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Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Towards a resilient water management to fight climate crisis within an EU Blue Deal

(own-initiative opinion)

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR),

1. emphasises that water, essential for life, sustains human health, food production, ecosystems, and climate regulation, yet it is threatened by numerous challenges, including pollution from industrial chemicals, pesticides, nutrients, pharmaceuticals, plastic pollution, underwater noise, raw material extraction, waste, and the profound effects of climate change; underscores that water scarcity should not only be seen as a natural occurrence, but rather also as the consequence of the prolonged and widespread mismanagement of water resources; underlines that the way water is currently managed is no longer adequate and must be reviewed in order to ensure determined action and bold measures in the field of climate change mitigation and adaptation and prevention of natural disasters;

2. points out that water management within the EU is profoundly impacted by climate change, agriculture, industrialisation and urbanisation ([1]). Interconnected water challenges include, but are not limited to, floods, droughts, heat stress, water scarcity, pollution of surface and groundwater, decreased biodiversity in water bodies, dealing with wastewater and urban run-off and a rising sea level. In 2019, 29 % of EU territory was affected by water stress for at least one season ([2]); is concerned that water scarcity is forcing local and regional authorities to declare drought emergencies, fuelling tensions in local communities and cross-border regions;

3. underlines the negative impact that droughts, floods and other extreme weather phenomena have on the EU's economic, social and territorial cohesion, hindering the implementation of the Union's Cohesion Policy and increasing the risk of deepening social inequalities;

4. recognises that the challenges of water management are poised to intensify significantly in the coming years and decades due to the impacts of climate change and that the planetary boundary for freshwater has already surpassed safe limits ([3]); stresses that coordinated mitigation, adaptation and resilience actions are needed urgently across all sectors to reduce and control short, medium, and long-term impacts on the well-being and health, environment, and economy; calls for water management to be based on long-term strategies, making the transition from crisis management to risk management by, for example, putting more emphasis on demand versus supply-side measures and prioritising drinking water over other uses;

5. underscores that more efficient use of water has a direct impact on energy consumption and the fight against climate change; stresses the importance of achieving a Water-Smart Society by taking measures such as preventing water leakages and eliminating instances of water being wasted; urges the European Commission and Member States to work with local and regional authorities (LRAs) and provide them with the relevant support, including economic support, particularly within the water-energy-food-human health-ecosystem nexus;

6. calls on the European Commission for a comprehensive water strategy that addresses water-related challenges with attention to diverse sectors and which protects the right to clean and adequate water for all. The current EU water policies remain fragmented and follow a silo approach: a holistic strategy that connects various aspects of existing water management policies across sectors is needed;

([1]) https://climate.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-12/SWD_2023_932_1_EN.pdf.
([2]) EEA, 2023.
([3]) Number of times the planetary boundary is transgressed in the EU, in 2010 and 2021 — European Environment Agency (europa.eu).

7. stresses the need for combating waterborne and water-related diseases, water pollution, and water scarcity, which impact public health and are exacerbated by climate change; welcomes the Zero Pollution Action Plan and the Zero Pollution Stakeholder Platform (jointly co-chaired by the Commission and the European Committee of the Regions), and invites the next Commission to continue the work of this platform;

8. acknowledges the interconnectedness of water with all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and welcomes the recognition of the role of water in tackling climate change in the COP28 UAE Consensus; calls on the EU to continue its efforts in implementing the Water Action Agenda and UN Water Conference 2023 commitments, particularly those to achieve SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation); invites the Commission to actively engage with the CoR in these international fora;

9. underlines the importance of soil health for water retention and filtration; calls on the Commission and co-legislators to make water retention, filtering, and soil moisture, a key pillar of the Soil Health Law, while taking into account the soil and climate conditions of each territory; underscores that reservoirs, collection systems, differently shaped surface structures in both rural and urban areas should allow slow seepage of precipitation into the landscape instead of flowing quickly into the sewage system, helping to avoid flooding; flags up the need to limit land take and natural soil sealing by means of policies promoting the reuse of brownfield sites over the use of greenfield sites for building and land use; highlights peatlands' and healthy forests' potential as carbon sinks and their role in filtering water and mitigating floods, droughts and wildfires; underscores the importance of ensuring that development policies support the role played by farming activities in proper water management; recalls the EU Nature Restoration Law's role in enhancing synergies between mitigation and adaptation actions, disaster prevention and nature restoration, combatting the triple planetary crises of biodiversity loss, pollution and climate change;

