

**Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'Addressing the challenge of water scarcity and droughts in the European Union'**

(2008/C 172/10)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- echoes the concern of regions and local authorities about the problems observed around the Mediterranean and in central and western Europe due to droughts and phenomena such as abnormally dry years, empty reservoirs, difficulties with groundwater tables, problems with brackish water in coastal water tables, reductions in groundwater levels, changes in the hydrological regime owing to inadequate planning, changes in the normal rainfall patterns and water pressures resulting from natural causes or human action, leading to the consequences already observed by the Commission in its preparatory work;
- advocates a coherent water planning policy in Member States and the regions, in which Community funds invested in infrastructure have the aim of conserving water, preserving uplands and wetlands, regenerating forested areas, water-saving and efficiency and reallocating water between uses, and of alleviating situations caused by severe drought or water scarcity, by providing additional means of water supply;
- welcomes the Commission's Communication on the 'Health check' of the Common Agricultural Policy, as regards the inclusion of water management as a new challenge for the Common Agricultural Policy; agrees with the Commission that the possibility of closer integration of water management issues in rural and upland development programmes should be considered. The CoR calls for the value of arable land and upland areas, rich in water and forests, to be studied as a means of generating atmospheric humidity and attracting rain and of halting desertification caused by climate change.

**Rapporteur:** Francisco CAMPS ORTIZ, President of the Generalitat of Valencia (ES/EPP)

**Reference document:**

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council — Addressing the challenge of water scarcity and droughts in the European Union

COM(2007) 414 final

**Policy recommendations**

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

1. welcomes the Communication from the Commission on water scarcity and droughts in Europe, considering it to be fully in line with Directive 2000/60/EC (Water Framework Directive), which must form the general basis for any water policy in the EU;

2. endorses the Commission's description of the difference between 'drought' and water scarcity, which is defined as follows: 'while "drought" means a temporary decrease in water availability due for instance to rainfall deficiency, "water scarcity" means that water demand exceeds the water resources exploitable under sustainable conditions';

3. emphasises that water scarcity and drought are phenomena which occur in certain regions of the EU and should be managed in accordance with local and regional conditions;

4. urges the Member States and Europe's regions and municipalities to strive to conserve and save water, to cut down the wastage of water and to expand water reuse: these are absolute priorities, above and beyond other alternatives, in order to combat water scarcity and droughts; also calls for structural measures to provide sustainable solutions for water scarcity and drought problems;

5. stresses that to combat water scarcity and droughts, absolute priority must be given to creating an economy that uses water efficiently and sustainably and that saves it. Saving water also means saving energy. Like energy, water is necessary for all human activities, economic and social;

6. highlights the role that local and regional authorities can play in implementing the Water Framework Directive, planning land and water use, developing the various economic sectors, protecting the environment and ensuring supply to citizens of sufficient good quality water;

7. points out that the regions have much to say about the different measures proposed by the Commission, particularly when it comes to guaranteeing all citizens' access to decent water, protecting both surface and ground water, planning water usage rationally, preventing and remedying scarcities in the short, medium and long term, setting the end-price of water,

allocating and reallocating water between uses, saving, reusing water and applying the water hierarchy in all economic spheres, ensuring the flexibility and mobility of water flow between internal or external water management systems, developing infrastructure for water and for land reclamation; drafting drought plans, improving knowledge and information, mobilising economic sectors, and raising the awareness and guaranteeing the involvement of the public;

8. points out that when it comes to water, the subsidiarity principle and multi-level governance are particularly relevant, because it is the responsibility of the European Union, States, regions and local authorities to take action in response to droughts and water scarcities, through steadfast, mutually supportive cooperation between regions;

9. points out that, although climatic conditions and the severity of water shortages and droughts vary in different parts of the European Union, the solutions adopted must coincide in their compliance with the ecological principles of the European water policy. Therefore, preference should be given to local and regional solutions in accordance with the subsidiarity principle;

10. calls for solidarity in all of the Member States affected, the application of the subsidiarity principle and a leading role for the regions and municipalities in order to solve a problem affecting this vital resource and its protection;

11. points out that the Member States and regional and local authorities should focus on the objectives of the existing Water Framework Directive. The Commission is therefore urged to press for application of the Water Framework Directive;

