



New EU Report on bathing water quality: rankings showing little change in the face of today's environmental and health challenges

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The [2024 report on the quality of bathing water in Europe in 2023](#) was published yesterday afternoon and it states that bathing areas remain safe in Europe. While Surfrider Foundation Europe welcomes this very positive news regarding the bacteriological state of our bathing waters, we however wish to point out that several pitfalls of this report highlighting the need for a more comprehensive approach to ensure that bathing waters are safe. As a new mandate is about to start in the EU institution, the NGO stresses the necessity to adapt the analyses to current societal issues and reiterates its concern that a proposal to revise the Directive is still pending.

A report demonstrating the need to adapt to multiple uses

The European Environment Agency (EEA) published yesterday its annual report on bathing water quality in Europe. According to the report, 85.4% of European bathing sites were of excellent quality in 2023, and 96% met minimum standards.

Surfrider Foundation Europe welcomes this announcement, believing that the report's key conclusions support a revision of the European Directive concerning the management of bathing water quality (2006/7/EC).

In 2021, the NGO submitted its European [Manifesto for Healthy Waters](#) to the European Commission, calling on the European Union to seize this revision as an opportunity to reconsider the monitoring of bathing water quality on the basis of 7 recommendations promoting, in particular, the extension of monitored areas, the introduction of year-round monitoring, and preventing pollution at source.

We welcome the fact that the latter is reflecting in this year's report and hope to see here a sign indicating an imminent revision of the Directive. According to the European Environment Agency, the quality of coastal and continental waters has remained relatively stable since 2015. For the past 10 years, a proportion of European bathing areas have been of poor quality (1.5% in 2023), with some still facing persistent pollution problems that could pose a risk to human health. We have warned about the urgency of tackling the sources of pollution upstream for years. Member States and local authorities must be given the adequate resources and tools to rapidly rehabilitate these sites and continue to improve the quality of their bathing waters.

In addition, the report bases its analyses on samples taken during the summer season, and only at bathing sites identified as such. "On the eve of the launch of this year's EU Green Week focusing on water resilience, it is worth recalling that this resource does not only constitute a vital need, but also a major source of well-being for human beings," points out Lucille Labayle, Water Quality and Health Policy Officer for Surfrider Foundation Europe. "Recreational aquatic activities are not just limited to swimming. They are numerous and can take place all year round, on sites that are sometimes distinct from officially defined bathing areas. These people also deserve to be informed about the quality of the water at their sites".

Classification parameters raising questions in the light of current societal issues

Among its key demands, Surfrider is also calling for the addition of new parameters to be monitored, including waste, harmful and toxic algal blooms and chemical contaminants, which are still not included in the official parameters for monitoring and classifying bathing areas.

[Details of the measures set out in our 'European Manifesto for Healthy Waters' can be found here.](#)

As explained by the EEA in its report, EU data establish the bacteriological quality of bathing waters. They focus essentially on the risks of faecal contamination, based on 2 indicators defined in the legal provisions of the Directive and considered by the European authorities to have the most direct impact on human health:

Escherichia coli and intestinal enterococci. “Official analyses as they are currently carried out only give a partial picture of the state of our bathing and recreational sites. Is it really fair to say that 85.7% of European water is of excellent quality under these conditions?” asks Lucille Labayle.

These provisions seem clearly inadequate in the face of society's current concerns and expectations, and it seems difficult to talk about excellent bathing water quality in a context of widespread concern and doubts about the impact of this pollution on health.”

Currently, [most of the indicators established under key EU policies for the aquatic and marine environments have not been met](#). Key threats from chemical pollution remain partially or inadequately addressed by the existing legislation and implementation gaps still undermine our chances to achieve a toxic-free environment. These provisions seem clearly inadequate when faced with society's current concerns and expectations. It seems difficult to talk about excellent bathing water quality in a widespread context of concern and doubt about the impact of this pollution on health. Recent analyses regarding the high concentration of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances in seafoam in the Netherlands also illustrate the growing concerns about the risk of exposure of users to these harmful substances. It is thus legitimate to question the links established between the chemical state of our aquatic and marine environment and the classification of our bathing waters.

Moreover, as underlined in the EEA report, the impact of climate change is likely to exacerbate the health and environmental risks associated with water pollution. The proliferation of cyanobacteria and toxic algae has been widely recognised as a growing threat to the health of bathers and recreational users. For all these reasons, we firmly believe that it is essential to revise the Directive in order to have the appropriate tools to monitor and anticipate these emerging risks as effectively as possible, while communicating effectively to the public.

An urgent need to revise the Directive in view of its shortcomings

In 2021, as part of its Zero Pollution Action Plan, the European Commission undertook to review the Bathing Water Quality Directive by 2023, assessing especially whether the inclusion of new parameters should be considered. Three years on, the review process has stalled. In the meantime, other initiatives have made progress, such as the recast of the Urban Wastewater Directive, which should hopefully be adopted by the end of the year. Although this revised text has the potential to considerably improve wastewater management and its impact on bathing and recreational areas, it will not suffice to guarantee excellent and safe water quality for all. Climate change may for instance lead to certain risks becoming more prominent. Heavier and more frequent rainfalls, accompanied by urban run-off and sewer overflows, will thus continue to constitute a major pressure on the environment and human health, carry out not only bacteria but also antimicrobial resistant genes, debris and microplastics, as well as toxic substances found in the

urban environment. It is therefore urgent to carry out a revision of the Bathing Water Directive to ensure complementarity with the rest of the legislation.

On the eve of a new mandate for the European institutions following the forthcoming elections on 9 June, Surfrider Foundation Europe is calling on future decision-makers to act quickly. The European Commission's announcement of the publication of the results of its evaluation report on the Directive is a first step in the right direction, but it must be accompanied by action. "With the Green Pact and the Zero Pollution Action Plan, the Commission provided itself with an ambitious roadmap. We are still waiting to see the results when it comes to managing our bathing and recreational waters. At a time when the revision process is lagging worryingly behind schedule, we urgently need to work towards a strong new Directive that will protect the health of the ocean and of Europeans," concludes Lucille Labayle.

Our water quality experts are available to journalists for further interviews.

About Surfrider Foundation Europe

Surfrider Foundation Europe, an NGO founded in 1990, works to protect the oceans, coastlines, waves and their users. For over 30 years, with a team of experts and 50 volunteer branches in 12 European countries, the association has been working with stakeholders (citizens, private and public sectors) on several major issues: aquatic waste, coastal development, climate change, water quality and the health of ocean users. It is because the health of users counts that Surfrider Europe is closely monitoring the revision of the European Directive on the quality of bathing water. Find out more about the association at <https://surfrider.eu>

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