10. calls on the next Commission to prioritise the adoption of the Water Resilience initiative without any further delay, to make water a strategic priority for its next 2024-2029 mandate and to mainstream water into all relevant EU policies; to this end, calls for the appointment of a dedicated EU Commissioner in charge of the water portfolio to oversee and embed a cross-sectoral water approach;

A European consensus for a Water Strategy

11. reiterates the CoR's call for reducing water use, circular processes including water reuse, and a water-efficient approach for buildings, and to strengthen the EU regulation at basin level by bolstering measures to safeguard water resources, particularly higher quality underground water resources ([4]); recalls the CoR recommendations in 2016 to achieve an EU Water-Smart Society ([5]);

12. acknowledges the Council's recognition of the strategic importance of an EU approach to water security and the need for enhanced EU and global action on water ([6]); takes note of the proposal for a REWaterEU plan by several EU Member States; takes note of the European Parliament Resolutions for COP27 ([7]) and COP28 ([8]), which stress the importance of achieving Water-Smart Societies to meet climate objectives;

13. welcomes the works of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the European Parliament Water Group on the EU Blue Deal, advocating for radical efforts and adaptation of the EU water governance to anticipate needs, protect water resources and manage water-related risks through an action plan ([9]);

14. regrets the delay in adopting the EU Water Resilience initiative and urges the Commission to effectively engage with LRAs, economic actors and civil society organisations in paving the way towards an ambitious and holistic European Water Strategy to mainstream water into all EU policies through concrete measures and a clear timeline;

15. calls for the EU Water Resilience initiative to evaluate current legislation and implement new measures to adapt to climate change and reconcile the needs of different water users with current and future water availability, to avoid disjointed efforts among national and subnational levels, to restore the water cycle and to integrate water objectives into relevant EU sectoral policies and investment programmes;

([4]) Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on Addressing the challenge of water scarcity and droughts in the European Union (OJ C 172, 5.7.2008, p. 49).
([5]) Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Effective water management system: an approach to innovative solutions (OJ C 207, 30.6.2017, p. 45).
([6]) https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/03/23/european-council-conclusions-23-march-2023/.
([7]) https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2022-0461_EN.html.
([8]) https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2023-0458_EN.html.
([9]) https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/eu-blue-deal.

16. calls for a better implementation of the water-related *acquis communautaire*, including a revision of the Bathing Water directive ([10]), the Nitrates and Floods directives ([11]), the Marine Strategy Framework directive ([12]), and to enhance the implementation of the Water Framework directive ([13]); calls on the Commission to carefully examine how the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive ([14]) (UWWTD) requirements interact with the Water Framework Directive obligation of non-deterioration, in order to ensure coherence between the two pieces of legislation, while preserving all incentives to take proper technical treatment measures; encourages the Commission to take legislative action, if necessary;

17. expresses concern over the slow implementation of water policies due to inadequate funding and insufficient integration in sectoral policies; calls for increased financial support for LRAs and water-related actors for capital expenditures and emphasises the need for better coordination of regional funds and funding instruments, including LIFE Europe, Interreg, Horizon Europe, and the European Investment Bank financial toolbox;

18. draws attention to the fact that, in most Member States, local and regional authorities have institutional and political responsibilities and competences relating to water management, thereby shaping the implementation of most EU water directives; calls on the EU and its Member States to create the right conditions for local and regional authorities to contribute to water management, including by providing sufficient financial resources to secure good water quality and increase the resilience of water management in the face of climate change;

Towards an inclusive EU water governance with LRAs at its core

19. notes that LRAs are key players in water management, including price setting and service supervision, and that they play a significant role in implementing environmental policies ([15]); points out that LRAs have a major role to play inbuilding public acceptance of climate actions and fighting disinformation, and that they are the first responders to the effects of climate change;

20. points out that LRAs are actively working towards water resilience by reforming urban and rural planning, renewing and building new green and blue infrastructure and spaces, restoring and protecting their waters and soils, and implementing flood and drought management plans, as demonstrated in initiatives such as the Covenant of Mayors and the Green City Accord; highlights that LRAs are carrying out these measures while fostering collaboration with water suppliers, the agri-food industry, businesses, urban planners, citizens, and LRAs in river basins; emphasises the need for enhanced financial and structural support from the Commission to LRAs for the implementation of these initiatives;

