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Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee
Blue Deal Accelerator – technology, skills and finance for a water-resilient future
(own-initiative opinion)

(C/2026/4651)

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. With water scarcity, climate impacts and competing uses are already affecting key sectors of the EU economy, whilst emphasising that water is a human right and a public good, the EESC calls for water to be treated as a critical production factor underpinning competitiveness and strategic autonomy, and as a strategic, standalone priority across all EU policies.

1.2. The European Water Resilience Strategy (WRS) and the EU Blue Deal require a comprehensive and cross-sectoral implementation framework. The Blue Deal Accelerator (BDA) should link industrial transformation, water-smart technologies, workforce development and investment mobilisation through clear roadmaps, indicators and reporting.

1.3. Water resilience must be embedded across EU industrial policy instruments, including through a water test. Water considerations should become a condition for permits, investments and public support, including through efficiency, reuse and -retention measures to reduce system losses and alleviate infrastructure pressure.

1.4. Robust, harmonised data systems are essential, as no data means no policy. A European Water Data Space should be created to ensure transparency, comparability and evidence-based policymaking, and to facilitate EU-wide investment.

1.5. The EESC calls for the explicit recognition in the Industrial Accelerator Act (IAA) of the water-energy nexus as vital for decarbonisation and industrial competitiveness, highlighting ecosystem risks. The Committee calls for measures to mitigate water demand, notably to ensure compliance with water impact assessments in simplified permitting processes and in the designation of industrial acceleration areas.

1.6. Water should be integrated into the Circular Economy Act as a strategic resource, with requirements for water efficiency, reuse, fit-for-purpose allocation, pollution prevention and resource recovery, in line with the water-energy nexus and natural water cycles.

1.7. Public procurement should drive demand for water-smart and circular solutions. The Water Resilience Investment Accelerator ⁽¹⁾(WRIA) should serve as a platform to aggregate projects, including nature-based solutions (NbS) and wetlands as natural water infrastructure, enhance investment readiness, connect solutions with financing, and accelerate market uptake and strengthen Europe's technological leadership. The WRIA model should be replicated internationally.

1.8. A water-smart transition requires a skilled workforce. Policies on skills must align with industrial and environmental transitions. The European Water Academy (EWA) should be a practice-focused platform for lifelong learning across the water sector, aligned with the Union of Skills and the European Skills Agenda.

1.9. Drawing on the energy efficiency first principle, the EESC calls for the progressive integration of water efficiency first as a binding requirement in EU legislation, in funding conditionalities and in planning and investment decisions, supported by a harmonised EU methodology for measuring and monitoring water efficiency across the full water cycle.

1.10. Water footprinting should be combined with stewardship to target efficiency where local water risks and societal impact are highest and maximise environmental, economic and social value at basin level.

1.11. The EESC calls for the creation of a streamlined EU water financing framework, prioritising the development of robust project pipelines and grounded in an overview of investment needs and supported by simplified governance and a single funding access point (the Blue Transition Fund). Investment pipelines should systematically include NbS, including wetlands, as bankable assets delivering multiple benefits.

1.12. In line with its call for water conditionalities in EU funding, the EESC recommends that where leakage thresholds are exceeded, EU support should prioritise projects with measurable leakage-reduction outcomes and avoid financing capacity expansion where basic leakage control has not been addressed.

1.13. Water resilience should be a cross-cutting priority in Global Gateway partnerships. Its education and skills pillar can advance the BDA in the EU's external action, including through wetland partnerships supporting infrastructure and NbS in partner countries.

2. General comments

2.1. The EESC emphasises that water is a human right and underlines the importance of an integrated approach to water policy linking social, environmental, industrial, innovation, skills and infrastructure policies. Water governance and financing frameworks should safeguard the public interest and ensure universal, affordable, and equitable access to water and sanitation. Private-sector participation can contribute additional resources and expertise, provided that public authorities maintain full responsibility and accountability for service provision and access outcomes. The BDA should translate strategic priorities into tangible measures supporting the transition towards a water-smart society and economy, and provide a practical framework to connect industrial transformation, the use of water-smart technologies, workforce development and investments. It should promote integrated approaches combining grey infrastructure with NbS, including wetlands ⁽²⁾, which act as natural 'sponges' that store, regulate and purify water.

⁽¹⁾ EC proposal to implement 20 innovative pilot projects for natural water retention and water efficiency, bringing together local water investors, solution providers and problem holders to inspire similar actions across the EU.

