

Towards a Water Resilient Europe: Upholding the Human Right to water

Summary

Safe and secure water supplies are of critical importance for all people everywhere, in order to protect public health, mainstream resilience, and guarantee safety and the well-being of people and societies.

A range of pressures impact the ability of Member States to provide resilient and sustainable water services in the short, medium and long term, including climate change, pollution, environmental degradation, rising costs and standards, population and economic growth, urbanisation and the international security context.

These pressures drive an urgent need to strengthen the resilience of our water supplies through the development of a holistic European water resilience policy that enables sustainable and cross-sectoral water resource planning and a comprehensive effort across society towards water resilience. This framework would allow European water suppliers to guarantee resilient water services now and into the future. Europe will not be resilient, self-sufficient and secure without water resilience.

The European Water Resilience Strategy should set a clear direction for coordinated and coherent action by Member States, taking into account national and regional circumstances. In this regard, EurEau has identified three essential drivers that we believe should be included in the Water Resilience Strategy to ensure its effectiveness:

- ~ Improved water governance and monitoring for integrated and sustainable water resource management across all sectors.
- ~ Improved supply management to ensure sufficient resources.
- ~ Better demand management and promotion of water saving solutions where appropriate.

We strongly welcome the Commission President's announcement of a Water Resilience Strategy as a political priority for the 2024-2029 mandate. We call on the Commission to publish it without delay and to drive further action over the course of the new European mandate. Furthermore, we recommend including the core elements identified in this paper.





1. Introduction

Safe and secure water supplies are essential for the protection of public health, mainstreaming resilience, and guaranteeing the safety and well-being of people and societies. To ensure the appropriate level of resilience to meet societal and economic needs, water suppliers must consider the quality and quantity of water sources available and the reliability and sustainability of water supply systems.

Left unchecked, existing and emerging pressures including climate change, pollution, environmental degradation, rising costs and standards, population and economic growth, urbanisation and the international security context, have the potential to seriously impact Member States' ability to provide appropriate water services. At the same time, water resources face competing needs across multiple sectors, including agriculture, industry and power production. We also need to ensure a sufficient flow in the surface waters to meet e-flow requirements and allow for other non-consumptive uses.

These pressures and considerations drive an urgent need to strengthen the resilience of our water supplies through the development of a holistic and sound European water resilience policy that enables sustainable and cross-sectoral water resource planning, where water is at the heart of every sectoral policy. Wherever possible, this should harness existing planning tools to contribute to the goal of water resilience.

The EU objectives of building a more competitive, resilient and self-sufficient society and economy cannot be achieved without water resilience. Whether it is for crops, medicines, energy or manufacturing, every activity requires a sufficient, safe and secure supply of water. In particular, new economic activities spearheading the green and digital transition require thorough water availability checks at their planned locations. Producing hydrogen, batteries or chips requires considerable amounts of high-purity water, but we must find ways to supply these industries without jeopardising citizens' drinking water supply. In this way as in many others, **water resilience is a precondition for the overall resilience and competitiveness of our societies.**

The foundation for sustainable and cross-sectoral water resources planning requires robust and coherent policies that recognise the importance of and the need for increased water security and water resilience. The increasing frequency of droughts and growing water scarcity experienced over the past years in many parts of Europe should be a wake-up call in this regard.

These policies must be adaptable to a range of future scenarios and national and regional circumstances, as well as to climate change. The European Commission's Water Resilience Strategy, which was initially announced as a Water Resilience Initiative for publication in March 2024, will allow for positive developments in this critical space, by creating a platform for multiple sectors to work together to resolve issues that will impact us all. Europe will not be resilient without water resilience. That is why EurEau looks forward to the publication of a comprehensive Water Resilience Strategy for the EU.



2. What elements should the Water Resilience Strategy cover?

The Water Resilience Strategy should include recommendations to water-related competent authorities, decision makers and other relevant stakeholders at all levels to ensure a sound European water resilience. These recommendations should set a clear direction for coordinated action by Member States depending on the national and regional circumstances and considering transboundary issues where relevant.

We need a European-level water resilience strategy to better address the multiple pressures on water resources and competing needs for these. Increased water resilience requires comprehensive planning with appropriate impact assessments across a range of sectors. The focus should be on water-intensive sectors, which can have the biggest potential impact on water resilience by implementing effective measures.

Because adaptable long-term solutions may be difficult to deliver and involve significant investments, an appropriate policy is needed at the EU level to focus efforts across society and promote greater collaboration, cross-sectoral planning and funding. **Without this common strategy, it is unlikely that Member States will be able to address water resilience in the short, medium and long terms.**

EurEau has identified three essential drivers that we suggest should be included in the Water Resilience Strategy to ensure its effectiveness.

