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# Position paper

# On the consideration of small agglomerations in the revised UWWTD


## Summary

Small agglomerations have been identified as a source of pollution in the evaluation of the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive (UWWTD). Despite that small agglomerations need to be better defined in the UWWTD, this source of pollution needs to be robustly addressed for the protection of biodiversity, ecosystems and for the protection of drinking water resources.

EurEau would like to see more guidance on monitoring and control of small or even individual systems at EU level through a thorough assessment and planning for the registration and monitoring of individual sanitation systems included in River Basin Management Plans. These elements should also be easily accessible to the local drinking water operators so that they can include them in the risk assessment and risk management of the catchment area as required in the recently recast Drinking Water Directive.


## 1. Small agglomerations

According to the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive (UWWTD), an agglomeration is "an area where the population and/or economic activities are sufficiently concentrated for urban waste water to be collected and conducted to an urban waste water treatment plant or to a final discharge point".

The scope of the current UWWTD covers agglomerations of more than 2,000 p.e. and agglomerations of less than 2,000 p.e. with a waste water collection system in place.

One policy option of the Impact Assessment of the UWWTD aims at extending the scope of a UWWTD to "small agglomerations", because the evaluation of the Directive considered those agglomerations as a remaining pollution load.

However, there is no definition of what could be a 'small' agglomeration. We can assume that it refers to agglomerations with less than 2000 p.e., with or without a collecting system.

More than larger agglomerations, small ones present a large diversity of features around


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Europe: from dense villages to sparse groups of buildings, islands, villages on the top of a hill or in the bottom of a valley, dwellings stretched along rivers or sea sides, etc. which make the most cost-effective sanitation system very local dependant.

Nevertheless, the evaluation of the UWWTD [1] stated that small agglomerations (agglomerations of less than 2,000 p.e.) constitute a significant pressure on 11% of the EU's surface water bodies, and that around 13% of the biological oxygen demand (BOD) load could be avoided by addressing the issue of waste water management in small agglomerations. However, due to local considerations, managing the waste water collection and treatment in small agglomerations can be challenging and there is a clear need for guidance to address this question and to better protect the receiving waters under the Water Framework Directive (WFD) and especially when they are used as a drinking water resource. It can also contribute to locally enhance biodiversity and protect brittle aquatic ecosystems.

## 2. Protection of drinking water resources

One issue with small agglomerations is the difficulties to assess the level of their emissions to both surface and groundwater sources and the quantification of the share of emission they are responsible for in the failure to achieve good chemical and ecological status of water bodies under the Water Framework Directive[2] (WFD). In that sense, more guidance on the monitoring and control of small or even individual systems are needed at EU level to ensure that the pollution caused by inexistent, inadequate or badly maintained waste water treatment infrastructures from some small agglomerations can be stopped.

The question arises on the relevance of including more stringent measures in the UWWTD for small agglomerations. Until now, the WFD was the instrument to deal with any pollution of waters not covered by specific legislative instruments. As the WFD will not be revised, it is indeed important to reinforce its implementation through other legal acts. Article 7 (WFD) protects drinking water resources by requiring Member States to identify water bodies from which water is abstracted to produce drinking water and to ensure their protection to avoid the deterioration of their quality to reduce the level of treatment. To this end, Member States may establish safeguard zones for these water bodies.

The application of Article 7 (WFD) may be linked to the UWWTD by requiring the appropriate treatment of any waste water at utility level, even if not directly released to drinking water resources. Furthermore, a better monitoring, control and maintenance of the waste water infrastructure should be put in place. The information on the state of these infrastructures and the result of this control and monitoring should also be easily accessible to the local drinking water operator so that they can be included in the risk assessment and risk management of the catchment area required recently recast Drinking Water Directive[3].

[1] SWD(2019) 700 final: COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT EVALUATION of the Council Directive 91/271/EEC of 21 May 1991, concerning urban waste-water treatment.
[2] Directive 2000/60/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2000 establishing a framework for Community action in the field of water policy.
[3] Directive (EU) 2020/2184 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2020 on the quality of water intended for human consumption (recast).

# 3. Supporting the objectives of the Water Framework Directive

To achieve the WFD objectives, the remaining pollution gaps under the UWWTD need to be tackled. However, a centralised collection system is not necessarily the most appropriate solution in all circumstances. Individual sanitation systems may also have a role to play if they are well designed, sized, built, maintained and controlled[4]. If this is ensured, such solutions have several benefits as they help to reach the objectives of the EU Climate Law[5] to become climate neutral by 2050 and address the consequences of the Weser Ruling on permits for the extension of WWTPs[6] by reducing the load to the WWTPs.

River Basin Management Plans should thoroughly assess the pressure from small agglomerations and establish plans for registration and monitoring of individual sanitation systems. The Common Implementation Strategy (CIS) of the WFD should establish guidance on how to assess their performance, stimulate good practices and maintenance to provide the necessary level of service for reaching the objectives of the WFD.

# 4. Conclusion - a framework for a better control of pollution from small agglomerations

First of all, the UWWTD needs to guide the delineation of agglomerations and the boundaries of small agglomerations, integrating already existing traditional definitions from Member States and not to change the compliance by modifying the agglomeration definition.

The evaluation of the UWWTD identified small agglomerations as a significant pressure on the European receiving waters. EurEau, representing both drinking water and waste water operators in Europe, sees this as an opportunity to define a framework helping to reach the WFD objectives, protecting biodiversity and drinking water resources from small agglomeration pollution without increasing the burden for waste water operators. The basis for these requirements can be Article 7 of the WFD and the risk assessment and risk management of the catchment area required under the recast of the Drinking Water Directive. It should require the monitoring and control of treatment for small agglomerations on the local risks and circumstances, particularly with regards to the protection of drinking water resources. The reporting at EU level is not necessary as long as it is available locally. It will avoid additional burdens on national actors.

The local authorities must be required:

- to treat at an appropriate level any source of domestic waste water in order to control the risk of contamination of the receiving water bodies
- to make sure that the appropriate treatment is in place by issuing a permit
- to monitor the effectiveness of the treatment in place through regular control of the infrastructure by a competent body

[4] EurEau (2021): Briefing note on IAS.
[5] https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/eu-climate-action/law_en.
[6] EurEau (2021): The Weser Ruling consequences for urban waste water treatment – and a proposed solution.

- to keep record of the infrastructures in place and the results of the monitoring in order to feed the risk management plans of related Directives (WFD, MSFD, BWD and DWD).

In order to help the local authorities, guidance on appropriate treatment solutions for individual or small collective systems and the associated maintenance should be developed at EU level and preferably under the CIS of the WFD. This guidance should include nature-based solutions to avoid extensive collection systems that have a large carbon footprint and require intensive investment.

With such requirements we are confident that receiving waters, biodiversity and drinking water resources would have the appropriate level of protection to avoid pollution of water bodies from small agglomerations.

## About EurEau

EurEau is the voice of Europe's water sector. We represent drinking water and waste water operators from 29 countries in Europe, from both the private and the public sectors.

Our members are 32 national associations of water services. At EurEau, we bring national water professionals together to agree European water sector positions regarding the management of water quality, resource efficiency and access to water for Europe's citizens and businesses. The EurEau secretariat is based in Brussels.

With a direct employment of around 476,000 people, the European water sector makes a significant contribution to the European economy.