*With regard to the effects of droughts and water scarcity*

12. echoes the concern of regions and local authorities about the problems observed around the Mediterranean and in central and western Europe due to droughts and phenomena such as abnormally dry years, empty reservoirs, difficulties with groundwater tables, problems with brackish water in coastal water tables, reductions in groundwater levels, changes in the hydrological regime owing to inadequate planning, changes in the normal rainfall patterns and water pressures resulting from natural causes or human action, leading to the consequences already observed by the Commission in its preparatory work;

13. endorses the Commission's commitment to continue to address the challenge of water scarcity and drought at international level, in particular through the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change;

14. points out that the Synthesis Report forming part of the Fourth Assessment Report of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), presented in Valencia on 27 November 2007, predicts with 'high confidence' that many semi-arid areas in the Mediterranean Basin 'will suffer a decrease in water resources due to climate change';

15. points out that it is the regions and municipalities which, because of their close proximity to the end-users, are the first to have to deal with drought and water scarcity-related problems, often with insufficient resources. Moreover, it is they who know which measures are appropriate for the area in question and who, in cooperation with other regions and municipalities, can implement these measures, with support from national and European bodies;

#### *With regard to planning and rational use of water*

##### The price of water

16. notes that water and sewage pricing is a particularly sensitive and important issue for administrations, as they have to reconcile appropriate incentives to use resources efficiently with the financial impact of prices on users, given the physical, climatic and geographical differences, discrepancies between infrastructures and the different ways that public services are organised in each area;

17. highlights that the cost recovery and consumer pays principles mentioned in the Water Framework Directive do not preclude consideration of the social, environmental and economic effects of cost recovery and the geographical and climatic conditions of the region(s) affected; the application of these principles is the responsibility of the authorities that are closest to the citizens;

18. recommends also considering the 'polluter pays' principle when determining the price of water, as the second pillar of an integrated management system for this resource. This principle would commit all users to better use of the resource, and would make it possible to redistribute revenues according to the different needs and efforts realised;

19. recognises the need to mainstream mechanisms for measuring water consumption so as to promote water saving and its efficient and rational use;

20. asks the Commission to bear in mind the opinions, concerns and experiences of regional and local authorities in its studies on water pricing, especially for issues such as the consequences of strict pricing leaving this resource available only to the service and consumer sectors; the legal framework surrounding supply, treatment and purification; the social and economic impact of water pricing, and the calculation of the environmental costs of the resource;

##### Water planning

21. considers that land-use planning geared towards preservation and sustainability, which is a competence of local and regional authorities, is a key factor in the proper management of water, and stresses the importance of strict application of the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive and the identification of European river basins facing water stress or structural scarcity;

22. proposes that the European Union support the regions in showing cooperation and solidarity with regard to water;

23. highlights that, in order to make efficient use of water, it should be possible for this resource to be reallocated between different uses, depending on the circumstances. It is the role of the Member States and the regions to develop the necessary infrastructures and the legislative and governance mechanisms enabling this, in line with social, economic and environmental sustainability;

24. welcomes the Commission's Communication on the 'Health check' of the Common Agricultural Policy, as regards the inclusion of water management as a new challenge for the Common Agricultural Policy; agrees with the Commission that the possibility of closer integration of water management issues in rural and upland development programmes should be considered. The CoR calls for the value of arable land and upland areas, rich in water and forests, to be studied as a means of generating atmospheric humidity and attracting rain and of halting desertification caused by climate change;

25. considers that water planning is the best tool for assessing the water available for sustainable regional development;

26. calls for the inclusion of measures to protect upland areas, wetlands and green areas in order to overcome the consequences of droughts and flooding linked to climate change, bearing in mind that this will require environmental, sustainability and water-saving concerns to be taken into account in water use;

27. understands, in the context of the Water Framework Directive, that water demand management and water use planning are based essentially on river basin districts, in cooperation with the regional authorities concerned; considers, however, that this basic principle must not result in problems transcending the borders of a region or district being considered insurmountable;

28. advocates a coherent water planning policy in Member States and the regions, in which Community funds invested in infrastructure have the aim of conserving water, preserving uplands and wetlands, regenerating forested areas, water-saving and efficiency and reallocating water between uses, and of alleviating situations caused by severe drought or water scarcity, by providing additional means of water supply (transfers, reservoirs and desalination), in line with point 37 and subsequent points below;

