Indicator (CDI), based on a combination of indicators of precipitation, soil moisture, and vegetation conditions, for mid-August 2023. Source: Global Drought Observatory: <https://edo.jrc.ec.europa.eu/gdo>

It will also be necessary to expand the water infrastructure and create more storage capacity. This will require a wide range of measures, from collecting rainwater in cisterns and building reservoirs and ring pipelines to reducing soil sealing to increase the soil storage capacity. In the event of flooding of the various types of watercourses, efforts must be made to divert the excess water and store it in flood control basins. Buffer capacity should be provided at regular intervals along flowing watercourses so that excess water can gradually drain away, and peak flows can be attenuated. Infrastructure investment and forward-looking, concrete planning must be used to prepare for such situations.

Energy is needed to run water pumps to transport drinking water to citizens. This is why drinking water utilities are already relying on their own energy cycles so that they can continue to supply people with drinking water in the event of a power cut.

In the past, strict budgetary rules have repeatedly proved to be the biggest obstacle for the public sector in financing infrastructure projects. The aim must therefore be to exempt projects related to the European Green Deal, water policy, energy independence, digitalisation and social investment from any rules that prevent such public investment. It is therefore necessary to apply the “golden rule of investment” to public investment in order to safeguard productivity and protect the social and environmental foundations for the well-being of future generations.

Strengthening ecology

Over the past 30 years, European water legislation, in particular the Water Framework Directive, the Drinking Water Directive and Wastewater Directives, has led to some success in improving the quality of water resources. However, there is still a considerable need for action, which is being exacerbated by the climate crisis. Currently, only 40 per cent of EU water bodies are in good status. Further efforts are still needed to improve the environmental quality and quantitative status of rivers and lakes. In particular, the agricultural, industrial, transport and energy sectors in particular are called upon to reduce their inputs of pollutants. The polluter pays principle should therefore be applied more strongly in general EU legislation in order to protect water resources from all forms of pollution. It is also important to restore ecosystems and reduce the sealing of soils so that they can absorb water and store it for times of drought and serve as retention areas in the event of flooding.

Avoiding water stress and conflicts

Agricultural areas with intensive irrigation, islands popular with tourists and large urban centres are considered to be the most vulnerable areas to water scarcity. Water scarcity is expected to increase due to climate

change. Agriculture, which accounts for about 60 per cent of consumption, and water-intensive industries remain the largest consumers of water in Europe. New technologies can improve the efficiency of water use. It is therefore important that these sectors increasingly contribute to solutions by stepping up research and innovation in water-efficient practices and implementing existing knowledge (e.g., drip irrigation, water-efficient farming, strengthening the circular economy, adapting food production to local conditions, etc.). Forward-looking planning, better data, dialogue with water users in the form of water councils and good political coordination can also prevent conflicts over the use of the precious resource of water. Before a water crisis occurs, it is important to clarify who is entitled to use how much water and when. The question is: What are the consequences if a factory has to close down because there is no more water, or the fields can no longer be sufficiently irrigated? How do we respond? (Short-time work, financial aid, ensuring food security, etc.). We need to plan ahead to answer these questions.

Should there nevertheless be conflicts over the use of water resources, priority must always be given to the supply of drinking water. Studies also show that people with very high incomes consume many times more water due to their lifestyles and can therefore exacerbate water crises. This raises the question of restrictions on certain types of use (swimming pools, snowmaking systems, irrigation of golf courses). It is time to discuss how society should share life's most important natural resource. A framework for this exchange should be created at regional, national, and European level.

Conclusion: Take decisive action on the climate crisis and strengthen water supplies

Water is the basis of life. We need to be even more careful with this vital resource in the future. This requires a European water strategy - an EU Blue Deal - a clear prioritisation of water use in times of water scarcity and, above all, decisive action on climate change. Only by doing everything we can to slow down the climate crisis and its consequences can we protect our water supplies and preserve our livelihoods.

Water distribution networks and infrastructure must be resilient and fit for purpose in the future to ensure a sustainable, efficient and equitable water supply in Europe. In the face of the climate crisis and the resulting scarcity of water resources, all necessary measures must be taken to reduce water losses and ensure an equitable distribution of water resources. Providing people with clean and affordable drinking water must always be a top priority, especially when water is scarce.

Demands

- Resilient and sustainable water management requires a European solution, a “Blue Deal”, as called for by the European Economic and Social Committee, focusing on the human right to water, the fair distribution of water resources and the improvement of water infrastructure, enabling the protection of our ecosystems and strengthening research and innovation.
- The human right to water must be guaranteed for all people in Europe. The focus must be on water as a public good and the provision of good quality and affordable water. Water must be made available free of charge in public spaces, especially for vulnerable and marginalised groups.
- Systematic and transparent collection of data on water supply in Europe, access to water and sanitation, the state of water infrastructure, surface and groundwater abstraction and water use in industry, agriculture, and households.
- Strengthening the public sector by adapting legislation at European level. Inter-municipal cooperation needs to be significantly facilitated in EU regulations and the legal scope of EU public procurement law needs to be expanded.
- No liberalisation of European water services. The exemptions for water and wastewater in Directive 2014/23/EU on the award of concessions which were granted in the course of the successful European citizens’ initiative “Right2Water” must be maintained in the future.
- Regulations are needed at both national and European level to better regulate water consumption and to enable effective and financial support to improve the water infrastructure. Alternative models for water-intensive agriculture and industry are needed.
- Joint forward-looking planning is needed to prevent conflicts over water and to develop good solutions for people, industry, business, and agriculture. Where there is competition for water resources, transparent approaches are needed that prioritize the long-term supply of drinking water for people.
- All water users should be encouraged to use existing water resources in a sustainably way by raising awareness.
- A “golden investment rule” should be introduced for investments in water supply, to exempting them from the strict EU budget rules. Appropriate financing instruments should also be developed at European level.
- The polluter-pays principle must be strengthened to tackle pollution at source. Pollutant discharges into water bodies and groundwater must be permanently reduced so that drinking water and sanitation remain affordable.
- A rights-based approach must be pursued in all areas of water policy and water poverty must be tackled. The European Pillar of Social Rights should also be considered. A common approach to understanding water poverty at EU level should be promoted and a comprehensive definition of water poverty should be developed.
- Water is a public good and must be accessible to all at an affordable price. Practices such as international private companies bottling water in the Global South and selling it worldwide need to be scrutinised for their sustainability, as the local populations suffers massively from this practice, exacerbating problems such as drought, migration, conflict and poverty.

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