

The European Commission revealed on Thursday (1 February) how it plans to update drinking water rules, aiming to improve human health, reduce emissions and tackle plastic waste.

A legislative proposal unveiled by EU Commissioners Frans Timmermans and Karmenu Vella intends to guarantee access to water as part of the European Pillar of Social rights. It is a direct response to the “Right2Water” citizens’ initiative, which was signed by 1.6 million people.

It is also a result of the ongoing Better Regulation drive, overseen by Timmermans, which aims to streamline EU legislation and cut red tape.

The proposal seeking to improve water quality has drawn on information provided by the World Health Organisation, by adding new and emerging substances such as legionella and chlorate to a list of safety criteria.

Timmermans’ quest to reduce bureaucracy is also evident in new rules that allow authorities to focus on treating substances that are known to be in the local area, rather than having to go through a long list of generic substances that are not present.

However, Environment Commissioner Karmenu Vella explained that water quality is an area in which the Commission rarely has to intervene, as the member states often implement the bloc’s rules properly.

#### Crystalline water

While the update hopes to make drinking water as clear as possible, it will also tackle transparency by ensuring that consumers can easily access data about the water in their area online. Estimates suggest that this measure alone would reduce associated potential health risks from 4% to just 1%.

But the Commission also wants to make bills clearer, not just to help people make sense of their payments but to decrease energy needs by being more transparent about where costs come from.

According to the International Energy Agency, public supply water losses - mostly due to poor infrastructure - can top 24% in the EU, while energy consumption of the sector accounts for 3.5% of electricity consumption.

A separate report by the Commission revealed that in some member states, drinking water losses hit a staggering 60%.

By obliging suppliers to make this kind of information readily available, the EU executive hopes to boost energy efficiency efforts, as consumers will realise that they are paying hand over fist for their providers’ shortcomings.

“Water and energy are too precious to lose. Today’s proposal is a first step towards more

energy efficiency and sustainable water treatment in Europe,” said Mads Warming, a global director at Danish technology firm Danfoss.

#### Plastics in the water

Timmermans also highlighted the link between today’s update and the Commission’s recent Plastics Strategy, which is scheduled to be complemented by rules on single-use plastics later this year.

The EU executive hopes that by improving water quality and obliging member states to provide free drinking fountains in public spaces, among other measures, there will be less demand for plastic water bottles.

Jobs and growth Commissioner Jyrki Katainen said that the plan “implies a reduction of energy use and unnecessary water loss. Thanks to increased transparency it will also empower consumers and push them towards more sustainable choices, like tap water.” By improving trust in tap water’s drinkability, the Commission estimates that households could stop buying bottled water and save more than €600 million a year, as tap water only costs an average of €0.002 per litre.

As well as saving Europeans money, the proposal also aims to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 1.2 million tonnes, as bottled water is estimated to decrease from 100 to 88 litres per year by 2050.

#### Air quality conundrum

Things were less bright on the air quality front and the college of Commissioners agreed to move against non-compliant member states.

Nine environment ministers were summoned to Brussels for an informal meeting on Tuesday (30 January) to explain why their countries are breaching EU law but Commissioner Vella said the solutions they suggested were “not substantial enough to change the bigger picture”.

He said his officials would analyse the ideas put forward at the meeting and the member states would have until Friday next week (9 February) to propose new solutions.

Today, Vella’s colleagues agreed to “proceed with the final stage of infringements, unless additional credible, timely and effective measures are presented”, the Maltese official told EURACTIV.com.

Source: euractiv.com