29. takes account of the specific water planning requirements on islands and in areas in analogous situations where, due to the limited availability of water, basic supply can be provided by desalinating seawater; in these cases, recommends efficient water use as the most important measure, followed by optimising energy efficiency and using energy from renewable sources, and guaranteeing access to water through storage systems that allow for adequate reserves, together with the promotion and rehabilitation of traditional rainwater collection and storage infrastructures;

30. integrated water management systems should take account of the strategic role of groundwater resources as reserves to be included in drought management and emergency supply plans;

31. calls for cross-border cooperation to manage shared water basins and intergovernmental cooperation in the exchange of best practices and policy coordination: southern Europe is used to water scarcities, and these are now worsening in northern Europe as a result of climate change, as more frequent flooding and water scarcity problems mean new challenges must be faced;

*With regard to drought risk management plans*

32. considers that the implementation of specific drought plans is an effective way to move from crisis management to drought risk management, and believes that the Water Framework Directive is flexible enough to develop specific water management plans for the river basins concerned;

33. believes that the way ahead, as stated in previous opinions, lies in the exchange of information and the drafting of a specific protocol for droughts or, at national level, the drafting of specific management plans; acknowledges the key role of local and regional authorities in defining adaptation strategies, taking an integrated approach, and encourages them to act in partnership with the other stakeholders, including users. Against a background of climate change, it will be necessary for plans and instruments to be flexible and for knowledge and experiences to be shared. It is important to emphasise that no local or regional authorities can manage these things independently. Support in the form of resources, expertise and data is crucial to success. This can be provided through examples of good practice from other local and regional authorities, but the Member States and the EU should be prepared to help make such support available;

34. calls for further consideration of the guidelines set out in the opinions on natural disasters and climate change, particularly with regard to the role of regions as 'enforcement officers' for the relevant adaptation policies, and in response to challenges such as migratory flows, adjustments to legislation, changes in user attitudes and strengthening of cooperation between regions grouped, for instance, according to river basins; in particular, emphasises that Europe's map of droughts, water

scarcities and related disasters will change as the climate changes;

35. proposes, together with the allocation of Community funds to investment in water infrastructures, that a specific European programme be set up for water. This programme would gather funding from the existing instruments in the Community budget. It would aim to visibly and coherently support actions for access to the latest technology, implementation of good practices, communication measures and improved governance, helping to create a 'water-saving culture';

*With regard to the use of Community funds*

36. stresses that the European Solidarity Fund should be applied to situations of catastrophic drought, and that catastrophic droughts should be incorporated into the working plans of the Community Civil Protection Mechanism, including specific protocols and in coordination with the drought observatory, by means of an early warning system;

*With regard to the consideration of additional water supply infrastructures*

37. considers that additional water supply infrastructures (transfers, reservoirs and desalination plants) are means to prevent situations of severe drought, although they are not a substitute for the responsible use of water resources;

38. recommends that additional water supply measures should be adopted once all the preventive measures are in place, in line with the water hierarchy system and subject to coherent planning. Use of different infrastructures should ensure balanced and sustainable environmental, social and economic development;

39. recommends that the competent authorities consider the reuse of purified waste water via adequate regulation and distribution infrastructures as a means of managing demand; underlines the need to take all necessary measures to ensure that water from waste treatment plants is not used for drinking water but restricted to certain uses which are acceptable from the environmental and health angles;

40. considers that national, regional and local hydrological planning as set out under the terms of the Water Framework Directive should include the assessment of structural deficits and resources which can still be sustainably used by these areas, taking the future potential of planning areas and environmental restrictions into account;

41. is in favour of transfers of surplus resources and other inter-system exchanges of water in each Member State as a means of showing solidarity with regard to water, provided that these measures have a positive impact on the environment, and guarantee the quality of water bodies and the recovery of water tables and water flows;

42. considers that, against a background of climate change, energy efficiency and sustainability must be decisive factors when choosing between options for the external supply of water flows to planning areas (transfer or desalination). Desalination is an energy-intensive process and therefore has a high environmental impact, and should only be considered as an option in circumstances where the benefits outweigh that impact;

