



3rd European Water Conference

Brussels, 24 – 25 May 2012

Charlemagne Conference Centre Brussels,

Room Alcide de Gasperi

Key Messages

Organized by  on behalf of the





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About the Conference

The 3rd European Water Conference took place on 24-25 May 2012 in Brussels to serve as a platform for consultation and debate between different stakeholders, Member States and the European Commission on the policy options of the Blueprint to Safeguard Europe's Water Resources.

The detailed Conference report, the presentations and video footage of the speeches of the Conference are available at: <http://waterblueprint2012.eu>.

Status of Europe's water and challenges for water policy

- More than 50% of European surface water bodies are in less than good ecological status and the environmental objectives of the Water Framework Directive (WFD) for 2015 will not be fully met. The status of groundwater is also worrying. The main challenges in this context derive from agriculture, climate change, hydromorphological pressures, and systemic challenges (i.e. communication and sharing of data).
- In addition, a significant proportion of EU basins are currently water scarce and this proportion will increase by 2030. Some measures are being implemented, but these will not be able to reverse the trend in the near future. There is a need to maximize Europe's water saving potential and innovation and research can play a fundamental role in this respect.
- The 1st cycle of the WFD clearly shows success stories (integration of ecological perspective into water management, enhancement of international cooperation, public and stakeholder participation, increase of knowledge base, improvement of chemical water quality), but also a long road ahead to meet the ambitious objectives of European water policy (e.g. not all River Basin Management Plans have been submitted, low ambition of the River Basin Management Plans, lack of concreteness and comparability, dressing up "business as usual" as WFD implementation).

"Unlocking" the most promising measures

- Taking a mix of measures to address European water challenges is critical. We need to "unlock" measures that give answers to different problems in a coordinated way, since no single measure will be able to solve the problems at hand.



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- Stronger policy integration is needed between water, agricultural and energy policy as well as key relevant policy reforms (e.g. in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)). The European Commission can play a key role in further promoting integration, and providing further instruments and practical guidance on the improvement of water management at a local level.
- It is essential to have a good set of both mandatory and voluntary measures for the agricultural sector. At the same time, we should not rely on regulation only to reinforce policy. Reliable funding (public and private) is fundamental for implementing measures. Agreements between farmers and water companies are a successful concept and should be further promoted.
- Some stakeholders support the development of EU standards for water reuse, underlining the need to have common quality parameters for the reuse of water at EU level. Different quality levels for reused water should be set for different users on a scientific basis and in cooperation with the relevant sectors (agriculture, water suppliers, industry). Some stakeholders, however, argue that EU standards will not help because situations vary greatly between countries and sectors.
- For the protection of water ecosystems, there is a need to further promote win-win measures, such as wetland restoration (win-win for the WFD, flood prevention, Habitats and Birds Directives). More attention should also be given to strategic approaches such as green corridor strategies at river basin level.
- Stakeholders pointed to the need for further action and European regulation on pharmaceutical substances in water. Besides discussions in the context of the Environmental Quality Standards Directive, further steps should be taken: firstly, implementing stringent legislative criteria, and secondly, looking at ways to reduce pharmaceuticals at source (upstream) and working on hotspot management (e.g. hospital discharges).

Economic incentives for more efficient water resources management

- Water pricing needs to be implemented in combination with other policy tools, but certain preconditions are necessary:
 - Economic instruments will only work if necessary background data (e.g. information on environmental flows) and preconditions (e.g. abstraction licenses) to inform their design and implementation are available.



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- Enforcement and monitoring of water legislation and property rights is a necessary requirement. Illegal water abstractions need to be controlled.
- Mandatory metering is needed for the implementation of water pricing policies in Europe.
- Water pricing should be accompanied by education and awareness-raising related to water demand management.
- Stakeholder involvement is critical to set the prices right. All relevant actors (agriculture, industry, households) need to collaborate in achieving water policy objectives.
- Regarding the application of social water tariffs, it was argued that everybody should pay the same price for their water use. This would ensure consistency. Governments can use other policy tools to support low income groups.
- There is a need to impose conditions on the use of EU funds (Rural Development, Cohesion Policy). It was also argued that the objectives of the WFD should be included in cross-compliance requirements under the CAP.
- It could be considered unfair that remediation costs are not borne by the polluter. These costs according to a recent OECD report are very significant. There is a need to strengthen the application of the polluter pays principle.
- The interpretation of environmental and resource costs needs practical guidance from the European Commission.

Governance system and knowledge base

- Since its adoption, the WFD has been the main driver for improvement of governance in European water management. Public participation, transboundary cooperation and the knowledge base have improved. The existing water policy framework and the WFD Common Implementation Strategy process should be continued.
- The implementation of water policy has sometimes been difficult due to the fragmentation of institutions. Taking cooperation and coordination to a higher level requires the definition of common objectives.
- Member States have difficulty implementing cross-sectoral activities between the WFD and other sectors, because water policy makers have no competence to



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intervene in other sectors such as agriculture and energy. In addition, coordination between water quality and hydromorphological aspects as well as between water policy and nature protection has so far not been sufficient.

- Cooperation between the water and agricultural sector is where governance is most deficient, mainly due to the difficulty in setting up a dialogue and because of the system of subsidies in the agricultural sector. Political will is needed to push further cooperation between the CAP and the WFD.
- To address the problem of illegal water abstraction, river basin authorities and managers need more leverage in identifying illegal abstractions and penalizing them. Compliance mechanisms applicable to all river basins are needed. In some parts of Europe, the rigidity of the water concession system is still a major problem, limiting the ability of river basin authorities to register the amount of water abstracted.
- Sound scientific results adapted to the needs of policy have to be communicated to decision makers via an improved Science Policy Interface. Research work could identify appropriate data collection to support key measures, e.g. setting water efficiency targets, and should focus more on reasons for missing the targets of water policy.

Innovation and global aspects

- The EU needs to consider the water challenges beyond Europe and incorporate the global dimension of water into the Blueprint discussions.
- The European Innovation Partnership on Water is an opportunity to find new solutions for the water challenges we face. It is also a chance for the EU water industry to become more competitive and to translate ideas of the European water sector into marketable solutions.
- The scope and aims of the Innovation Partnership will be further clarified together with the industry and the public sector until the end of 2012, when the strategic implementation plan of the Partnership is due.
- The European Water Initiative (EUWI) has been a successful instrument to put water on the development agenda and stakeholders favour its continuation. Strategic discussions on how and whether to continue the EUWI are ongoing with emphasis on the means to have a significant impact on the water sector and to gain support at the political level.