



European Economic
and Social Committee



DECLARATION FOR AN
EU Blue Deal

#EUBlueDeal







Water is a vital resource. It is indispensable for ecosystems, human life and the functioning of the economy and our society. But the global water resources are limited and increasingly under pressure. As explicitly recognised by the UN General Assembly in 2010, **access to safe drinking water and sanitation is a human right**, and it is unacceptable that there are people who still do not have access to water and sanitation in the EU.

The EU has established legal frameworks to protect freshwater and marine resources. However, many of the objectives set have not been achieved. With a view to developing a comprehensive approach to European water policies, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has adopted [a series of own-initiative opinions addressing the water crisis](#) in its various dimensions.

Given the essential nature of water and the current and future challenges facing the world and our continent, the EESC strongly believes that water can no longer be one of the elements of the Green Deal: a change of scale is needed at EU level. The EESC therefore calls on the European institutions to **consider water as a priority and to adopt an EU Blue Deal as a standalone strategic policy**, on an equal footing with the EU Green Deal. The EU Blue Deal must be **fully complementary to and in synergy with the EU Green Deal and the UN Sustainable Development Goals**. It must be a comprehensive, coherent policy, based on guiding principles and concrete actions as set out below. It is about anticipating needs and preserving and adequately managing our common water resources in the short, medium and long term for a water-resilient future. **Europe can transform water-related challenges into new opportunities** for technological development, societal progress, new jobs, skills and business growth while respecting the environment.

Our Committee calls on the EU institutions and the Member States to take these principles and proposals into account and recognise water as a **strategic priority in the 2028-2034 programming period and beyond**, integrated into all EU policies.

It is time to join forces and find common solutions to the systemic water crisis. Our collective action, supported by a strong and ambitious water strategy at European level, is the only guarantee for a sustainable and water resilient future.

Oliver Röpke, EESC President

26 October 2023

Guiding principles of the EU Blue Deal



Principle 1:

All EU policies must be aligned with the new European water policy, as has been the case with the EU Green Deal. Policies and actions under the Blue Deal must be based on **up-to-date, accurate, transparent, comparable, easily accessible and reliable water data**.



Principle 2:

The restoration and protection of ecosystems, wetlands and biodiversity should form an essential part of the Blue Deal.



Principle 3:

The European Union must adopt a human rights-based approach to water and fight water poverty, in line with Principle 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights. **The right to a healthy environment should also be recognised as a fundamental human right**.



Principle 4:

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) services must be sustainable, equitable, of high quality and affordable for all. In the event of a water crisis, citizens and their basic needs must have priority.



Principle 5:

All water users should be encouraged to adopt solutions and practices supporting the sustainable use and consumption of water.



Principle 6:

The EU must support the development of technologies enabling water efficiency, recycling and pollution reduction as well as their incremental uptake **by agriculture, industry and households**.



Principle 7:

Water losses due to leaks in networks and waste of water by agriculture, industry, households and all other users **need to be significantly reduced**.



Principle 8:

Agriculture is both a major cause and a victim of water scarcity. **The EU must ensure, through a strategic plan, access to sufficient quality water and its sustainable management in agriculture to enable adequate and sustainable food production in the EU**.





Principle 9:

Given the link between energy, water and critical raw materials, **water should be seen as a fundamental element of the EU's industrial strategy.**



Principle 10:

A sectoral industrial approach is needed as different industries have different water needs and opportunities regarding water efficiency. **The no-harm principle has to be combined with a right for economic activities to consume water.**



Principle 11:

The **availability of skilled and specialised workers must be ensured and the competitiveness of European companies must be preserved.**



Principle 12:

A comprehensive EU water policy must be accompanied by an equally ambitious financing plan. Water prices, costs and taxes must be fair and transparent and prices be based on the principle of full cost recovery.



Principle 13:

The EU should increase its efforts on blue diplomacy and water should be integrated into the EU's foreign policy and external relations, including neighbourhood, trade and development policies. One of the main strategic objectives of blue diplomacy should be **to upgrade the UN treaty framework on all water-related issues**, and swiftly implement international agreements.



Principle 14:

It is imperative to **develop international policies to promote the sparing and efficient use of water in all sectors of the economy and society, to reduce the pollution of ground waters and surface waters, as well as to restore polluted and degraded waters.**



Principle 15:

The EU Blue Deal requires **adequate governance of freshwater resources, including groundwater.** The EESC calls for a **river basin approach** involving all relevant stakeholders. Existing cross-border river basin cooperation initiatives should be deepened, developed and adequately financed.