⁽²⁾ In this opinion we define wetlands according to the 1971 Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat.

2.2. The EESC emphasises that this transition must be socially fair and inclusive. The accelerator should increase the engagement of citizens, youth, civil society and local and indigenous communities in water governance, building trust and high acceptance of measures and mobilising behavioural change towards water resilience.

2.3. The accelerator should align EU initiatives and reduce policy fragmentation, driving systemic change by bridging gaps between policy and implementation, fostering collaboration between stakeholders and embedding water resilience in Europe's economic and social model. It should drive both demand-side transformation, promoting efficient and circular water use, and supply-side deployment, accelerating the uptake of technologies and solutions at scale. This coherence should be delivered through integrated planning and the implementation of grey and green infrastructure combined with NbS at basin and local levels. Restoring water retention across the wider landscape should be treated as a core enabler, as it reduces run-off, limits pollution and lowers pressure on infrastructure, improving water-efficiency outcomes and enhancing long-term resilience.

2.4. The EESC calls for stronger coherence between internal and external EU action, including under Global Gateway, positioning the EU as a global leader in blue diplomacy. In this context, water resilience should be recognised as a cross-cutting priority, with wetland partnerships to support the implementation of NbS and to strengthen cooperation with partner countries.

2.5. *Technology as a key enabler for European water-smart industry*

2.5.1. Water is a strategic production resource for the EU economy, on par with energy. Reliable water systems underpin industrial processes and supply chains, as recognised in the Clean Industrial Deal. Industrial policy should integrate water resilience more systematically. Laws and strategies must reflect the growing water risks for investment, costs, permitting and long-term viability, as well as industry's dependence on well-functioning water systems supported by ecosystems, such as wetlands, which regulate water availability and quality.

2.5.2. Decarbonisation and water resilience are intrinsically linked. Many low-carbon processes increase water demand, while water systems depend on energy. The EESC calls for investment in clean technologies that support the EU Blue Deal, including the circular use of desalination by-products ⁽³⁾.

2.5.3. The EESC considers that the IAA should explicitly recognise the water-energy nexus as essential for decarbonisation and competitiveness. It should:

- integrate water efficiency and reuse into market mechanisms for low-carbon materials;
- accelerate permitting for water recycling and efficient technologies;
- promote shared infrastructure in industrial clusters; and
- support digital water management for monitoring and optimisation.

Industrial strategies should also promote NbS, including wetlands, to improve water retention and reduce systemic risks. The EESC warns that accelerating clean and decarbonising technologies may increase pressure on water resources and infrastructures, and should therefore systematically account for their impacts on water demand and management.

2.5.4. The EESC calls for a holistic approach to developing clean technologies, reflecting the water-energy nexus. To mitigate impacts on water resources, the EESC calls for water impact assessments to be respected in the permitting simplification processes and for water demand to be taken into account when designating 'industrial acceleration areas' in the Member States. This measure must not only weigh the environmental and climate assessments of those territories, but also consider the concentrated water demand and the subsequent created need for new water infrastructure.

⁽³⁾ OJ C, C/2026/14, 16.1.2026, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2026/14/oj>, OJ C, C/2026/2542, 22.5.2026, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2026/2542/oj>. EESC opinion on 'Battery Booster Strategy' (OJ C, C/2026/3230, 2.7.2026, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2026/3230/oj>).

2.5.5. The Circular Economy Act (CEA) should explicitly recognise water, including wastewater and sludge, as a strategic resource and production factor, alongside materials and energy, and treat water efficiency, reuse and loss prevention as core elements of circularity. It should:

- prioritise water-efficient and circular solutions in planning and major investments;
- promote water reuse beyond irrigation and across sectors;
- support the creation of EU-wide quality, safety and end-of-waste criteria for reclaimed water and recovered nutrients;
- encourage water-related circular criteria in public procurement to stimulate demand;
- improve pollution control at the source.

Circularity should also reflect the water-energy nexus and natural water cycles, with NbS supporting water retention and groundwater recharge.

2.5.6. The BDA should apply the water efficiency first principle through digital water technologies, monitoring systems, reuse and circular water infrastructure. Investment pipelines should systematically include NbS as bankable assets delivering water, climate and biodiversity benefits.