21. is concerned about the lack of a comprehensive and clear European framework for climate adaptation, including the appropriate legislation and division of responsibilities to address inaction; calls for the European Water Strategy to actively address these challenges within the realm of water management;

22. points out the need to strengthen transboundary river basin management. Rivers span across multiple countries, fostering interdependence among European regions; calls on the Commission to incorporate water-related aspects in its neighbourhood policy and regional/international initiatives, and to strengthen transboundary basin cooperation for both qualitative and quantitative water aspects. Currently, there is a lack of regulation on the quantity of river waters, while many European regions use river water as a resource for drinking water;

23. strongly calls for enhanced multilevel water governance within Member States to support LRAs in developing water planning and management strategies, ensuring alignment between national and subnational action, incorporating water management into spatial planning, and creating tools for structured mutual learning, leading to greater policy integration at national, regional and local levels;

([10]) Directive 2006/7/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 February 2006 concerning the management of bathing water quality and repealing Directive 76/160/EEC (OJ L 64, 4.3.2006, p. 37).
([11]) Council Directive 91/676/EEC of 12 December 1991 concerning the protection of waters against pollution caused by nitrates from agricultural sources (OJ L 375, 31.12.1991, p. 1).
([12]) Directive 2008/56/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 June 2008 establishing a framework for community action in the field of marine environmental policy (Marine Strategy Framework Directive) (OJ L 164, 25.6.2008, p. 19).
([13]) Directive 2000/60/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2000 establishing a framework for Community action in the field of water Policy (OJ L 327, 22.12.2000, p. 1).
([14]) Council Directive 91/271/EEC of 21 May 1991 concerning urban waste-water treatment (OJ L 135, 30.5.1991, p. 40).
([15]) The governance of water services in Europe, EurEau (eureau.org).

24. calls on the EU to ensure that Member States draw up national water resource plans that will comprehensively examine the needs for drinking water, nature, industry and agriculture, while also taking flood risks into account;

25. points out that the Mediterranean is the most water-stressed region, where around 30 % of the population face permanent water stress and up to 70 % face seasonal water stress ([16]); welcomes the work of the CoR's Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) on its report *Building water resilience: the role of Mediterranean cities and regions*; reiterates that mountainous, outermost and insular regions are particularly vulnerable to water stress, and face specific problems linked to access to drinking water and wastewater disposal and treatment ([17]), and that these challenges should be considered when reviewing existing and developing new legislation. In the context of this work, the EU should ensure the possibility for adapting legislation to the local conditions in the different Member States;

Improved implementation of the access to water and sanitation principle

26. points out that access to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible, and affordable water and sanitation is a human right ([18]), noting that the recasts of the Drinking Water directive ([19]) and the Urban Wastewater Treatment directive aim to guarantee this right in the EU; however, expresses concern that despite these efforts, there are still local areas in the EU where this right is not effectively guaranteed; notes that 10 million Europeans still lack access to basic sanitation services ([20]); considers that water should be regarded as a natural common good balancing efficiency with public oversight;

27. acknowledges that the loss of key ecosystem services, such as drinking water and biodiversity, undermine those rights, for example by reducing agricultural and fisheries outputs, negatively affecting health, or removing natural filters in the water cycle; stresses that the long-term food security and resilience of food systems hinge on the availability of clean fresh water;

28. highlights that LRAs are the most relevant governance level to guarantee this right and, therefore, calls on the Commission and Member States to provide political and financial support to LRAs to make necessary investments in infrastructure to achieve SDG 6 across the EU;

29. highlights that many LRAs are in charge of setting tariffs and implementing tariff reductions for vulnerable citizens who are not able to pay their water bills; calls on the Commission and Member States to step up efforts to combat water poverty and implement effective instruments to address current and increasing water affordability problems, including strengthening a common approach and the exchange of best practices at the EU level for a fair design of water prices;

30. is of the opinion that, given the significant developments in the security policy situation in recent years and the European interest in addressing potential vulnerabilities, EU legislation should ensure strong cross-sectoral cooperation between utilities providers in the field of electricity, water supply, wastewater treatment, gas and heat; calls for the relevant public bodies at local, regional or national level to ensure that authorised representatives from the various utilities sectors consult each other on risk preparedness every year;

