

European rivers are the most fragmented in the world as a result of dams and other obstacles, amputating tributaries from larger rivers, trapping vital sediments, and blocking fish from their natural migrating routes. These barriers are a major cause of the alarming loss of “forgotten” freshwater fish and the decline by 93% of European migratory freshwater fish populations, such as salmon or eel, since 1970.

A new report by WWF presents a three-step approach that can be taken to minimize the negative impact of Europe’s existing hydropower plants on freshwater species and habitats. To minimise its impact on freshwater ecosystems, Europe’s hydropower sector needs to take substantive measures - three of which are outlined in WWF’s new report ‘Hydropower in Europe: Transformation - not development’. The first step is to put an end to further hydropower development in Europe, as asked for by 150+ NGOs in a manifesto released last October. The second step, which concerns Europe’s existing hydropower fleet, focuses on mitigating the environmental impacts of the 21,000+ existing plants. The third step underlines the need for restoring rivers’ natural functions.

Such a transformation can be achieved through several economic and legal incentives. Many hydropower plants in Europe were constructed before the adoption of the EU Water Framework or Nature Directives, so there is an urgent need to bring hydropower permits, licences and concessions in line with EU legal requirements, or to consider decommissioning, as suggested by a recent U.N. report. In addition, there often is a strong economic case for refurbishing or decommissioning plants rather than building new (especially small) ones.

Claire Baffert, Senior Water Policy Officer, WWF European Policy Office said:

“Europe does not need more hydropower. The hydropower sector needs to focus on reducing the severe impacts its existing plants have on freshwater biodiversity, in line with the EU Water Framework and Nature Directives.

Reorienting EU financial tools, in particular state aid, is needed to level the playing field towards refurbishment, away from building new plants, and to support the EU Biodiversity Strategy’s goal of restoring 25000 km of free-flowing rivers”.

Source: wwf.eu