2.5.7. The EESC recommends that the Commission, in cooperation with stakeholders, develop a common methodology for measuring and monitoring water efficiency across the full water cycle based on river basin water balances and comparable indicators. This should reduce water use, ease pressure on water bodies, and support national and sector-specific targets contributing to the EU objective of improving water efficiency by at least 10 % by 2030, while accounting for ecosystem functions, such as wetlands, as natural regulators of water quantity and quality.

2.5.8. Implementing the water efficiency first principle requires faster uptake of best available solutions. The EESC calls on EIT Water to support the deployment of innovation, to strengthen skills and implementation capacities, and to foster industrial partnerships, complementing initiatives such as the EWA and the WRIA.

2.5.9. The EESC calls for improved data collection, digital water monitoring and public reporting of water balances to track efficiency progress. The EU-wide action plan on digitalisation in the water sector should accelerate investments in secure, interoperable and financially viable digital water systems, and in water-efficient technologies, circular water solutions and capacity building across sectors. Complementary investment in ecosystem restoration remains key for ensuring long-term water availability and resilience beyond efficiency gains alone.

2.5.10. The EESC supports an EU-wide 'smart metering for all' initiative to accelerate water efficiency, ensuring broad coverage across users and utilities. Standardised and interoperable data systems should support an EU water accounting system. Member States should set clear milestones, aiming for substantial coverage by 2035 and integration into all new connections and during network renewals.

2.5.11. Referring to the Drinking Water Directive, the EESC reiterates its call for the earlier submission of national leakage reduction plans. To strengthen data transparency and comparability, the upcoming Delegated Act should require the publication of reported leakage indicators, national action plans and regular progress updates. The Commission should also specify that the national plans prioritise digital monitoring and accelerate smart metering deployment in all Member States.

2.6. Skills and capacity-building for the water transition

2.6.1. The transformation of water systems requires innovation, new skills and professional capacities. Modern water management increasingly relies on digital expertise, yet the EU water sector faces structural workforce challenges, including demographic changes, fragmented training and limited attractiveness. Strong alignment between skills and industrial policies is needed, and the BDA should place a greater focus on implementation capacities.

2.6.2. The EESC highlights the need to strengthen education, training and professional development across the water value chain. Initiatives such as the EWA can help harmonise the EU skills ecosystem through knowledge exchange and multidisciplinary approaches, while improving the visibility of water careers and fostering Europe's technological leadership in water solutions. Entry pathways for young people, including paid internships and junior positions, should be expanded. Training should cover water-smart technologies, NbS across the wider landscape, and integrated planning across water and land-use sectors, supporting the up- and reskilling of workers, public authorities, water professionals and communities across Europe, and be extended internationally through EU external action frameworks and partnerships.

2.6.3. The EWA should not create new bureaucracy but act as a coordinating and enabling platform linking existing institutions, training providers, utilities, industries, public authorities at all levels, trade unions and civil society organisations, focusing on practical, operational skills and complementing existing education systems.

2.6.4. The EESC recommends a 'train-the-trainer' approach to strengthen local training systems, adapt curricula to national needs and facilitate knowledge transfer within the EU and with partner countries. The Global Gateway's education and skills pillar should be leveraged to support the BDA in the EU's external action by supporting knowledge transfer, capacity-building and inclusive training opportunities for youth, women, indigenous people and other vulnerable groups, including those outside formal education, thereby broadening participation and strengthening local ownership.

2.6.5. EIT Water could become a key platform linking skills, knowledge and market uptake across the water sector. The EESC recommends that EIT Water collaborate with initiatives such as the EWA to strengthen skills and workforce development, supporting growth and job creation. It should also foster international partnerships and large-scale deployment to position Europe as a global leader in water resilience solutions.

2.7. Financing the transition to a water-smart society and economy

2.7.1. Achieving water resilience requires significant investment. The WRS identifies an annual investment gap of EUR 23 billion in Europe, while up to EUR 255 billion is needed by 2030 for water supply and sanitation alone to comply with the Drinking Water and Urban Wastewater Directives, excluding other economic and industrial needs ⁽⁴⁾. Despite this, water remains structurally underfunded. Although capital is available, deployment is hindered by fragmentation, complexity, limited project pipelines and a lack of standardisation. Addressing these barriers is essential for unlocking investments that would generate strong economic returns and support job creation and competitiveness ⁽⁵⁾.