31. reiterates the need for sustainable water resource allocation, including through water-saving targets, to distribute shortage risks across water users fairly; stresses that any temporary water supply suspension or pressure reduction should first always guarantee a sufficient volume for the population, while ensuring the fulfilment of ecological flows, vital for maintaining the health of aquatic ecosystems, promoting biodiversity, and the proper use of water resources;

32. underlines the importance of preventing speculation on water in order to ensure equitable access, social justice, and sustainable resource management; calls for a ban on trading water as a commodity on financial markets and stresses the need for a combination of public oversight and private sector participation tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of the community or region in question;

([16]) Water scarcity conditions in Europe (Water exploitation index plus) (europa.eu).
([17]) COM(2022) 198 final (europa.eu).
([18]) https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/687002/files/A_RES_64_292-EN.pdf?ln=en.
([19]) Directive (EU) 2020/2184 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2020 on the quality of water intended for human consumption (OJ L 435, 23.12.2020, p. 1).
([20]) Urban wastewater - European Commission (europa.eu).

A call for action to mobilise all of society

33. stresses the need for a comprehensive approach addressing both qualitative and quantitative aspects to ensure water security, sustainability and resilience, which requires the mobilization of the whole society; calls on the Commission and Member States to strengthen inclusive governance through long-term national education and information programmes targeting all stakeholders, following a 'One Water' approach where all stakeholders from different sectors in a specific region sit around the same table, such as water-oriented living labs; invites the Commission to leverage the European Climate Pact to empower citizens to build a Water-Smart Society;

34. highlights the importance of tackling pollution at the source and the need for drinking water operators to rely on high quality water resources to minimise treatment costs and to ensure clean drinking water; calls on all EU institutions and Member States to collaborate in implementing the 'Polluter Pays' Principle to tackle pollution, including per-and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), pesticides, contaminants of emerging concern and microplastics;

35. underscores that involving citizens must be a cornerstone in a holistic approach towards EU water policies. Citizens should contribute in the implementation and design of European water solutions and the awareness among the population about the urgency of water challenges needs to be strengthened; calls for an EU wide campaign to raise awareness, following up on the EU Green Week 2024 which focuses on the topic of water resilience;

36. highlights the importance of the water-soil nexus for water management; emphasises the importance of continued investments into solutions that mitigate environmental impacts such as salinisation and brine management, which pose significant implications for our environment, society and agriculture; calls on the Commission to integrate a water and soil driven approach in its policies and to learn from countries adopting this principle. By allowing water and soil to guide spatial planning, ecosystems become more resilient and less vulnerable;

37. considers that when disposed of in landfills, plastics leach toxic chemicals into the soil and groundwater. When mismanaged, plastics pollute land, waterways and the oceans. Toxic additives and microplastics contained in rain, soil, waterways, oceans and on mountaintops cannot be eliminated by recycling, landfilling or incineration. Only legally binding limits on global plastics production for essential uses can make a difference;

Circular economy and water efficiency

38. stresses that the International Chamber of Commerce identifies water as a key enabler for a circular economy, facilitating the recovery of raw materials, enhancing food supply, preventing water scarcity and reducing the risk of eutrophication; calls on the Commission and Member States to accelerate the shift towards water-efficient materials and energy recovery across industrial processes to achieve water-smart industrial symbiosis;

39. strongly urges the Commission to adopt a water efficiency principle in the EU alongside the energy efficiency principle to unlock effective water reuse and savings for agricultural, industrial and domestic purposes;

40. notes that industries, particularly strategic sectors for the green and digital transitions, are water-intensive industries and that water scarcity can hinder the EU's decarbonisation, economic growth and strategic autonomy; therefore, calls on the Commission to adopt the relevant legislation to build green and water-smart economic sectors respecting the do-no-harm principle in the fields of energy, agri-food, tourism, aquaculture, digital technology and construction, in cooperation with LRAs and relevant stakeholders;

41. since water resources are limited and increasingly under pressure, preventing water leakages should be the first priority for advancing water efficiency; access to water and sanitation is a human right, therefore leakages on a large scale while facing growing scarcity is unacceptable; there is a general lack of awareness of water leakages, which is driven by underinvestment in maintenance and renewal of water infrastructure ([21]); stresses that although many LRAs are funding developments and upgrades in infrastructure, financing for long-term investing remains limited and will require a significant mobilization of funds; stresses therefore the need to boost investment in infrastructures, services and new technologies within the current and future European Structural and Investment funds and NextGenerationEU, including its follow-up instrument post 2026;

([21]) Maladaptation refers to actions taken with the intention of lessening the effects of climate change, but which end up increasing risks and vulnerability.