43. believes that decisions regarding the feasibility and characteristics of external supply must take into account the environmental effects, energy efficiency and costs of the additional infrastructure needed to incorporate water flows into planning areas;

44. concludes that informing the public and complying with environmental and economic conditions will promote social consensus with regard to the construction of additional water supply infrastructure (pipelines, desalination plants). Water in river basins receiving an additional water supply should be used in a particularly consistent and responsible manner;

45. will pay close attention to studies by the European Commission on additional water supply infrastructure, particularly with regard to transfers, reservoirs and desalination;

*With regard to water-efficient technologies and practices*

46. supports the promotion of research to bring economic activity, decision-making procedures and water efficiency into line with the challenges raised by water scarcity and drought. In this context, appropriate solutions could include creating incentives for sanitation manufacturers to make more economical and water-efficient products, penalising unjustified wastage, imposing penalties for illegal drilling and drawing of water, setting up levies and/or tax concessions, providing incentives for water efficiency in all fields, promoting the use of clean technologies in industry, establishing clear, stable ground rules for transferring rights for water usage between users and for working out the relevant compensation, and developing voluntary agreements;

*With regard to the water-saving culture in Europe*

47. urges regional and local authorities to set up public communication, awareness and information campaigns highlighting the value of water, and to include the importance of water-friendly behaviour in educational and training programmes. Particular focus should go to informing and raising awareness among tourists and other people who travel from one region to another;

48. considers that public involvement in the implementation of the Water Framework Directive and the definition of water policy should provide an opportunity to raise public awareness and to inform and encourage people to use this resource responsibly; this applies particularly to the drafting of drought plans. The Committee therefore urges the authorities to promote this involvement;

49. proposes the development of market mechanisms, reinforcing the criteria for water saving within the product lifecycle and taking into account quality and certification systems such as EMAS in production processes, eco-design and a 'water-friendly' label for products, so that citizens and public and private contractors can learn their water footprint and change their consumption;

50. considers that the eco-efficiency of infrastructure and equipment must be promoted through the corresponding quality and certification systems. Local and regional authorities can promote water saving and recycling in buildings and urban infrastructures. Through investments and legislation in addition to the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive, the regions could encourage the recovery of rainwater and water from building cooling systems, and could make use of secondary networks in cities and buildings in order to use non-drinking water for cleaning, irrigation and sanitation purposes. Tourist facilities, including golf courses and farms must in particular be required to reuse and recycle the water that they utilise;

51. highlights the essential role of the regions and local bodies in establishing partnerships with civil society and economic players, through voluntary agreements, incentives and taxes, with a view to saving water and improving efficiency;

52. points out that water is one of the areas where most money and efforts are being invested in decentralised cooperation with third countries, and it is the cooperation networks set up by the regions and municipalities that are most flexible, tightly-knit and close to citizens; calls for collaboration and the exchange of information and experience between cooperating regions in order to achieve, with the contribution of the European Union and its Member States, the UN's Millennium Goals;

53. advocates the exchange of best practices and debate between the regions on the subject of water, so that they can learn about successful water management experiences;

*With regard to the European information system*

54. considers that the Water Information System for Europe (WISE) and the management of indicators are reliable means by which to find out the scale, impact and evolution of droughts in Europe;

55. highlights the role of the authorities in compiling data, fostering basic research and information monitoring, encouraging the development of common methodologies and, if necessary, compatible, comparable indicator systems, exchanging knowledge and experience and prioritising the empowerment and coordination of administrations in order to obtain full data on their areas; therefore, supports the creation of a European Drought and Desertification Observatory to monitor water scarcity and forecast droughts in the context of climate change;

*With regard to research and technological development*

56. agrees that it is necessary to disseminate and facilitate the use and exploitation of the results of research on water scarcity and droughts, and that technological research and development

activities within the EU's 7th Framework Programme should be enhanced and encouraged;

57. highlights the importance of the regions as a driving force behind technological innovation in the field of water, given that water efficiency will be an increasingly important factor for competitiveness; therefore, proposes for strategic reasons that inter-regional cooperation, information exchange and strategic partnerships with technological platforms be stepped up;

58. lastly, concludes that against the backdrop of climate change, the proposals made in response to the challenge of water scarcity and drought could bear fruit in the short term.

Brussels, 10 April 2008.

The President  
of the Committee of the Regions  
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE

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