2.7.2. Globally, needs are even greater: wetland conservation and restoration targets require between USD 275 billion and USD 550 billion per year, and the restoration of at least 123 million hectares ⁽⁶⁾. This underscores the key role of natural infrastructure and NbS for water storage, regulation and resilience, which should be prioritised as strategic investments within both EU and international financing frameworks, including through Global Gateway and structured partnerships with non-EU countries.

⁽⁴⁾ Water Europe, 2024.

⁽⁵⁾ Investing in water is a proven growth driver, as each EUR 1 invested generates an estimated EUR 2.35 in economic output and creates approximately 16 000 jobs for every EUR 1 billion of capital expenditure. Source: OECD, 2023, *Water Europe position paper on the multiannual financial framework*, inter-country input-output (ICIO) tables, Paris, OECD Publishing.

⁽⁶⁾ The Global Wetland Outlook.

2.7.3. The EESC underlines that water is no longer solely an environmental, or ESG reporting issue, but an increasingly critical factor in financial risk assessment and economic stability. Water-related risks now rank among the top global credit risks ⁽⁷⁾ and increasingly influence sovereign and corporate credit ratings, with direct implications for access to finance and the cost of capital. The absence of effective water management strategies may increase investment risks, constrain financing opportunities and affect industrial location decisions, underscoring the need for stronger investment in water resilience, including NbS and integrated grey-green infrastructure.

2.7.4. The EESC emphasises the need to properly value water across the hydrological cycle, recognising its social, environmental and economic functions, to improve water-related risk assessments and decision-making and to unlock investment into sustainable and resilient water systems.

2.7.5. Public resources alone will not be adequate to bridge the investment gap, making the mobilisation of private capital essential. The EESC calls on the European Investment Bank and national promotional banks to allocate dedicated funding, to develop tailored financial instruments such as blended finance and risk-sharing mechanisms and provide advisory support to improve project preparation. Member States should complement this through targeted financing strategies, such as sovereign blue or green bonds and fiscal incentives. The EESC further highlights the importance of operational tools such as the Sponge Facility, which can aggregate projects, de-risk investments and translate policy priorities into bankable opportunities.

2.7.6. Initiatives such as the WRIA could help develop investment pipelines for water projects, improve preparation and increase the visibility of financial institutions and investors. The EESC sees the WRIA as an operational platform to accelerate water investments by linking water-related risks and needs with investment opportunities, bridging gaps between problem owners, solution providers and investors, and enabling the testing and scaling of financing and funding models.

2.7.7. The WRIA should be demand-driven and focused on key challenges such as water scarcity, pollution, flood and drought risks, and infrastructure needs. It should expand through regional hubs within a coherent EU framework and common methodologies. These hubs should foster learning through systematic monitoring, evaluation and dissemination of results, including lessons learned from unsuccessful projects. Water-oriented living labs can support testing, validation and the scaling of solutions – including nature-based and hybrid approaches – in real-world conditions, as well as their investment readiness and scalability. The WRIA model should also be replicated internationally through structured cooperation.

2.7.8. The EESC calls for a coherent EU water financing framework, a Blue Transition Fund, to align public and private capital, improve governance and increase the visibility of investment opportunities. It should enhance clarity and governance by providing a single access point for investments across all multiannual financial framework pillars and combining public investment with innovative financing. It should be based on a clear mapping of water-related investment needs. This would allow financing to be strategically designed and prioritised in a way that optimises outcomes and impact and ensure the effective achievement of the objectives of the WRS. Sustainable and responsible water use must be a core criterion in all EU funds.

2.7.9. Water resilience goes beyond climate and environmental policies. However, water resilience and climate resilience are mutually reinforcing and must be addressed simultaneously where interlinkages exist. Climate and water-related financing should be dependent on water resilience criteria, helping reduce risks and incentivising the integration of blue and green infrastructure alongside technical and natural solutions.

2.7.10. Robust and harmonised data are key for effective governance and investment decisions, including a systematic mapping of water-related needs. Establishing an EU single water accounting system (the European Water Data Space) should serve as a 'single source of truth' for water data to guide policy, prioritising investments and ensuring accountability.

⁽⁷⁾ Moody's – Global Credit Conditions 2026.

2.7.11. This framework should also support the EU's external action, including through the Global Gateway, by strengthening the water dimension across international partnerships and investment initiatives. Wetland partnerships should be established to support infrastructure development, the use of NbS and efforts to advance digital water cooperation, positioning water resilience as a driver for sustainable development, climate adaptation and economic growth.

Brussels, 18 June 2026.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Séamus BOLAND