42. stresses that the future of agriculture and food security largely depends on water availability; highlights the need to reinforce practices centred around the sustainable use of water resources in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to: a) ensure long-term resilience through nature-based solutions; b) improve water retention in the landscape, including by adopting agricultural practices entailing techniques which disturb the soil as little as possible or create stable meadows and other natural infiltration systems; c) fight pollution; d) move towards less water-intensive crops; and e) encourage water reuse and reduction, including by rolling out irrigation advice services which, based on the difference between precipitation and potential evapotranspiration, will inform users exactly when they should irrigate their fields and how much water they should give them; f) replace inefficient irrigation systems with systems which use less water; calls on these practices to be further supported by adequate investments in innovative farming practices to tackle the negative effects on natural environments and climate change, and at the same time to protect biodiversity and boost a sustainable EU-based production that ensures competitiveness of farmers and agri-businesses and revitalises rural communities;

43. highlights the paramount importance of prioritising sustainable water management practices that focus on preserving the integrity of freshwater ecosystems; reminds that, while the construction of reservoirs might seem a logical approach to ensuring water security, such measures offer only a finite solution, significantly disrupting the natural balance of freshwater ecosystems and impairing their ability to naturally replenish water resources;

44. highlights the need to strive for an equitable tax system for major water consumers, ensuring their fair contribution and simultaneously providing them with an incentive to actively pursue water usage reduction; stresses the necessity for a European plan on how to improve water efficiency of major water consumers while strengthening their competitiveness;

45. calls on the EU institutions and Member States to prioritise nature-based solutions; advocates for the use of grey solutions only when green ones cannot provide sufficient and continuous reliability of the required water system services ([22]);

Digitalisation

46. calls on the Commission to incentivise digitalisation in the water sector, to harness the benefits of the interconnectivity of people, devices and processes, and to create capillary networks capable of monitoring the water system and its underlying infrastructure in a holistic way; calls for this monitoring to start at its multiple sources and extend to individual end users, thus generating continuous flows of data for innovative decision support systems at different levels of governance, particularly to ensure interoperability at basin level; at the same time, highlights the importance to guarantee information security, ethics and integrity;

47. notes that data is available but scattered across several sources; calls for supporting smart quantitative water management and conservation through monitoring, improved transparency and enhanced data sharing within the private and public sectors, citizens and all involved actors, in order to promote multidisciplinary cooperation at the most relevant level and to adopt a common data platform on quantitative and qualitative water parameters at EU level;

Research and innovation

48. points out that collaboration and partnership in research and innovation are key to tackling water risks; highlights that Unesco recognises good practices from Europe, such as water-oriented living labs, and calls on the Commission and Member States to support such partnerships in cooperation with LRAs. Preconditions vary across Member States, it is imperative to underscore the need for each region to address its unique circumstances accordingly;

49. notes that there is a risk that investments into water can be misallocated in research and innovation ([23]); calls on the Commission and Member States to foster research and innovation on water, support key water-related partnership such as Water4all, to encourage the involvement of LRAs in developing solutions that leave no one and no place behind; calls for a dedicated Horizon Mission for a Water-Smart Europe in a water-resilient world;

50. notes that there is a shortage of skilled professionals in the water sector; sees the urgent need to make significant efforts to secure available professionals in the EU to establish new forms of continuous and lifelong vocational qualification; calls for specific plans for reskilling and training of workers and researchers in the water sector.

([22]) *Multisource project, policy brief: integrated nature-based solutions for water-smart cities*, March 2023, EU-funded project No. 101003527.
([23]) https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/dfc5df4f-0073-11ee-87ec-01aa75ed71a1/language-en.

Brussels, 20 June 2024.

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions
Vasco ALVES CORDEIRO