1. Improved water governance and monitoring for integrated and sustainable water resource management across all sectors, including through (but not limited to):

- ~ Ensure both horizontal and vertical coordination among different levels of competent authorities involved in water resource planning and management.
- ~ Development/improvement of governance structures at basin level to deliver cross-sectoral water resource planning and leveraging off existing River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) requirements.
- ~ Identification of all relevant stakeholders.
- ~ Identification of monitoring requirements.
- ~ Development of cross-sectoral and adaptive water resources plans that allow for active collaboration across all stakeholders. Wherever possible, this should harness existing planning tools to contribute to the goal of water resilience.
- ~ A holistic approach to ensure water availability for drinking water supply while improving the water environment and water resilience.
- ~ Inclusion of long-term estimations on water balances in RBMPs, including climate change impacts, and expected demographic and socio-economic evolutions.
- ~ Need for assessment of present and future water availability to better allocate



water use per sector when defining water balances.

- ~ Development of fair and sustainable water allocation mechanisms to prevent unsustainable abstractions and to assure long-term availability. Being an essential service to society, public drinking water supply should be given priority over other uses.
- ~ Full implementation of the cost recovery and polluter pays principles as well as incentives for efficient use of water resources set in the Water Framework Directive is needed.
- ~ Inclusion of relevant performance indicators on water resilience (e.g. water availability, sectoral water use, water balance) in RBMPs and on monitoring of exceptional situations.
- ~ Adequate enforcement of water resources plans to ensure all water allocations are respected by all stakeholders.
- ~ Knowledge sharing at European, national, regional and local levels to ensure knowledge-based implementation.

2. Improved supply management to assure sufficient resources, including through (but not limited to):

- ~ Identification of sustainable sources of water and promotion of conjunctive use of water sources to achieve improved water resilience.
- ~ Improved understanding of the interaction between groundwater and surface water abstractions at local and basin levels.
- ~ Consideration and promotion of new water sources when needs are identified (e.g. desalination, rainwater harvesting, use of reclaimed water, greywater).
- ~ Measures to protect, enhance and recover lakes, rivers, wetlands and aquifers, that reinforce resilience and adaptation of water sources quality and quantity status to climate change impacts. These measures may for example include research, managed aquifer recharge from various sources (such as reclaimed water) and nature-based solutions.
- ~ Measures to ensure control at source to prevent pollution in water resources.

3. Better demand management and promotion of water saving solutions, including through (but not limited to):

- ~ Raising awareness of water use including water sources and drinking water in all sectors.
- ~ Promotion of efficient and sustainable water use across all sectors and reduced dependency on water while fostering dynamic mechanisms and rules to avoid unsustainable water use. Efficient and sustainable water use should cover water abstraction, water losses and drinking water use. It should harness the possibility



of treating and delivering water to varying standards tailored for specific uses.

- ~ Promotion of circular economy (e.g. water reuse) and transformational adaptation in relevant sectors (e.g. crop changes, smart irrigation, sponge city planning, closed water circuits, dry technologies).
- ~ Demand planning and growth forecasting, including an assessment of the impacts on local and regional water security.
- ~ Assessment of additional pressures on water resources stemming from new water-intensive industries as part of the EU's green and digital transitions (e.g. hydrogen, semiconductors, data centres, batteries).
- ~ Development of sectoral guidelines to improve demand management. The focus should be on water-intensive sectors.
- ~ Cross-sectoral drought management plans at local and basin levels. Such plans should define clear responsibilities, drought scenarios based on performance indicators monitored during exceptional situations and possible actions (changes to water allocation and abstraction, restrictions to water use, (re)definition of water use priorities during emergency conditions).

3. Conclusions

The promised Water Resilience Strategy provides a unique opportunity for the European Commission to lay the foundations for mainstream water resilience and encourage Member States to drive its implementation.

Steps to build water resilience through this strategy will contribute to making water supplies more sustainable and Europe more resilient, and assist Member States in complying with existing directives including the Water Framework Directive, Critical Entities Resilience Directive and Drinking Water Directive, amongst others.

Given how critical the challenge is and the limited time available to address current and emerging pressures, we call on the Commission to publish the Water Resilience Strategy without delay and to drive further action over the course of the new European mandate 2024-2029.

About EurEau

EurEau represents Europe's drinking and wastewater sector. We encompass 38 national water services associations including public and private operators from 33 countries.

Together we promote the access to safe and reliable water services for Europe's citizens and businesses, the management of water quality and resource efficiency through effective environmental protection.