Actions under the EU Blue Deal to be implemented as a matter of urgency

Given the challenges ahead, we must act as a matter of urgency. **The EESC urges the co-legislators to include the following measures in the Blue Deal and will attentively monitor their implementation during the next mandate of the European Commission (2024-2029).**

1	There is a need for a common approach to understanding water poverty at EU level . The EU needs to develop common guidelines to monitor access to quality and affordable water and sanitation services (WSS) as well as to map the state of play and to regularly follow developments.
2	An EU advisory stakeholder platform, jointly set up by the EESC and other EU institutions , should be established to: share best practices, develop specific standards on water quality and use in agriculture and industry, contribute to a regular update of Blue Deal action plans, and promote partnerships and the circular economy.
3	There is need for systematic collection of transparent, comparable, easily accessible and reliable data on current state-of-play and long-term trends at EU level with regard to: water supplies, access to water and sanitation, the state of water infrastructures, surface and groundwater abstractions and water use in industrial, agricultural and household processes.
4	Each Member State's water infrastructure and water resources need to be immediately and thoroughly assessed in order to identify urgent investment needs. Consistent legislation should be put in place across all Member States to establish a sustainable water storage mechanism during wet periods .
5	The development of water and sanitation infrastructure should be financed, particularly in socially disadvantaged urban and rural neighbourhoods . This could be done for instance in the context of the urban renovation wave.
6	Prices must take account of long-term water security, incorporate the 'polluter pays' principle and ensure universal access and affordable prices, particularly for vulnerable groups . A common approach at EU level to a fair design of water prices should be established . Water tariffs could contain price signals to ensure more sustainable consumption.
7	Awareness-raising campaigns and specific actions to promote understanding of the value of water and change long-term behaviour must be launched in all Member States.
8	A water consumption label for products, in addition to the existing EU energy label, should be introduced to raise consumer awareness. Consumers must be incentivised to calculate their water footprint .
9	Incentives should be put in place for a transition to a circular water economy and supporting water reuse for all types of users . Replacing the use of drinking water with non-conventional water sources should become the norm where possible.

- 10 Over the next two years, **the EU's industrial strategy and its transition path documents need to be reviewed to include water-related industrial challenges and opportunities**, with a special focus on water-intensive industries and supporting the adoption of water-efficient technologies.
- 11 The EU should accelerate its efforts to create a **Knowledge Innovation Community for water** within the European Institute of Technology (EIT) and step up the "five missions" approach.
- 12 **All schemes of the Common Agricultural Policy should encourage sustainable and efficient water management** and integrate indicators in each Member State in order to monitor progress in water management. Dedicated support must be provided to ensure a substantiable transition in the agri-food sector and its adaptation to climate change.
- 13 **EU agricultural and industrial policies must integrate measures fostering the reduction, reuse and recycling of water and the reduction of water pollution**, through the adoption of good practices, training and new technological solutions, for a water smart society.
- 14 **The sustainable use of water and water conditionality should be criteria in all EU funds**, in order to avoid supporting projects that run counter to the objectives of the Water Framework Directive and the new EU Blue Deal.
- 15 In addition to national funds, a **Blue Transition Fund** must be set up at EU level **as a single EU access point** for water investments and combining **public investment with innovative financing**.
- 16 The Blue Transition Fund will support **resilient infrastructure and sustainable water management, research and the uptake of water-efficient technologies**. It will fund investments in **working conditions, quality jobs and training** as well as measures to **reduce inequalities** in access to affordable and quality water and sanitation services.
- 17 Water investments should be given **special treatment within the Stability and Growth Pact**.
- 18 The recently agreed **UN High Seas Treaty** should be swiftly implemented.
- 19 In external relations, the EU should facilitate sustainable water and wastewater management through **cooperation in the fields of infrastructure, technologies and expertise as part of economic partnerships and development cooperation**. The Global Gateway is an excellent tool in that respect.
- 20 A **European Water Centre with an international dimension should be set up** to support Member States and other countries in the European Neighbourhood and beyond to address water-related issues. This centre should present examples of outstanding collaboration and propose policy recommendations to advance the policy objectives of the Blue Deal.
- 21 A **dedicated EU Commissioner** should be in charge of the water portfolio.



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www.eesc.europa.eu/eubluedeal



Printed by the EESC-CoR Printing and Distribution Unit, Belgium

EESC-2023-81-EN

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Publications Office
of the European Union



Print:
QE-04-23-852-EN-C
ISBN 978-92-830-6218-9
doi: 10.2864/630864

Online:
QE-04-23-852-EN-N
ISBN 978-92-830-6219-6
doi: 10.2864/977023

EN