

Our entire natural world depends on it, but despite the sometimes apparent abundance of **water**, its uses (and misuses) have contributed to a crisis of frightening proportions. Today, 31 million people in Europe still lack access to basic sanitation, and a third of Europe's population is affected by water stress during an average year. With **climate change** accelerating, this already alarming situation is only expected to worsen. In Europe, extreme unseasonal temperatures and endemic drought starkly illustrate the real-life consequences for people, livelihoods and the environment.

But even as we watch this precious resource slip between our fingers, we somehow have a system that appears to condone the pollution of what remains of it. This unfolding disaster is preventable and can be attributed in large part to a lack of regulation or oversight of private enterprises' treatment of, and effects on, our water.

Polluter pays? Nope...

Enshrined in the Treaty on the Functioning of the **European Union** (Article 191 (2)) and across many EU environmental policies is the 'Polluter Pays Principle' (PPP). As the name suggests, this is a fundamental theory that the actors who contaminate the environment pay for - or 'internalise' - the damage they cause. But unfortunately that seems to be all it is - a theory. In practice, much of the cost of water pollution is still borne by the European taxpayer.

In 2021, the **European Court of Auditors** (ECA) published a report outlining widespread inconsistencies in the application of the PPP. It noted that in many instances, public budgets - rather than private polluters' coffers - were made available to clean up environmental damage.

Inadequate tools

The Water Framework Directive, the EU's central piece of legislation on **water pollution**, has, as a cornerstone of its design, a list of 'priority substances' that should be monitored. But while this list is essential for controlling and reducing the amount of pollution in Europe's waterways, it is not currently fit for purpose.

First of all, it does not reflect the true extent of the problem. Most pollutants and priority substances have individual 'threshold values' that offer a simplistic snapshot of the issue, as they ignore effects of 'toxic cocktails' that occur when different chemical substances mix. Second, many substances that are widely used across the EU and are of great concern to both aquatic life and human health are still not listed as priority substances. Among these are glyphosate (the most sold pesticide in the EU), PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances), and a number of pharmaceuticals and microplastics.

To focus on one, **PFAS** - or 'forever chemicals' - are known to cause a range of health

complications in humans, including various cancers, liver damage, fertility issues, thyroid disease, and many developmental problems affecting unborn children.

This “forever pollution” in Europe’s water has reached extraordinary levels. A major journalistic investigation led by Le Monde this year exposed PFAS contamination in 17,000 sites. Some samples taken revealed levels of PFAS thousands of times ‘safe’ limits. Seriously threatening drinking water sources across the continent, PFAS are also known to bioaccumulate in fish and other animals. Indeed, so mobile are these chemicals that they have been detected in natural ecosystems and organisms far beyond Europe, from “penguin eggs in Antarctica to polar bears in the Arctic”.

The problem? Once again, the polluters are not sufficiently monitoring or reporting on chemical levels in water at their sites. And even when this does happen, the PPP is still often not being applied!

Micropollutants in wastewater

In Europe, wastewater contamination is another major problem. Those most responsible for such pollution are the pharmaceutical and cosmetics industries, together accounting for 92% of the toxic load – notably in the form of micro-pollutants – in European wastewaters. In addition to such micro-pollutants, across Europe our wastewater management systems are also manifestly unfit for purpose, with many rivers, canals and streams being regularly poisoned with dangerous levels of raw sewage, causing untold harm to biodiversity, and rendering formerly swimmable waters no longer safe for human enjoyment. To protect our natural environment, restore ailing ecosystems and ensure all Europeans have access to clean water, we need decisive action now.

The good news?

As the **European Commission** reviews part of the 20-year-old Water Framework Directive (WFD) regarding ‘priority substances’ for surface and groundwater, as well as the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive (UWWTD), we have a golden opportunity to plug the leaks in our currently inadequate water protection legislation.

In 2022, the Commission presented its proposal for amending the WFD, the Groundwater Directive, and the Environmental Quality Standards Directive. This included updates to the lists of priority substances to encompass more water pollutants – notably 24 PFAS, several pesticides and a number of pharmaceuticals. The update would require Member States to monitor the presence of these substances in water, and ensure that their levels do not exceed established standards.

A common-sense proposal

Currently under discussion is one obvious, common-sense solution to the question of how to

fund the treatment of water teeming with toxic pollution: 'Extended Producer Responsibility' (EPR). EPR is a financing mechanism that would oblige those sectors responsible for micro-pollutants to make a proportional and fair financial contribution to the eye-watering costs associated with this treatment process. In the context of the updated UWWTID, the Commission has explicitly proposed EPR. The same solution has also been firmly endorsed by the European Parliament rapporteur to address priority substances and 'substances of emerging concern'.

With people financially squeezed across Europe, it should hardly be deemed controversial or radical to demand that those entities at the root of the problem (many of whose profit margins continue to swell) contribute to cleaning up their mess. The European Environmental Bureau recently signed a joint statement calling on the European Parliament and the Council to approve and uphold the Commission's inclusion of the EPR mechanism in its proposed revision of the UWWTID.

All eyes on EU

Political short-termism and corporate greed have plagued aquatic life and our vital [water](#) sources for long enough. We now need bold and meaningful action that meets the challenge that threatens our future.

At the United Nations' annual **Water Conference** this year, the EU presented a series of time-bound, financially resourced commitments regarding water. It is now the duty of EU policymakers to honour those. European Parliament and EU Member States - over to you.

Source: Meta