



EU strikes deal on water pollution, but existing protections pay the price

The EU institutions have reached a long-awaited deal on updated rules for pollution of EU surface and groundwater, but Member States have managed to delay and weaken obligations.

Yesterday, nearly three years after the European Commission proposed an update to the lists of pollutants that EU Member States must monitor and control in surface and groundwater, the EU institutions reached an agreement.

While the deal requires Member States to monitor and limit pollution of new substances, among them more pesticides (including glyphosate), a group of PFAS, and – for the first time – pharmaceuticals, Member States managed to secure long timelines to act. Member States have until 2039, with the possibility to delay until 2045, to comply with the new standards.

While close to 200,000 people recently raised their voice against deregulation of environmental laws, the deal included Member States' (and industry's) wish to weaken the non-deterioration principle of the WFD, by the introduction of two new exemptions that allow short term negative impacts, and deterioration of status following relocation of water or sediment.

Sara Johansson, Senior Policy Officer for Water Pollution Prevention, European Environmental Bureau, said:

“After more than three years of negotiations, the EU has finally agreed on updated water pollution standards - a necessary step forward. But this progress is severely undermined by the excessive timelines Member States gave themselves to limit pollution in EU waters. This weakens the Water Framework Directive’s potential as a tool for prevention. Member States must now include concrete measures to stop further pollution in the 4th River Basin Management Plans,” said Sara Johansson, EEB.

Claire Baffert, Senior Policy Officer, Water and Climate Change Adaptation, WWF, said:

“Last night’s deal is a direct attack on access to clean water and our environment, letting companies dump more toxic substances into our rivers. To add insult to injury, some industry lobbies keep pushing the European Commission to weaken core water protection rules under the Water Framework Directive with more exemptions - but it must not give in to pressure and should instead listen to citizens across Europe.”

Manon Rouby, Policy Officer and Legal Advisor, Pesticide Action Network (PAN) Europe, said:

“All over Europe, our waters are polluted with TFA, a small PFAS pesticide residue that can be toxic to reproduction. By not monitoring these substances immediately in all types of water bodies, the EU misses a significant opportunity to take water and health protection with the importance and urgency it requires.”

Erik Ruiz, Safer Pharma Programme Manager, Health Care Without Harm Europe, said:

“For the first time, Europe has acknowledged pharmaceutical pollution as a serious water quality threat: a crucial step forward. But delaying real action ignores the urgent risks pharmaceuticals pose to ecosystems, biodiversity, and public health. Pharmaceutical and antibiotic residues in our waters fuel antimicrobial resistance, one of the greatest health crises of our time”.

Lucille Labayle, Water Quality and Health Policy Officer, Surfrider Foundation Europe, said:

“It is a short-lived relief to see a deal finally struck, three years after the Commission’s proposal. Unfortunately, last night’s decision leaves Europe’s waters largely exposed to harmful substances for many years to come still. By caving to private, short-sighted interests, EU leaders have failed communities who rely on aquatic ecosystem every day.”

Why this matters – and what happens next

The multiple delays to the adoption of the updated water pollution standards leave little time for Member State authorities to plan and include measures to tackle the new pollutants in the next River Basin Management Plans (RBMP), which need to be finalized by end of 2027.

New rules on monitoring and reporting will help improve the picture of water pollution across Europe, including a mandatory 'Watch List' for groundwater that requires Member States to monitor pollutants of emerging concern in groundwater (already in place for surface water), the use of modern monitoring techniques that capture the combined "cocktail" effects of substances (so called effect-based methods) and regular reporting of monitoring data to the European Environment Agency (EEA).

Next, the deal needs to be adopted by the European Parliament and the Council.

ENDS

Notes to editors:

- The lists of priority pollutants for surface and groundwater should be updated every six years, the last updates were done in 2013 and 2014 for surface and groundwater respectively. The EU-wide groundwater standards for pesticides and nitrate have not been revised since the adoption of the Groundwater Directive in 2006.
- The [European Commission’s assessment of the 3rd River Basin Management Plans](#) (2022-2027) concluded that ‘significant work is needed’ to meet EU targets on freshwater quality and recommended Member States to increase compliance with EU water laws by adhering to pollution limits and to implement additional measures to address persistent environmental challenges, such as chemical pollution.
- [Almost 200,000 citizens](#) participated in the public consultation on the environmental omnibus, urging the European Commission not to weaken environmental laws, including EU core water rules under the Water Framework Directive.
- [More than 600 scientists](#) have signed a statement in support of updated water pollution standards for the EU, and against the weakening of WFD environmental protections.
- [A broad range of stakeholders](#) have called on the negotiators to uphold the environmental protections of the WFD and to ensure that Member States are required to include measures to

curb further pollution by the newly listed pollutants in the next River Basin Management Plans that Member States are currently drafting for the years 2028-2033.

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